

Study Skills Activities to Promote Independent Learning

by Winston Sieck - November 30, 2016

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Your school year is going fairly smoothly.

With your carefully crafted lessons and strong scaffolds, students seem to be getting the material reasonably well.

Then you start to wonder...

Would they be able to learn more about the topic on their own? Or in college, where the instructors leave much of the burden of learning up to the students?

Are you helping them become independent, lifelong learners?

To get there, your students need to master [study skills](#). Ideally, you'd incorporate a few study skills activities when planning your lessons. But how do you get started?

Working study skills activities in to your lessons may sound difficult, but it really isn't.

It takes only a slight shift in thinking about things you are already doing, plus a few tips on how to talk about them with your students.

To illustrate, here are 3 examples of study skills activities woven into units from core academic areas.

Activity 1: Prepare questions to ignite curiosity

Imagine you are teaching a social studies unit. In it, the students learn about ancient Egypt and the trading and barter system. They read books and watch educational videos, listen to teacher lectures, and participate in a simulation of trade in ancient Egypt.

To create a study skills activity for this unit, encourage your students to prepare questions to ask in class each day. As you know, [questions drive a great lesson](#). A compelling question sparks our curiosity for the answer.

Generating and [asking good questions](#) on one's own is also a key study skill. Point this out to your students explicitly. Let them know this is a skill you want them to take from your class, and use in all their studies.

So, what are good questions?

The best kinds of questions are open-ended and ask "how" or "why." They invite explanations and take

real thought to answer, as opposed to those that only require a “yes or no” or simple fact to answer.

Here are some example questions:

- How did the Nile River affect the trade of Egypt then and now?
- Do people ever barter today? What does that look like?
- Why did merchants in ancient Egypt want certain products over other products?

Before assigning the students to bring questions back to class, model “good” questions like these. Then, suggest that they review their notes and readings, taking a little time to reflect on the material to come up with questions for the activity.

Activity 2: Break up a big task to help avoid procrastination

Now suppose you are teaching a science unit. In this unit, the students learn about the ways humans can alter the equilibrium of ecosystems, causing potentially irreversible effects. They also learn that the amount of life an environment can support is limited by matter and energy and the ability of the ecosystem to recycle materials.

This is a project-based learning (PBL) unit in which students have to stretch themselves to tackle a good-sized chunk of work. Students select from a list of activities to complete within eight days over a two-week span. On day nine and ten, students present their projects to the class. The activities include:

- build a habitat with islands or other land areas that demonstrate the results of an oil spill or the clean-up methods
- develop a documentary about a particular area influenced by human destruction of habitat through direct harvesting, pollution, or atmospheric changes
- create a slide show informing the public of ways to reduce their ecological footprint

PBL units like this can feel overwhelming to students, leading them to put it off.

In your study skills activity for this unit, you can provide guidance and support on how to deal with procrastination by turning a big task into bite-sized pieces.

First, discuss the scope of the project and how your students feel about completing it. In the process, describe a strategy that will help. When facing a large task that seems like too much, setting small goals to focus on helps you [overcome procrastination](#) and better meet success.

Then, have your students outline the steps in their project and what they will accomplish during each class period for the eight days. You can review the students’ plans to ensure they are on target of meeting their goals.

Having written down a plan, students cross off each task when it is completed. This progress will help increase motivation to do more. Your students will have gained momentum, well on their way of completing the project.

Activity 3: Make connections through reflection and explanation

Finally, imagine that you're teaching literature (hopefully, you're not picturing yourself teaching all these subjects in one day).

You ask your students to read a story, jotting down their thoughts on sticky notes, and then writing further in a reflection journal.

This kind of activity is closely related to a [self-explanation study strategy](#). The key is for students to explain the material to themselves by adding their own thoughts and making connections.

For example, in [Strategies that Work, Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding](#), Harvey and Goudvis give an example of a seventh grader reading *Mirette on the High Wire* (McCully 1992).

It's the story of a brave girl and a tightrope walker who has a fear of heights.

The student writes on a sticky note that she is afraid of high places, too. Suppose you ask the student to write more in a reflection journal. Possibly this student would write:

Bellini is afraid of heights just like me so I know how he feels. I think I also know how he felt when someone offered to help him, even though he was so much older.

When my little sister helped me understand how to multiply decimals, I was embarrassed since she knew so much more than I did.

And I know how hard it must have been for Bellini to learn how to walk a high wire. But, at the same time, he must have felt really proud of himself.

I felt proud of myself when I climbed up the steps of the watchtower to earn my Scout badge when our troop counted the migratory birds at the reforestation camp last weekend.

In literacy, students search for and use connections to knowledge gained through personal experiences (text-to-self), learning about the world (text-to-the-world), and reading other texts (text-to-text). They can...

- interpret characters and events
- notice and compare topics/content/types of stories/writers
- reflect on the social and moral issues of today and those in realistic or historical fiction, biography, and fantasy

In this case, students write in a reflection journal, but the self-explanation strategy can be applied to other forms of writing and any curricular area.

You make it a study skills activity by pointing out that your students can use the strategy elsewhere and on their own. You mention that it's a skill they can take from your class and use to understand any new material more deeply.

From Strong Lessons to Strong Students

The next time you plan a lesson, think about how you can integrate a study skills activity.

You can make a start with the 3 examples above. For ideas of other strategies to include, have a look at these 21 [study tips](#) grounded in educational psychology research.

[Teaching specific study skills](#) in core content areas is critical to student success.

These strategies not only help students master your lessons, but also nurture independent, lifelong learning.

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