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Learning the Ropes--Survival Techniques for College Freshmen

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LEARNING THE ROPES— SURVIVAL TECHNIQUES FOR COLLEGE FRESHMEN

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According to Alvin Toffler's book The Third Wave, the expert is not longer on a towering pedestal. More and more, lay people are being added to the decision-making process in hospitals, in industry, and even in schools. Parents and students are expressing the new attitude, "You don't have to be an expert to know what you want."

At Technical College Reading Center, we listened to our experts--the UMC students. Sophomores indicated what they needed, in order to earn desirable grades in our two-year technical school. Taking their suggestions, we decided to expand the focus of our reading program to include those "survival skills" identified by the "pros". Our purpose was to give the unsure freshman student a boost in the right direction; i.e., a fast course in "learning the ropes."

Initially, we had students enrolled in study skills courses conduct surveys on where to study on campus. The students collected worksheets, notes, flashcards, and old exams. These were compiled into study files available for checkout in the library. Students kept accounts of study hours, correlated on a chart with grade point averages. For example, it was found that an A-B student studies 15-20 hours a week to attain successful grades. Each quarter new surveys were conducted and course study files were updated. This involvement by "those in the know" added a dimension of veracity and relevance that would have taken our staff a millennium to impress on student minds through lecturing or dittoed handouts.

We next used study and test-taking tips that students suggested during small group discussions

and created some short, entertaining audio-visual programs based on student' experiences.

Our first program was seven minutes long and was entitled "Everything You Never Wanted to Know About Studying, But Knew You Should Ask". We brought the issue into focus immediately: "Here you are in college and it's time to face the facts. You are not here to go to football games and beer busts, or to find dates all of the time. You are here to learn. This means going to class, and, you've guessed it already--studying, an activity most of us want to avoid, but know we must do. In a recent University of North Dakota survey, students said that studying was the number one problem that they encountered."

Each idea or concept was introduced with an example given by our students, followed by suggestions they had previously shared with us on how to alleviate the problem situation. An outline of the concepts covered follows:

I. Introduction
   A. Everyone needs to study to get good grades
   B. Everyone can benefit by increased efficiency in studying effectively

II. When to Study
   A. What time of day is best for study?
   B. How many hours a week should you study?
   C. How long should one study at a sitting?

III. How to Study
   A. Gather all materials you will need
   B. Utilize self-testing from notes
   C. Some concentration methods for studying
   D. Solo versus group studying situations

IV. Where to Study
   A. Comfortable place
   B. A place with good lighting
   C. A place with no distractions

V. Help in Study - Available Resources

We compiled study and faculty feedback of this program from our college and from area institutions (Concordia College, Moorhead, North Dakota State, and University of Minnesota). Reviewing their evaluations, we decided to make another program for general test-taking. Again, we included ideas that UMC students identified as useful.

Our students, however, still demanded more basic information. One student reported that a fellow had passed his medical board exams without taking a single

medical course. Students spoke up: "What about the Nursing Boards?" "I have to take aviation ground school exams." "There is a civil service test for radio announcing." "I have a state court-reporter test." "Remember CPA exams for accounting." The comments led to queries about tests in other technical courses such as natural resources, restaurant management, animal nutrition, and agronomy. We became aware that test-taking, objective questions in particular, were important student concerns. Our programs had covered study schedules, taking notes, and general study techniques. But our students asked for some test-wiseness tips to build confidence in taking exams and relieve their test anxiety.

We researched published work in the field of test-wiseness (Langer and Wark 1969), Millman and Pauk 1969, Ford 1973, McPhail 1975, Shepherd on double negatives 1979, and sections on test-wiseness in Stanley and Hopkins' Educational and Psychological Measurement and Evaluation, 1972), and produced a series of light and humorous multi-media programs on test-wiseness clues for true-false, matching-completion, and multiple choice exams. We took care to indicate to students that test-wiseness will only work up to 20% of the time, and then only with certain courses and certain instructors! The best solution was to attend class and study!

Students took the basic test-wiseness concepts that we offered and collected test-wiseness questions from their course exams. These were compiled and became quizes for our units. Besides serving as application of test-wiseness skills, the quizes were poignant. The students found it enjoyable and challenging to tackle questions from a myriad of subjects such as apiary studies, economics, hunt seat equitation, biology tractor maintenance, restaurant sanitation, psychology, horticulture, child development, mechanized agriculture, business law, computer programming, and first aid.

Concepts covered in true-false were:

1. Answer all the questions. You have a 50-50 chance of getting them right.
2. Watch for specific determiners for true: most, generally, may, sometimes, some, can, most, tends to, usually, many, few, often, seldom, more, less, good, occasionally, great, little, rarely, probably, frequently.
3. Watch for specific determiners for false: only, always, all, never, invariably, absolutely, every, none, best, worst, guarantees, undoubtedly, insures
4. If a question is partly false, it is all false.

5. If something sounds odd or out of place, it is probably false.
6. Know how to comprehend double negatives.
7. STUDY and GO TO CLASS!

Concepts in Matching and Completion were:

1. Use the process of elimination to help find an item mate.
2. Use association to give you a clue.
3. Grammatical agreement of both items is a clue.

Concepts for Completion were:

1. Write in something as an answer.
2. Note the number of lines allowed.
3. Note the length of the line allowed.
4. Watch for grammatical agreement of singulars and plurals, and "a" and "an". Answers beginning with consonants follow "a", while "an" is followed by a word that starts with a vowel.
5. STUDY and GO TO CLASS!

Concepts in Multiple Choice were:

1. Questions in general terms call for general answers.
2. The longest alternative is a good bet for the "long-winded" instructor.
3. Choose a middle value alternative.
4. When you come across opposite alternatives, one of them is usually the correct answer.
5. "None of the above" is seldom used. "All of the above" is more often preferred.
6. If two alternatives mean the same thing, choose neither of them.
7. Use association.
8. Watch for specific determiners, as for true and false.
9. Inter-item clues can give you up to 2-4 correct answers on the average test. Try to re-read your test when you are finished, to catch them.
10. STUDY and GO TO CLASS!

All concepts were illustrated with simple hypothetical examples. More difficult questions were covered in the quizes taken directly from UMC exams.

A test-wiseness pre- and post-test is now being developed, utilizing items from actual tests given at UMC. Because we have listened to students as the experts, we believe that our audio-visual programs have increased student self-confidence and inculcated an attitude toward studying and test-taking as learning experiences rather than as cramming marathons that burn the midnight oil.

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(For more information or examples of materials and a complete bibliography on test-taking, contact the author at University of Minnesota Technical College, Crookston, Minnesota, 56716.)