

# Using a survey following a test to encourage students' self-assessment of, and preparedness to change, their approaches to study

Dwight Assenheimer & Jane Rienks

School of Medicine & Student Transition & Retention Team (Div. of Students and Education)

## The conundrum: struggling high achievers

Applicants to medical school are 'high end'—they have a high ATAR and must perform competitively on the national UMAT (Undergraduate Medicine and Health Sciences Admission Test) test. However:

- Individual students struggle with learning the heavy content (in-depth bioscience and high lecture and contact hours)—but the struggle is almost always with remembering not with understanding
- Struggling students may be putting in many hours of independent study
- Anecdotal evidence (discussions with students) suggest that many students seeking help have difficulty in:
  - analysing how their approach to study influences what and how they learn
  - recognising that their approach to study isn't working
  - experimenting with, and adapting their study approaches, and testing the efficacy of these approaches.

## This is not surprising because...

- Students' individual habits of learning are well established by the time they conclude their secondary education, and may not suit the tertiary environment (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Lowe & Cook, 2003)
- Changes to learned and applied skills are unlikely to occur unless students critically examine their study practices and whether they work (Paterson & Chapman, 2013). Insight may precede a willingness to embrace experimentation with new learning skills

Furthermore:

- Most medical students have not struggled with study until now—this is a new and often confidence-shattering experience.

## And it really matters because....

- Bright, potentially competent students may achieve less well, lose confidence and motivation, and may fail
- Students receive a single grade for the year. If result not satisfactory, entire year must be repeated (~8 units)
- Students are excluded if they fail the same year twice, or if they cannot complete the five year degree within seven years; some may leave without any passed units and no credit to take to another degree
- Medical practitioners must remain current—so learning how to learn must be a core skill.

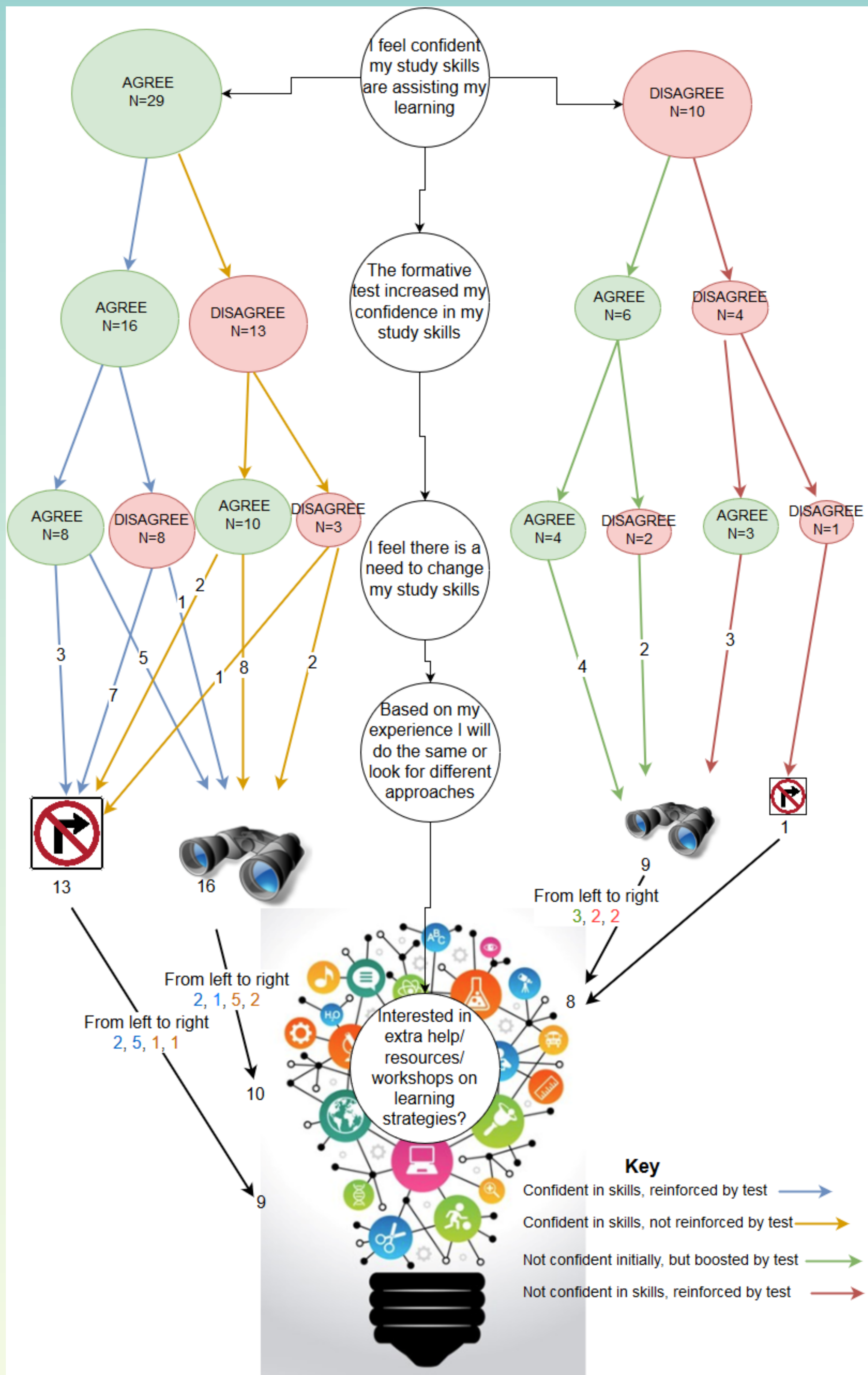
## Our survey asked about study skills

- Anonymous survey administered after the formative test and before the summative mid-semester test results were released
- 39 of 122 students responded, a 32% response rate
- We asked them a series of questions about their confidence in their study skills, whether this was reinforced by the test, whether they felt they should change how they studied, whether they would look for different study approaches and whether we could help
- Used a 4 point Likert scale (SA, A, D, SD) for three questions but grouped categories because strongly agree/disagree rare.

## ...and this is what we found

- Respondents separated into four groups on the basis of whether they were confident that their study skills, and whether or not the formative test reinforced this confidence
- Students who didn't agree that they needed to change their skills were significantly more likely to say they would do the same vs look for alternative approaches (Fishers Exact, p=0.0131)
- However, most students felt they should look at different approaches (25/39), including many who were confident
- Most were interested in extra help/resources (27/39) – including confident students who did well, even if they said didn't think they **needed** to change how they were studying.

## Results



## Implications

These students displayed a remarkable degree of openness about their study skills. Furthermore, this pilot study suggests that:

- Some medical students **need** academic study skills advice
- Students are interested in looking for **alternative study approaches** even if they are confident in their skills and doing well
- There is interest in **help/resources** both amongst students who are doing well and students who need help.

### What now?

We need to work with students to locate/design/provide resources and types of assistance that they can use to develop successfully as:

- Undergraduate medical students
- Lifelong learners in a complex, rapidly changing and heavily scientific professional field.

## References

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