Promoting learning Autonomy: Helping Students Become Independent Learners

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After twelve years of schooling, many students still do not have mature and efficient strategies necessary for independent learning. In an effort to address this problem, most postsecondary institutions are offering courses in basic skills such as reading, study skills, and writing. (Power, 1976; Lederman, Ribaudo, and Ryzewic, 1985). What causes and solutions can be offered to address this issue? How can classroom teachers help their students to become more successful in their learning activities? This article discusses reasons why students have not been successful in using learning strategies, identifies effective learning strategies, and offers suggestions for helping students become independent learners.

Reasons for Failing to Apply Independent Strategies

A search of the professional literature on studying and learning reveals the following reasons for students failing to apply independent learning strategies : lack of instruction, blind training in applying strategies, weak metacognitive strategies, and resistance to changing existing behavior patterns. Students can become independent learners when they overcome these obstacles.

Lack of Instruction

Students have not received systematic instruction in developing advanced learning strategies (Baker & Brown, 1984; Simpson, 1984). As they move from the process of initial learning to read to the complicated process of reading to learn, they must receive direct instruction which will allow them to develop mature and efficient learning skills. They will not become independent learners without advanced instruction (Herber and Nelson-Herber, 1987). Direct instructional activities should include modeling,

practice, and application across the content areas (Duffy & Roehler, 1986; Vacca & Vacca, 1986). In its recent research on teaching and learning, the U. S. Department of Education (1986) reports that the teacher plays the most vital role in students' acquisition and use of effective learning and study strategies. Consequently, teachers need to be aware of the quality and type of instruction offered in learning skills.

Blind Training of Skills

While most elementary and intermediate reading series contain sections of teaching study skills, and students receive instruction in the use of these study and learning strategies, nevertheless, they are often unable to effectively utilize or regulate their own learning strategies. Brown, Campione, and Day (1981) suggest that blind training in study skills is the reason for this weakness. Blind training occurs when instructors do not explain the how, when, where, or why in employing a new learning strategy (Simpson, 1984). Students are aware of various strategies, but do not know how to select or apply them with different types of reading materials.

Weak Metacognitive Strategies

Students are expected to attend to, interact with, and elaborate on the underlying meanings of the text. However, they are unable to do this without effective metacognitive strategies. These strategies include the ability to plan, check, monitor, evaluate, and revise learning strategies in reference to the task, learning characteristics, available strategies, and the type of material assigned (Brown et al., 1981). Metacognitive awareness allows students to regulate their learning strategies and to revise them when a breakdown in learning occurs. One significant factor in developing metacognitive awareness of learning is allowing students to become more self-directed and less teacher-directed in completing learning tasks.

Resistance to Changing Behavior Patterns

Many students are resistant to replacing ineffective strategies that they know and use with more demanding ones. Studies which have investigated the learning strategies that students employ throughout the learning processes

have found that students usually have one general study strategy, and it is used regardless of the content or the reading demands of the text (Higginson, 1986; Shenkman and Curkras, 1986; Turner, 1987). However, direct instruction in using effective learning strategies can alter students' behavioral patterns (Brown, Campione, and Day, 1981).

Identifying Effective Learning Strategies

Brown (1981) states that by directly teaching students learning strategies and the control of those strategies, students will not only enhance their academic performance, but will be able to transfer this training to other appropriate learning situations. Therefore, before teachers can help students become independent learners, they must be assisted in learning effective use of learning strategies. These strategies can be defined as any cognitive, affective, or behavioral activity that students engage in to encode, retrieve, store, or use information (Weinstein and MacDonald, 1986).

Weinstein (1987) names the following categories as learning strategies which foster learning autonomy: rehearsal, elaboration, organization, comprehension monitoring and affective. Teachers can help students use the processes and techniques in each category to obtain and use information.

Rehearsal Strategies

Rehearsal strategies emphasize repetition and are used when students need to recall information. These include rereading, repeating, and underlining. They require no deviation or modification of the text. These strategies are effective for literal levels of understanding.

Elaboration Strategies

This category allows students to try to understand new information by bridging what is already known with the new information. Techniques include summarizing, paraphrasing, creating analogies, and relating events to personal feeling and attitudes. They help students build their background and acquire new information.

Comprehension Monitoring Strategies

Comprehension monitoring strategies are aspects of metacognition and as such, focus on helping students monitor their own learning progress. They help learners in checking learning outcomes, planning subsequent strategies, monitoring their effectiveness, testing, revising, and evaluating efforts for learning (Baker and Brown, 1984). According to Weinstein, a variety of learning strategies are used for comprehension monitoring; however, most focus on self-questioning, teaching others, applying principles, and examining concepts.

Affecting Strategies

These are techniques that students use to create and maintain an effective learning climate. These include developing relaxation methods for reducing anxiety, creating a study atmosphere free of distractions, scheduling for maximum learning, establishing goals, and selecting rewards for accomplishments. These strategies create conditions favorable for learning.

Helping Students Improve Their Learning Strategies

Any effort to help students improve their learning must begin with their own knowledge and awareness of themselves as learners, their awareness of the task demands, and their ability to select and regulate learning strategies. In order to help students become independent learners, teachers are offered the following suggestions:

Administer a Learning Strategy Checklist

Assign a reading selection along with a learning strategy checklist in which students identify the strategies that they use before, during, and after studying the selection. Include on this checklist a list of strategies from which students can identify the strategies they use when they do not comprehend sections of the reading selection. The checklist has been successfully utilized in research by Swanson (1985) and Turner (1987). Completing this activity will allow students to become aware of their existing practices, and can serve as a starting place for discussion and teaching effective learning strategies.

Provide a Description and the
Significance of the Strategy

When introducing a learning strategy to students, identify how it is to be used, and why it is important. Students should be given examples of when the strategy can be used most effectively with various types of reading selections. Students should then be required to practice the strategy and identigy when and why it is significant (Schmitt and Newby, 1986).

Employ a Content Based Approach

Use a content-based approach to teaching learning strategies (Nist and Simpson, 1987). This includes using selections from different content areas, guiding students through the process of making study plans, selecting appropriate strategies, applying the chosen strategies, and identifying fix-it (for use when comprehension fails) techniques. The content-based approach allows students to determine the demands of the text and regulate their strategies.

Shift Responsibility to Students

Gradually increase the students' responsibilities for planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning strategies used with the content area reading selections. Shifting the responsibility for directing the learning activities from the teacher to the students will allow the students to ultimately structure the learning activities themselves and apply the processes independently (Herber and Nelson-Herber, 1987).

SUMMARY

According to Herber and Nelson-Herber (1987), students' independence in learning is developed by design, not by chance. Teachers can help students improve their learning by understanding the reasons why students have not been successful, identifying strategies that promote active participation in the learning process, and teaching students how to become more responsible for their own learning. Ultimately, students become independent learners when they plan, monitor, apply, and evaluate their own learning processes.

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