



Introduction

*“The greatest sign of success for a teacher . . . is to be able to say,
‘The children are now working as if I did not exist.’”*

– Maria Montessori

“Why did you call on me? I didn’t raise my hand.” We have all seen the look of surprise from students who prefer not to participate. As a matter of fact, when teaching adults, I notice even they will scoot down in their chairs or sheepishly look at the floor when I pose a question to the group. Perhaps it is just human nature operating under the law of least effort or a fear of being wrong.

Yet years of research indicate that getting all students actively involved in learning increases student achievement. Renowned educator John Goodlad (1983) once stated: “Being a spectator not only deprives one of participation, but also leaves one’s mind free for unrelated activity. If academic learning does not engage students, something else will.”

Thirty years ago, Anderson & Faust (1973) suggested that teachers seek to incorporate three levels of active response from students:

- The first level requires listening, watching or reading.
- The second level requires a particular covert (mental) response.
- The third level requires a particular overt (visible) response.

One of the hallmarks of successful teaching appears to be keeping all students mentally engaged in productive activities throughout the entire lesson, rather than waiting for something to happen. There is truth in the old adage: “When I hear, I forget; When I see, I remember; When I do, I learn.”

When students become active participants in learning processes they become empowered learners. Social relationships, critical thinking, curiosity and self-discipline are developed when teachers maximise student participation (Shor, 1992).

More recently with the focus on brain-based learning, researchers such as Patricia Wolfe, Robert Sylwester and Eric Jensen state that effective instruction involves the use of a variety of strategies to engage all learners. Current research on differentiated instruction emphasises a variety of classroom practices to allow for differences in students’ learning styles, interests and prior experiences. A differentiated classroom requires that teachers have a vast storehouse of strategies to enable all students to learn curricular concepts and ideas. When teachers use strategies to create engaging, meaningful and relevant lessons student motivation and achievement soar. The end product is a strategic learner.

What is a Strategic Learner?

*“Education is what happens to the other person,
not what comes out of the mouth of the educator.”*

– Miles Horton

A strategic learner is one who has learned strategies and knows when to apply them. Strategic learners have a repertoire of strategies they selectively use to successfully complete tasks in all content areas. They are not passive observers. Rather, they are active learners who reflect on their own thinking while learning, analyse their use of strategies and make revisions as necessary. A strategic learner is heavy on understanding of topics being studied and light on memorisation of facts.

Strategies are used to construct meaning before, during and after learning. For example, strategic learners devise a plan to focus their efforts, asking questions while learning such as: “How can I make sense of this?” or “What does this mean?” “How does this connect to other things I know?” or “What can I do to better understand what this says?” Strategic learners know the importance of summarising their learnings as well as reflecting on themselves as learners. In some circles this is referred to as metacognition.

In summary, strategic learners are independent learners who actively engage themselves in learning processes. Their goal is to make sense of and fully understand what they are learning. They know that strategy implementation offers them the opportunity to be lifelong learners.

What is Strategic Learning?

*“If we succeed in giving the love of learning,
the learning itself is sure to follow.”*

– John Lubbock

A strategy is a plan or action undertaken to achieve a specific aim. Strategic learners know and apply plans or actions to achieve learning. Strategic learning implies that students possess and independently apply effective strategies. A learning strategy, unlike study skills or activities, is a focused activity with a specific outcome in mind. For example, the Team Interview strategy (p. 21) is used to focus the learner’s mind at the beginning of a training. The purpose of the strategy is to activate prior knowledge by having participants interview each other using a questioning process. Occasionally strategies are referred to as study skills. Study skills tend to be more limited because they focus on general skills, such as notetaking. Study skill instruction often does not involve teaching students about the thinking behind the learning. As a result, the skill may not transfer to other learning situations (Cook, 1989). Activities, of and by themselves, can be merely time fillers or busy work with no specific outcome congruent to the intended learning. The focus of this book is on strategies that will engage the mind of the learner toward achieving a specific outcome. Researchers have acknowledged the importance of strategies. The emphasis today is not only on teaching students the strategies they need, but more specifically on what a strategy is, how to use it, why it works and in what situations it can be used. Madeline Hunter identifies this as “conditional learning”. This is a clear indication of mastery.

