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# READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL: The Study Formulas Revisited

*Kenneth VanderMeulen*

An interview with a college student who fears academic dismissal often goes something like this: "You say you didn't have scholastic difficulties in high school?"

"No, and I had good percentiles on the standardized tests. I really don't know what it could be. I study four or five hours a day."

"What is your method of study?"

"I go over the stuff in the text."

"Yes, how do you do that?"

"Well, I have this highlighter pen, and I bring out all the important sentences in the text that way. Then I go over it before tests. But the tests always ask things. . . . I never even heard of some of them. I'll sure flunk if I don't. . . ."

To quote more of the conversation would yield more of the same. The student is obviously unaware of what constitutes study, and will have to be given a crash course in how to study before he can regain his academic underpinnings. Like the thousands before him and more thousands in the future, this young person has fallen into the snare of thinking that one's ability to get meaning from the printed page automatically assures him of academic kudos. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Being able to read well is necessary, to be sure; however, studying is a large and complicated recipe, of which reading is only one ingredient.

As in any serious project, study requires a plan of approach, some kind of schedule, an understanding of what is relevant, and an adequate foundation of terminology in the field of work. The process of study is a careful interlacing of textbook background material, notes which have been rewritten after lectures, and outside reading notes taken from bibliography and other reference source materials. Students find by experience that they are more comfortable with one style of study than another, but there are no good shortcuts to a complete grasp of a particular discipline. The fact that many young people of normal intelligence go through high school and possibly further without realizing they do not know how to study indicates some omissions in our educational methods.

One important omission is our frequent failure to mention methods or systems of study at all. We tend to assume that secondary students should have been taught the proper approaches to study skills. This assumption leads to another pedagogical sin—this one a sin of commission. Oftentimes, students are actually led *away* from a full appreciation of the complexities of studying by the way in which teachers understate the role it plays in overall comprehension of the subject matter. A teacher may be heard to say, “I want you to read this material very carefully,” and the class members are all too willing to accept that charge exactly the way it was given.

After all, no one told them to question it, compare ideas in it, analyze it, test it for logic or objectivity, or even read it aloud to hear the syllables make literary music. In truth, the assignment doesn’t even carry the mandate to *think* about it. The teacher who asked his class to read the pages may feel secure in the belief that reading is thinking, that the very definition of reading must include serious sustained thought about the meaning of the symbols on the printed page. While this is indeed true, many students equate reverie with thinking, thus missing the boat entirely. In other words, reading must be more than moving passively through the associations called up by the words in print. Students who allow themselves to drift through the ideas presented are not truly reading. They need to be taught to see reading of expository material as examining or scrutinizing an author’s interpretation of information.

Therefore, when discussing advance work with classes, teachers might do well to purge from their conversation all such phrases as “look this over,” “study the chapter,” “remember these points,” and “read the material.” Every time the pupil hears these words, he or she is lulled into believing that looking, passive reading, committing to memory, and reverie are what study is all about. Since no one has informed them differently, these young people will persist in their misconceptions as long as they are allowed to. Those who go to college will take the false concept of study along with them, and meet a challenge of increased study loads with inadequate tools. Some will become memory drudges, mired in inefficiency; others will drop the “hard” courses, only to begin a pathetic search for “easy” courses; a few will feel totally overwhelmed and drop the whole effort with an attitude of bitterness; and, still others will compromise their standards with any expedient at their disposal. There is ample evidence that this situation of students who were never taught to study tends to en-

gender feelings of distrust and hostility displayed by college enrollees toward college course requirements and instructors.

Instead of merely wringing our hands at the thought of the deplorable situation, we teachers need to take an entirely new look at the rationale of study formulas, to rethink the purposes and rechannel the directions. When first established as a system, the aim was to make study methodical and therefore more efficient. Let us review the parts briefly. The first step is the survey or preview step, meant to give the student a broad picture of the work to be covered, to furnish general impressions through skimming all the material. Step two, translating headings and sub-heads into questions, serves to build interest and make the reading step a more purposeful activity. Reading the material, the third step, thus has been prepared for in the previous steps. Stage four in the process is usually described as the recitation step, in which the student makes sure that he has understood the ideas presented, by restating notes and outlines in fleshed-out form. The fifth step, designed for the purpose of retention, is thought of as reviewing, and involves a reorganization of the materials, implying preparation for a test.

Put in this way, the study formula cannot well be of use to either teacher or student. If we merely explain and promote one kind of study formula or another, we approach the problem of studying and learning from the wrong direction. When a student knows the steps of a study formula, but has no conviction about the value of his investigation, he is no better off than a person with a checkbook but no account in the bank.

We propose the insertion of two more elements into the study formula. Previous to the first step of introducing units or subjects in the classroom, we need to add the pre-stage of *student involvement*. To our final step of review for retention, we need to add a post-stage called *reflection*. Let's see how we may best benefit from these two concepts, by bringing them to action in our student groups, in order to rid ourselves forever of the apathy that seems to stall many developing minds in some secondary schools.

