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## Helping Students Learn

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When we talk about effective teaching, what we are really talking about is effective learning. Effective teaching, therefore, can be described by what the teacher has the students do both in and out of class. It is outside of class where students do the vast majority of their reading, studying, and writing. Because of this fact, we should understand how students are using that time, and we should include specific learning strategies in our classroom instruction to help them maximize their time and effort.

Many undergraduates are ill-equipped for college-level work; the learning techniques that they relied upon in high school often do not work when they are confronted with more difficult and more voluminous college assignments. Rarely have they been given explicit instruction about how to read critically, study actively, and write clearly. For many of our students, learning to do these activities—essentially learning how to learn—is going to be crucial to their collegiate success.

Four areas that many undergraduates need explicit help in figuring out are: time management, note taking, textbook annotation, and study skills. Below are a few simple things you can do in class to help your students with these four areas:

### **Time Management**

- Tell them that poor time management is the #1 reason for impeding achievement.
- Have students consider college as a 40-hour work week and to schedule those hours accordingly.
- Have students sort goals (both long- and short-term) into three categories: A (high priority), B (medium priority), and C (low priority); ask them to prioritize those goals daily, concentrating on the As, not the Cs, by making a daily “to do” list.
- Encourage students to write important deadlines and other information down on a calendar that they refer to daily.
- Ask students to consider their strengths, goals, time-wasters, and biological rhythms for the best work times. Remind them to plan to work and then to work the plan but to be realistic, not overscheduling. Recommend that they to reward themselves when successful.
- Encourage them to make the most of the odd times--e.g. looking at flashcards while waiting for the bus.
- Provide a reading schedule, stressing that it is easier to read 10 pages a night than to read 70 pages in one sitting.

### **Note Taking**

- Discuss the components of good note taking--organizing notes in simple paragraph or rough outline form, distinguishing main points from details, leaving space between key points, noting examples, numbering reasons, using abbreviations and symbols (&, b/c, w/i, <, >, ↑, →), including examples, and not writing down every word.
- Suggest that they sit in front within the professor’s line of vision. Relate the research that indicates a relationship between students’ grades and where they sit in the room.
- Emphasize the importance of doing the assigned reading before a lecture and of reviewing notes from the previous lecture.

- Suggest that they divide their pages into two or three columns (the Cornell Method). While studying, students can use one column to predict or ask questions, make clarifications, or correlate material from the textbook.
  - Prepare your students to listen for extended comments, superlatives, and voice and volume changes as indicators of important material.
  - Have students note any process notes that are given--information about tests, how to study, when to study, or when study or review sessions are held.
- Stress that interacting with notes after the lecture is perhaps the most important phase of note taking. Introduce the idea of annotating notes, preferably as soon after the lecture as possible.

## Textbook Annotation

- Tell them to throw their highlighters away. Undergraduates are notorious for passively underlining whole sections of pages without processing anything.
- In place of highlighting, encourage students to write substantive annotations in the margins of their books (e.g. questions, comments, summaries, paraphrases, abbreviations). Inform them that bookstores do not pay more for unmarked books.
- Encourage them to preview chapters, looking for headings, subheadings, bold words, and definitions. Encourage them to read chapter summaries first as a preview of what to look for as they read.

## Study Skills

- Encourage any activity that engages the students in rehearsing material, paraphrasing it in their own words, or reformulating it in a new way. Rehearsal is a way to process information in order to remember it better.
- Have students predict test questions and quiz one another either during class or outside of class.
- Assign mini-presentations or poster projects with which students review course material to groups of other students
- Encourage study groups, emphasizing that each member needs to come prepared to talk through a difficult idea with the group, that members should be classmates first--friends second, that groups meet in a place that is conducive to studying, and that groups have a goal and structure.
- Introduce different study techniques that complement the material being tested, such as:
  - CARDS--write a word or phrase on one side and write an organizing term in the top right-hand corner. An organizing term helps students group like concepts together. On the other side, have students write all the material they know *in their own words*.
  - Concept Maps and Graphs--show how concepts are related to one another or to peripheral ideas, especially helpful for seeing relationships between complex concepts.
  - Talk-throughs--saying the information and monitoring your learning.
  - Timelines--consider a timeline chart. The vertical axis delineates time, and the horizontal axis delineates different concepts (e.g. political, social, and cultural events).
  - K.W.L.--students write down what they **K**now, **W**hat it is that they think they need to know, and what they need to **L**earn.
  - P.L.A.E.--**P**re-planning Stage (step one): Gathering information about the test and setting goals; **L**isting Stage (step two): Selecting and planning the best way to study for the test; **A**ctivating (step three): Forming questions to ask while student puts plan into operation; **E**valuating (step four): Forming questions to ask after student sees exam score

Sources: Sherrie Nist and Jodi Holschuh, Active Learning: Strategies for College Success. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000. And Michelle Simpson, GRSC 7770, Spring 2001.