# March Activities

**The last three months of any project can be scary. But the last three months of something you've been working at *for five years* can feel even more momentous. Sometimes we feel like hiding from what's coming – hoping that somehow it'll never happen. Problems with study build up because we're pretending they don't exist. This month's activities help you get your head out of the sand and tackle a few of them. You might need to set aside some time with these activities so you can actively think about what's cropping up to stop you, and then plan a really effective solution. And because your revision is approaching full-swing, we've included a couple of great revision activities too.**

## 29. Attitude Activity: The Problem Solving Cycle

This activity is based on the work of David Kolb of the University of Leicester. Kolb's work suggests that we learn best through experience – through doing. If we take action and attempt a challenge (therefore experiencing something rather than just reading or thinking about it) our awareness, understanding and mastery increases. Kolb proposes that 'experiential learning', as he calls it, passes through four phases.

When we first saw Kolb's work, his four phases were presented as a framework for problem solving. It worked really well for us and we became hooked. We'll share what we learned with you here. You'll need to set aside thirty minutes to start with.

First, choose a problem you're battling with or a barrier you're facing. It might be to do with study habits, current performance, levels of energy or a subject-specific issue.

The problem or barrier: _____

The result of the problem: _____

Now break down the problem into the four stages of Kolb's problem solving cycle. Use the guidance below to inform you how to approach each stage.

| 4. Experiment with a course of action | 1. Explore the problem |
|---|---|
| **Key question:** 'How did it go, and what have I learned?'<br><br>You'll be in this phase for a week. Try one of your top three adjustments. As you go along, get a sense of how it is working. Persist with it, thinking about its impact on your learning.<br><br>Then assess it at the end of the period. Discard, repeat or modify. | **Key question:** 'What is currently happening?'<br><br>Stay here for ten minutes, assessing *the exact situation you are in.* Do not use judgemental or emotional language ('terrible', 'crap', 'nightmare'). Use facts and figures ('I'm on a grade E', 'My motivation is very low'). Dredge up every last bit of evidence you can find – grades, test scores, attendance, levels of effort and energy, feedback. Describe only – do not use 'because' yet; avoid justifying anything. Calmly list everything about your current situation. |

| 3. Decide a course of action | 2. Analyse the problem |
|---|---|
| **Key question:** 'What are my options?'<br><br>Stay here for ten minutes. Look back at what is happening and why. *Only focus on the things you can solve.* Calmly set aside things outside your control. Sift through your analysis of the problem and begin listing things you could do. Be uncritical; ignore the part of your brain saying, 'That's a terrible idea!' or 'How could that work? It's ridiculous!' and continue to list courses of action. Start with 'I could …' and go from there. When you're stuck, bring to mind everyone who could help – teachers, tutors, mentors, parents, family, friends.<br><br>When you've completed your list, choose your favourite three, then your top option. | **Key question:** 'Why is it happening?'<br><br>Stay here for ten minutes. List every single reason *why the problem is happening.* Make your list as long as possible, exploring yourself and your own actions, your attitudes and beliefs, the influence of those around you, your classrooms, lessons, work materials, the impact of external events, the impact of teachers and tutors and so on.<br><br>Calmly list everything, making sure nothing is missed. Do not bother yourself with solutions yet. Take your time. |

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| **Key question:** 'How did it go, and what have I learned?' | **Key question:** 'What is currently happening?' |
| | |
| **3. Decide a course of action** | **2. Analyse the problem** |
| **Key question:** 'What are my options?' | **Key question:** 'Why is it happening?' |
| | |

Each of us apparently has a preference for one of these stages and might have a tendency to linger in it or even stay there as long as possible. We all know someone who endlessly talks about a problem without ever doing something about it. That person might feel most comfortable in stage 2 – analysing the problem. Other people you know might leap to a swift conclusion and do something straight away without properly thinking it through – perhaps they feel less comfortable in stages 1 and 2 and want to hurry on to stages 3 and 4.

For the cycle to work, stay in each quadrant for a good period of time, getting the most out of each stage.

The solutions you come up with will be better ones as a result!

## Final Thoughts

Kolb's approach to problem solving is called 'Root-Cause Analysis' – that is, a close examination of why a problem is occurring – what's at its root; or where it's growing from.

But there are other approaches to problem solving. Have a look at this short list, and see if alternative approaches might help you generate possible solutions too. There's a little space under each approach for you to scribble some initial ideas – maybe one of these will unlock your issue!

1. Breaking Down: One big problem might look too much to handle. But every big problem is composed of smaller problems. With this approach, you identify one or two smaller issues, and you try and fix those first.

2. O.D.A.: Designed by a US Airforce colonel called John Boyd, this stands for observe, decide, act. A simple three step problem-solving approach that begins with closely studying a problem before choosing a way forward.

3. Prove it!: Using this technique, you *try to prove the problem is impossible to solve*. Get as much evidence as you can to prove there's no way out. Wherever you can't prove its impossible to solve, make a note of why. Here, apparently, lie the possible solutions.