Independent Study at ESG

Philosophy and Procedures

The main objective of the C&MS style (Keller plan, as it is known to the outside world) learning is to allow students to make more efficient use of their time in learning subjects where there is a body of material to be learned (e.g. physics, not music or philosophy). Experience has shown that students using the Keller plan learn the material better than students exposed to the same material in a conventional lecture situation, and usually enjoy the work more.

The primary difference between C&MS and conventional lectures is that it is entirely self-paced. You can do one course in two terms or two courses in one term, either consecutively or simultaneously. It gives you a chance to spend extra time on topics you want or need to without risk of “falling behind.” In addition, the relatively large number of tests gives you a better opportunity to interact with staff to discuss the material.

The way this is all done may be clear to you already. The staff is augmented by student tutors, both official and unofficial. Official tutors are students who recently went through the program (ESG, not necessarily C&MS), did well, have an interest in teaching and hopefully interact well with other students. Unofficial tutors offer help when needed and are basically anyone you might talk to. Tutors tend to enjoy tutoring in part because it reinforces their own knowledge of the material.

Feedback is given by passing unit tests—you should not go on to the next unit until you have finished the last one, or at least are confident you know it. The tests themselves are an important part of the course. They allow you to find weak spots in your understanding, expose you to interesting problems, and give you a chance to talk regularly with a tutor or instructor. Failing a unit test is no crime—it gives you a chance to talk at length about some problem. Almost everybody fails several tests in a subject.

You can use any procedure you want to get through the units, backwards or forwards, or take all the tests at once. We recommend the following: read the unit (i.e. the handout), do the suggested reading, do a few of the recommended problems. If you have any trouble, do a couple of earlier problems (almost all texts arrange problems in order of difficulty). Finish the recommended problems, ignoring any that seem trivial to you, and if you have questions at any point, ask for help. When you think you have
fulfilled the stated objectives, ask a tutor for a test. The unit tests are all closed book unless otherwise stated—conversions and equations you’re not expected to know will be given. Spend as much time as you want on a test, but keep in mind that in most cases, any time over 20 to 30 minutes could more profitably be spent studying. Try to make sure that a tutor will be around when you finish a test so that it will be fresh in your mind when you discuss it.

These suggestions are not rules, merely guidelines, but remember that this procedure has worked in the past.