

Learning in style

If you're anything like me you probably won't make it to the end of this sentence before a distraction comes along and...

We're all very different

Everyone is different and that extends to how we learn as well. Some people just have to look at something once and it sticks in their brain. Other people work well when they can talk out loud and ask their peers questions. Then there are the people who learn by *doing*; pick it up, play around and *tinker*.

That last one is definitely me. I struggled to revise with a book for an hour absorbing knowledge. I found sticking pieces of paper on a wall and writing wherever it made sense (usually with as many doodles as notes) worked for me. In exams I imagine a spot on that wall, what was around it, and sooner or later I'd remember the part I needed.

I'm not suggesting this is what everyone should do. We all have our individual styles of learning. What I'm afraid of is that, with distance learning and videos making up such a huge part of teaching over the last six months, people who learn like me (or rather, have the attention span I do) might be struggling to feel engaged with learning.

So, what can I do to help?

I've been making resources that focus heavily on the tinkering side of learning. Can you build something that demonstrates the idea we're teaching? Can we show you stored energy with an elastic band rather than deriving an equation? That's what we're trying to do with [the Engineer Inside project](#).



I'm never without a whiteboard or pinboard that I can stick notes and bits of paper or drawings to. It helps me keep track of what's going on better than a list would. I like the chaos of it!

In this video I was talking about light refraction so decided to show it in action.



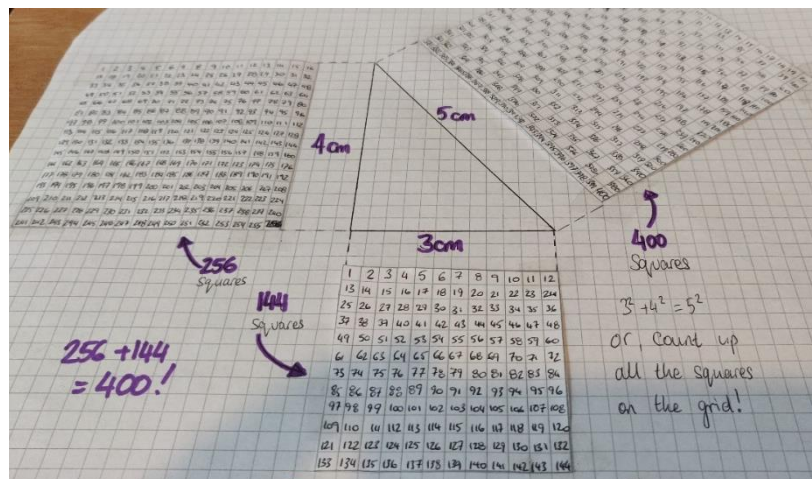
Why talk about storing energy when you can launch rockets to show how potential energy becomes kinetic energy instead?

But, if the way you're learning at the moment features a lot of sitting and watching a video, here are my tips to help:

- **Move** – can you watch the video in a room you wouldn't normally work in?
- **Stand up** – walking around might settle that 'fidget' habit that leads to distraction.
- **Take regular breaks** – just because a video is 30 minutes long doesn't mean you have to watch it all at once!
- **Think of a question** – even if it isn't an interactive video, choosing a question you *would* ask if you *could* helps you realise what you don't understand or want to know more about.

- **Look for the context** – if you don't care about the topic (that's okay, it happens to us all), pause and use a search engine to ask 'what is _____ useful for?' It's easier to concentrate if you understand *why* you are learning something.

It isn't always possible to get hands on, especially something dangerous like chemical reactions or anatomy (don't go dissecting roadkill), but you might be able to find a different way to imagine a concept.



Instead of learning Pythagorus' Theorem as $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ it sticks in my brain as thinking about making a triangle out of three squares. You can prove the equation works to yourself with grid paper like this.

The key take-away message from this blog post is that we all learn in different ways and that is nothing to be ashamed of. We all have to play to our own strengths. There are plenty of people like me making resources to support **you**, if the videos or textbook you have to work from aren't working for you – you only have to look.

Phil Jemmett is part of the WMG Outreach team in the WMG HVM Catapult research centre, at the University of Warwick.