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## USING DIRECT INSTRUCTION IN A COLLEGE STUDY SKILLS COURSE

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The lowest third of the freshman class, those predicted to have the most trouble in college, participated in the study skills course herein described. These students achieved at least a 2.0 grade point average (GPA) as frequently as students ranked in the upper two-thirds of the freshman class. This article describes the course and the means by which its effectiveness was assessed.

### The Study Skills Course

The study skills course, taught at a small Eastern university with nine undergraduate and graduate colleges or schools, is offered through the College of Arts and Sciences. Few students enroll in the course by choice. At the time of admittance, approximately one-third of the freshman class is required by the Office of Admissions to take the course during the freshman year. These students may have SAT's in the 400's; they may have recommendations from their high school counselors to take a study skills course; or their grades may show weaknesses in areas addressed by the course. Study skills classes meet for fifty minutes--five times a week for six weeks during the summer session, or twice a week for one semester during the fall. The students, typically liberal arts, engineering, business, or nursing majors, receive a letter grade and two credits toward graduation for passing the course.

### Assumptions

The course was designed on the following assumptions:

(1) The students will be relatively disorganized learners, lacking the habit of organizing their time and their learning

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materials, and having little sense of the need for making a schedule and keeping to it. Instructor experience has indicated that this assumption was valid.

(2) The students will be unaware of college academic standards, of the amount of required reading, and the need to develop study strategies. Instructor experience has indicated that this assumption, also, was valid.

(3) The students will be uncertain of their goals and not internally motivated. Therefore, external motivation (e.g., receiving grades and credit toward graduation) would be necessary.

Experience suggested that this assumption was both right and wrong. Many of the students are very career oriented and expect to work hard to reach their career goals. Many others, however, are unfocused and are still defining their goals. In both types, nonetheless, a marked absence of internal motivation to study the content of the study skills course was found. The external motivators were necessary.

(4) The students will be unaware of their own study skill needs, will resent being assigned to the course, and will resent the time that studying for the study skills course will take away from their study time for other courses. This assumption was supported by experience.

(5) The students will benefit from the use of auto-instructional materials, that is, books with answer keys.

This assumption was refuted in actual experience. The students apparently felt that it was futile to do the work themselves when the answers were readily available. Research (Guthrie, 1984) is beginning to show that this response is predictable.

### Selection of Instructional Procedures

The four guidelines which directed the selection of instructional procedures appear to have validity for this population.

#### (1) Use of Direct Instruction methods.

Instructional methods and procedures typically resemble Berliner and Rosenshine's definition of "direct instruction" (Berliner & Rosenshine, 1977). The instructors determine the course objectives and materials; students are made aware

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of lesson objectives for each lesson; course objectives are stated in the syllabus and discussed frequently throughout the semester; the classroom environment is instructor-structured but not authoritarian; student performance is scrupulously monitored--instructors carefully listen to students' oral responses and comment generously on their written work; in-class feedback to students is immediate and task-oriented; homework is graded, returned, and reviewed in class promptly.

(2) Provision for in-class applications of study techniques to individually selected textbooks.

Students must bring to class a textbook from any other course in order to make immediate application of the study techniques taught in class. This procedure allows for transfer of learning, that is, students immediately apply the newly learned study techniques to outside materials. It also allows for individualization; each student chooses the text in which to apply the study techniques.

(3) Use of a common syllabus.

All instructors use the same syllabus, although individual instructor modifications are permitted if the need arises. Each semester the syllabus is updated, with input from all instructors, after which changes are seldom made, because if the curriculum which was agreed upon is a good one, all instructors should be using it; if not, it should be changed.

In addition, the students have in common many study needs because there are distribution requirements within the university which students in every major field must meet. There are also study techniques applicable to several disciplines; for instance, some methods of learning vocabulary (3 x 5 cards; audio tape recorder) are equally effective for learning formulas, sequences, or lists of essential facts. The common syllabus assures that each of these study areas is taught in all sections of the course.

(4) Use of several textbooks.