In using a cooperative planning method, the teacher merely keeps the components of the study formula in mind, so that each part may be worked into the process in its appropriate place. It is never overtly employed.

Here the art of teaching consists of making it seem to each student that he is on a personal journey of discovery. By comparison, a guided tour in the text is dullness itself. The teacher poses a situation that

prevails, locally or world-wide, whether the class is in mechanics, science, language, or history, and the teacher helps students see the problems and reality of the situation. Now the class members see themselves *within* the picture, since it involves *their* future. And, in presenting these problematic facts of life to students, the teacher also gains stature among those youngsters who are looking for teachers who are “real.”

One teacher brings a few issues of the Congressional Record to class, not to read the dull deliberations, but to demonstrate the many ways in which people and local units of government are constantly calling for federal attention. The teacher asks the pupils to list the range of topics covered in a given number of pages. Beginning casually, students become aware of monumental problems and complex dilemmas facing elected representatives. They also come to realize that they themselves will have many of these same problems to work out in tomorrow's world, when they will be the responsible leaders of society. They become acquainted with such matters as starving people because of ignorance of land use, prevalence of crime because of our failure to educate, violence because of prejudice, and destruction because of greed. Recently, a letter written to a senator from Jacques Cousteau was entered in the RECORD. The author predicted that man will become extinct in fifty years because he has not learned how to use our most precious commodity, water. Our oceans, he says, are living things which we are killing by our practices, and our ignorance will cause our own end. Read in class, the compelling letter caused concern and a highly motivated search for information that crossed four discipline lines.

Class members can be guided to ask the very questions that will provide the core of concepts and understandings they will need in the subject field. If they are next given the keys to the library, so to speak, the students will gain some much needed self-reliance in the second stage of gathering information. It can be of special value if the teacher helps students see the difference between critical information and trivial data.

We may bring the third ingredient in at this point, to say that organization of information combines both practice and application of good reading *and* study skills under the ideal conditions of a sincere search for answers to real problems. Students will learn about the relative importance of the information they have gathered when they reach the crucial stage of the *reflection* period. While this step may take the form of a rambling class discussion, the process of crystallizing

one's impressions into sentences, and the way in which one person measures his ideas by setting them next to the thoughts of others—these are the comparisons and contrasts which lead to practical retention and learning. Although the problems considered are not resolved, the benefits incurred from the discussions are inestimable.

In summary, a teacher's work in the classroom will be more productive if he uses a study formula in planning advance work, rather than merely making assignments and recommending the study formula. The point is that exhorting students to study harder is futile when many young people have not learned that they must become affectively involved if they are to educate themselves.

It would be, therefore, of great benefit to classes in high school to begin each period with a picture of a problem situation. In our modern interdependent society, it should not be difficult to demonstrate that every problem involves us all. When discussion leads to step two, students organize and seek documentation to support all the ideas they have created for possible solutions. The information is gathered, organized, and brought to class sessions.

Along with the highly democratic business of talking over the information which committees and individuals have brought to class, steps four and five may be made more valuable as each member writes his conclusions, summarizing his own ideas, and refining his pictures of the possible ways to solve problems. We can include all the basic skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in this project to involve all students in current important matters.

Reflection is emphasized in this article as an antidote to the sickness of students going mechanically through the motions of study, when in truth nothing is happening at all. Reflection is also emphasized as a loud plea to teachers who frequently skip the step entirely because they have their eyes on the calendar. Teachers sometimes say, "We have to cover this by May 10," and demean the importance of the subject they teach.

We recommend the sort of teacher who draws his students into a magic circle by focusing all eyes on problems, issues, matters for serious attention. The class discusses (usually with some emotion—possibly prejudice) and finally reaches the strategic juncture at which a student says "Don't we have to know more than we know, to talk about that?"

Think of all the matters which require deliberation by America's future leaders in this school year! What math class could turn down the ramifications of current inflation charts? Why wouldn't science classes

want to investigate the charges and counter-charges surrounding food additives? Why is nuclear power development encountering slow-downs? Why are consumers saying Ralph Nader is costing them \$500 a year in safety gadgets? Why do executives complain about the "plight" of the American language? Can we rebuild America's farm land? Why are many American manufacturing companies foreign owned? Should a city declare itself overpopulated?

Answers to any of these questions (albeit answers do not always provide solutions) could be found first, by becoming concerned, then doing the necessary gathering of information, organizing the information in an orderly fashion so that reflection on the big question will be a logical outgrowth. The approach will have avoided the mechanical type of cursory reading that sometimes passes for study; instead, the students will have built a habit of aggressive reading which comes as a result of knowing what one is looking for in texts and reference volumes.