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## A Call for More Study Skills Instruction

by Joan Sedita, M.Ed.

The term "metacognition" is used in education to describe the learning process. It means transcending cognition, or more simply put, thinking about thinking. Study skills instruction develops in students a metacognitive approach to school - they learn how to learn. Students need to go beyond completing an assignment and think about how they complete it. They need to be aware of the process they follow and steps they take when prereading a textbook, taking notes in class, or answering an essay question on a test.

To most people, teaching basic skills means the 3 R's: Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic. I believe, however, that study skills are an essential component of basic skills which for too long has been neglected. I have devoted a significant portion of my twenty years work in the field of learning disabilities to developing study skills curriculums and instructional material, and to training educators and parents how to teach study skills. Study skills instruction benefits all students, but it is crucial to students who have learning disabilities.

### WHAT ARE STUDY SKILLS AND WHY DO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES NEED STUDY SKILLS INSTRUCTION?

Everyone needs the right tools and training to do their job. A carpenter must bring hammers, saws, nails and drills, and a working knowledge of how to handle wood in order to frame a house. A plumber needs the proper tools and experience to fix a kitchen sink. Study skills instruction gives students the "tools" and the "training" they need to do a good job in school. The more adept a student is with reading, writing, speaking and study skills, the more efficient and thorough he or she will be at getting the job of learning done. Too often, however, we move children through the grades without sufficient tools or training

As students progress through each stage of education, they must develop a new set of skills to cope with greater demands. In the primary grades, they learn to read and write and organize themselves. From third to sixth grade, the emphasis switches to reading and writing to learn, and assumptions are made about how organized students should be at this point. In junior high school, students are expected to work more independently and to keep up with increasingly difficult schedules for school work, sports, activities, and social commitments. Upon entering high school and then college, even greater demands are placed on the student to process a more complex and increasing volume of material, and to complete more longterm assignments. The greater the demands of the grade level, the more need there is for study skills to cope with those demands.

Most teachers agree that study skills are important, but many are not really sure what study skills are and whose responsibility it is to see that they are taught. College teacher-training and certification requirements usually do not include course work in the area of study skills. Curriculums are often quite detailed when it comes to content classes, and schools carefully examine these curriculums to determine which reading series or textbooks they will use across the system. Not so with study skills; for too long it has been the Cinderella of curriculum planning. Most schools do not offer study skills instruction as part of the regular curriculum. There is often an assumption on the part of teachers and even parents that students have been taught these skills in previous grades or developed them on their own. Through no fault of their own, the higher the grade level, the less likely teachers are to include study skills instruction in lesson planning.

In fact, many students are capable of developing their own systems for organizing, processing and comprehending what they have read or heard in class, planning homework and longterm assignments, studying for tests, and determining good test-taking strategies. Most students who complete college have never taken study skills classes, yet they have the intact learning processes to create the necessary organizational and study strategies to be successful in their college classes.

But what about the student with a learning disability? In his recent book, **Educational Care: A System for Understanding and Helping Children with Learning Problems** (1994, Educators Publishing Service, Cambridge, MA), Dr. Mel Levine presents a "phenomenological" model for describing a wide variety of learning difficulties. It is a model "based on clinical, educational and research experience, a model that favors informed observation and description over labeling and that takes into account the great heterogeneity of children with disappointing school performance" (pg. 2). The model presents six major categories:

1. Phenomena related to weak attention controls (attention, processing, production and mental energy controls)
2. Phenomena related to reduced remembering (short and longterm memory)
3. Phenomena related to chronic misunderstanding (processing problems)
4. Phenomena related to deficient output (language production, motor performance, organization, problem solving and strategy use)
5. Phenomena related to delayed skills acquisition (reading, spelling, writing, mathematics)

## 6. Phenomena related to poor adaptation (social and motivation problems)

Any combination of these learning difficulties will affect a student's ability to self-design and independently apply study skills strategies. These students can learn study skills, but they need specific instruction, practice, and teachers who understand learning styles, strengths and weaknesses. All students can benefit from study skills instruction. However, the difference between a student with a learning disability and one without is that although the latter certainly will benefit from such instruction, the student with a learning disability often cannot make it without this instruction.