Approximately ten textbooks are used. During the 1983-84 sessions, the year for which the data analyses have been completed and the results of which are reported below, the students purchased Adams (1981) and Cohen et al. (1973). New texts are constantly being reviewed, however, and in current use are Sotiriou (1984) and Adams and Brody (1983), as well as a vocabulary text, as described below. In addition,

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classroom-sized sets of other texts are provided for whole group use, or individual copies are used as resources for instructor presentations.

## Content

The following topics are covered in the course:

- monitoring comprehension
- getting the main idea
- identifying major and minor details
- knowing the importance of and methods for studying vocabulary
- identifying organizational patterns in paragraphs, articles, lectures, and textbooks
- surveying before reading
- taking effective notes on textbooks and lectures
- using study skills systems
- gaining test-taking skills
- learning rapid reading techniques
- distinguishing fact from opinion
- recognizing author bias
- drawing inferences
- knowing and using memorization techniques

Also included are topics related to personal organization strategies. Students are taught the importance of organizing themselves, which includes keeping an appointment book, getting to appointments, and being on time.

Common word recognition errors among students are discussed, and students are advised to have their eyes checked by a vision specialist if they have not done so within the previous year. Some examples of word recognition errors, which may indicate lack of visual acuity are the following:

undulate	alimony	recalcitrant
inundate	parsimony	reconstitute

There are frequent reminders to get enough sleep. Emphasis is placed on students' rights (1) to a quiet time to sleep, and (2) to an adequate space and a quiet time to study. Students seem unsure of their rights in these matters, and needed reinforcement is provided by repeated reminders of these rights throughout the semester.

There are also frequent reminders to apply what is taught in the study skills course when studying for other

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courses, because for most of these students transfer of learning does not happen automatically.

Finally, there is a strong emphasis upon vocabulary study. As with study skills texts, vocabulary text selection is continually updated. Nurnberg and Rosenblum (1983) are assigned during the fall and spring semesters and Rubin (1978) during the summer. The books differ in difficulty (the former being more taxing), as the students who enter the program during these sessions appear to differ in preparation. Some direct instruction of specific words is provided and methods of learning vocabulary are presented, but students are also expected to learn the vocabulary on their own, using methods suggested in the books themselves. The students are tested frequently; fifteen or sixteen vocabulary tests per term is not unusual. Tests are graded and returned as quickly as possible. The vocabulary study methods are techniques that also help students memorize many facts, formulas, names, theories, or sequences needed for other courses.

### Judging Course Effectiveness

Since no valid measures exist to determine what skills and strategies students actually use when studying on their own, judging course effectiveness is difficult. Even with their limitations, two means of making such judgments are GPAs and questionnaires.

End-of-first-semester GPAs of freshmen enrolled in the study skills course are compared to end-of-first-semester GPAs of freshmen not enrolled in the course. Although this is comparing unlike groups, one course objective is to enable the apparently less advantaged study skills students the opportunity to achieve similarly to their more advantaged peers. Therefore, chi-square tests are conducted between end-of-first-semester GPAs of the two groups. Data for the 1983-84 college year have been analyzed. Of the 214 study skills students, 68% achieved end-of-first-semester GPAs at or above 2.0 ("C" or better). In contrast, of the 435 freshmen not enrolled in the course, 67% achieved end-of-first-semester GPAs at or above 2.0. A chi-square test revealed no significant difference ( $p > .05$ ) between the two groups. Study skills students, then, who seemed less likely to be successful in their freshmen year, achieved

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GPA's at or above 2.0 as frequently as did students who seemed more likely to be successful in their freshman year.

Students also respond to anonymous survey questionnaires. According to this measure, 1983-84 students felt they especially benefited from 1) the self-responsibility stressed in the course; 2) the variety of strategies taught for actively attacking text chapters, absorbing new vocabulary, and studying lecture notes; and 3) the instruction and practice in taking objective and essay tests.

The strengths of the course appear to be: use of direct instruction, provision for in-class applications of study techniques, stress of self-responsibility, and demonstration of several study strategies. Although curriculum and text change are still made as needs arise, the course appears to be effectively meeting many of the students' needs.

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