Strategic learning not only emphasises the importance of learning strategies but focuses on student effort. A strategic learning climate encourages students to gain a greater sense of

control over their own learning. Teachers promote independent and interdependent learning by developing a risk-taking environment that supports learning and experimentation. When students are in control of their learning, they assess progress and can attribute success to their efforts in using learning strategies (Halloway, 2000).

Strategic learning is a direct result of strategic teaching. Strategic teaching prepares students for learning, involves the presentation of content in a relevant, meaningful way and, finally, helps students apply and integrate the content for future use. Strategies are an integral part of strategic teaching. Teachers create learning opportunities for students to pursue. The point of learning anything at school is to be able to do well in life (Eisner, 2002).

The goal of strategic learning is to develop strategic learners who assume responsibility for their own learning. Elliot Eisner (2002) states, "We want students eventually to become the architects of their own education. The long-term aim of teaching is to make itself unnecessary." (p. 582)

Much education today is
monumentally ineffective. All too
often we are giving young people cut
flowers when we should be teaching them to
grow their own plants.

- John W. Gardner

Ideas to Consider for Strategy Instruction

Benefits of Incorporating Strategies:

- Increases student achievement
- Creates motivated learners
- Creates critical thinkers
- Engages the learner's mind throughout the lesson
- Develops independent and interdependent learners
- Increases retention, understanding and ability to apply concepts learned
- Provides opportunities for students to engage in self-assessment activities

Teacher Goals for Strategy Instruction:

- Facilitate higher level thinking about the concept being studied
- Create independent and interdependent learners
- Cause reflective practice
- Support an effectively planned curriculum
- Provide all students with a tool kit of fix-it strategies to apply when learning

Criteria for Strategy Selection:

- Determine the learning objective and select strategies congruent to the objective.
- Determine the appropriate reading attributes/skills necessary to comprehend the passage.
- Determine the levels of thinking needed to understand the concept and select a strategy appropriate for the level.
- Analyse the level of difficulty of the concept being studied and select strategies which match the level of difficulty and students' levels of learning (differentiated instruction).
- Decide if a specific phase of thinking should be emphasised (before, during or after reading).
- Decide if the students will benefit by working independently and/or interdependently.
- Select strategies appropriate for the time available for learning the concept.
- Determine how much time and effort the strategies will require and decide if the concept is worth the additional time and effort. As Madeline Hunter once said, "It is not necessary to bring in an elephant to teach the colour grey."

Prevoke/Vocabogram

Why Use the Strategy

Prevoke/Vocabogram (Rasinski, 2000) is a prereading strategy which helps the reader develop vocabulary and prediction skills. Readers are challenged to use specific vocabulary words from the designated selection by categorising them into predetermined categories. The categorised words then serve as the basis for formulating a prediction about the selection to be read.

How to Use the Strategy

- 1) Select an informational or narrative selection to read.
- 2) Identify 10–20 key vocabulary words or phrases from the text.
- 3) Determine categories into which the words should be categorised (for example, story elements, story sequence, emotional connections, fact/fiction).
- 4) Display the key words on poster paper, board or individual handout.
- 5) Share the words with the students and discuss the general meaning of each one.
- 6) Explain the categories into which the words are to be placed. Have students, working alone or in groups, categorise the words and then formulate a written prediction. Predictions might result from purposeful questions that will engage students as they read the selection.
- 7) Share predictions and the rationale for the predictions among the class. List predictions on the board or poster paper.
- 8) Read the selection orally or silently. As the selection is read, make key vocabulary words visible so students can refer to them as they listen.
- 9) After reading the entire selection, ask students to compare their list of categorised words to what actually happened. Students make necessary changes.
- 10) Ask students to process how using the strategy assisted their reading comprehension. Discuss the benefits of making a prediction before reading.

When to Use the Strategy

- To develop student interest, use as an introduction to a short story, poem, novel or informational passage.
- When introducing a new unit of study in any content area, provide the key vocabulary words from the unit and have the students categorise the words into sub-topics. Predictions are then made about the learnings.
- To teach the concept of categorising select a short, interesting story and ask students to develop categories for organising the words. For example, words could be provided for a fairy tale. Discuss with students what it means to categorise, and then brainstorm possible categories.

Link to Assessment

Student's ability to make logical predictions is assessed. Teachers can observe student understanding of vocabulary words before, during and after selection is read. The criteria for categorising words can be used as an assessment topic (for example, story elements as used within the following example).