### A STUDY SKILLS MODEL

Through my teaching, supervising and administrative experience at Landmark School, I have developed, with the help of my colleagues, a flexible study skills model. It can be used in tutorials, resource rooms, skills classes and particularly in regular classrooms. Parts of this model can even be adapted by parents at home to help their children become more independent learners. The model begins with the development of organization strategies, including organization of materials, homework and longterm assignments; time-planning on a daily, weekly and monthly basis; and organization of study space. The model then presents main idea, note taking, and summarizing skills which can be taught and practiced in grades four through high school. These basic skills then become the foundation for building textbook, test-preparation and test-taking skills. It also introduces the Landmark Master Notebook System, a collection of working, reference and reserve notebooks designed to enhance the application of study skills on a consistent basis. The model has been presented to thousand of educators across the country through workshops at state and national conferences, onsite training at public and private schools, and through the seminars and teaching practicums sponsored by the Landmark Outreach Program. Teachers from primary grades to college level have adapted the model, and a number of school systems have done so on a systemwide basis. What follows is a summary of the first four skills of the Landmark Study Skills Model (L.S.S. Model).

#### Organization Skills

It is easy to assume that students, especially in the upper grades, have adequate organization skills. Yet many students do not know what supplies they should bring to class, how to use an assignment pad, or how to determine how long it will take to complete an assignment. Surprising as it may seem, some very bright teenagers do not even know how to use a calendar or a nondigital clock.

The L.S.S. Model provides a micro-united, structured plan for home and school work. Teachers should spend time in class to teach students how to set up notes and materials, use assignment pads, use longterm class calendars and personal weekly calendars, and organize study space. Teachers should also:

- Help students independently apply organization skills by explaining the rationale behind the skills
- Treat organization skills as part of the regular curriculum
- Model the use of calendar, assignment pads and homework time sheets in class
- Clearly state expectations for the application of organization strategies, and consistently check to see if students are meeting those expectations
- Organize and clearly explain all assignments and classwork to avoid confusion about what is required

#### Main Idea Skills

The ability to recognize and formulate main ideas is crucial for success in school, and in many ways it is a life skill. Supermarkets stock their products in the "main idea" sections of produce, bakery, dairy, etc. Even the nightly television news is presented in order of "main idea" segments such as national news, local news, sports, weather and human interest stories .

Information in school that must be learned from textbooks, lectures, class discussions and filmstrips can be categorized by main ideas to organize the material and make it more accessible to the student. A main idea can be the category for a list of items, the topic of a paragraph, the theme of an essay, the topic of a textbook chapter, or the thesis of a term paper. Main idea skills can be applied at a very basic categorizing level in the second or third grade; they can also be used to organize complex information from a college textbook. In lengthier material, main ideas can be listed in a hierarchy consisting of major and secondary main ideas.

The L.S.S. Model follows a four-step progression for introducing main idea skills:

- Categorizing lists of terms or new vocabulary
- Identifying and highlighting main ideas in paragraphs that have topic sentences
- Inferring main ideas in paragraphs that do not state the main idea and formulating them in the student's own words
- Identifying main ideas in multi-paragraph selections

Teachers should introduce main ideas using simple, structured material. As the student develops the skill, it should be practiced in more complex material from a variety of subject areas.

#### Note Taking Skills

Note taking is a procedure for recording information from lectures or reading in order to learn that information and retrieve it later to study. Note taking is also a valuable tool for gathering and organizing pieces of research for a report. Taking notes encourages students to be more active learners by processing information and writing it in their own words. Given that note taking requires the integration of listening, interpreting, sequencing and recording skills, it is easy to see why many students with learning disabilities feel overwhelmed when they must take notes. In some cases, they develop a fear of the task.

The two-column method of note taking, in which main ideas are listed on the left side of a page and details on the right, is the best technique for introducing and developing note taking skills. The L.S.S. Model introduces note taking by following the same four-step progression used with main idea skills. Note taking from lectures and other non written material should be taught after the student can confidently take notes from written sources. Teachers should also be aware that some students need to develop note taking sub-skills such as learning how to abbreviate, employing word economy, using visual markers and editing notes.

### Summarizing Skills

Summarizing helps students identify and organize the essence of the material they must learn. Sometimes there is so much information that students get lost in the details; constructing a summary enables them to see the greater picture. By searching for main ideas and relevant details, students become active readers and listeners. Reprocessing the information to produce a summary in their own words also provides practice for expressing that knowledge on a test or in class discussion.

Two-column notes can be used for the basis of a simple summary. The main ideas in the left column form an outline; the students turn these into sentences to write a summary. As with main idea skills, teachers should introduce summarizing using structured, simple material and progressing to lengthy, more complex material. Summarizing should also be practiced using a variety of subject matter; summaries from history material can be quite different than summaries from science material. Writing summaries from literary sources, such as short stories, is a good way to recall the key characters and sequence of events. Such a summary then becomes the basis of a book or story report. Consistently assigning students the task of summarizing notes, readings and class lectures trains them to apply good review skills.

### SUMMARY

While it is not a panacea for every academic problem, study skills instruction can improve the educational experience for students with learning disabilities and their teachers. With study skills intact students become more confident, strengthen their memories, become organized, and have a plan of attack for textbook use, test-preparation and test-taking.

As the inclusive education movement takes hold across the country, study skills instruction gives teachers a tool for accommodating the diverse abilities and experiences of students in regular classrooms. Until recently, study skills were most likely to be taught in resource rooms and remedial classes, or be part of a student's individual I.E.P. One drawback of this approach is that it can sometimes be difficult for the student to carryover and apply the skills in the regular classroom. For this reason, these students will benefit from study skills instruction which is incorporated into inclusive classrooms. The inclusion movement will also provide to many students who are not diagnosed as special needs the opportunity to become better students as special education teachers share their experience of skill training with content-oriented classroom teachers.

**About the author: Joan Sedita** is an experienced educator and teacher trainer, and an enthusiastic presenter who has conducted numerous workshops, training seminars, professional development programs, and consultations for educators and parents throughout the U.S. Joan worked at the Landmark School in Massachusetts (for students with learning disabilities) for 23 years as a teacher, diagnostician, high school principal, founder of the Landmark College Preparation Program, and director of the Landmark Outreach Teacher Training Program. Joan helped develop the language arts and study skills curriculums used at both Landmark School and Landmark College in Putney, Vermont. Her experience also includes work at Children's Hospital Medical Center in Boston; The Learning Disabilities Network in Hingham, MA; and Kurzweil Educational Systems, MA (a reading and study skills software development company). Joan is an adjunct graduate course instructor at Fitchburg State College, a member of her local school's site council, and the school board's Committee on Academic Excellence.

Joan has authored a number of books and articles, including the Landmark Study Skills Guide and Learning Disabilities: Information and Resources (see below), The Kurzweil StudySkills Guide, and Helping Your Child With Organization and Study Skills. Her newest book, Teaching the Language Arts Tutorial, is scheduled for publication in the fall of 2000. Joan received her Masters in Reading Education from Harvard University in 1979, where she had the privilege of having Dr. Jean Chall as her advisor. Joan is currently in private practice in Boxford, MA.

**Landmark Study Skills Guide** - This book provides practical teaching strategies for teachers and parents working with students who are unable to organize themselves, take adequate notes, use their textbooks efficiently, or study on a regular basis. Includes chapters covering organization, main idea, notetaking, summarizing, textbook, test preparation, and report-writing skills. Sample assignments and "How-to" lists for students to follow are included throughout. There is also a chapter for students and their parents which offers suggestions for becoming a more independent learner. Also available in Spanish. Order from **Landmark Outreach Publications**.

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