

“TEACHING THE BRAIN TO LEARN BY DEFAULT”

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The brain is built to think and learn. But can the brain lose its ability to carry out its primary functions? As we consider the challenges facing our education system today, we look for answers to this question. Year after year as students enter the classroom they appear to be less and less interested in becoming active participants in the learning process. Somehow, students' perception of the teacher's role in the classroom has changed. Instead of being facilitators of the learning process, teachers are now perceived as “educational technicians” who are responsible for mechanically imprinting knowledge and cognitive skills in the brain. Is learning a passive process or an active one which requires the involvement of the learner? The brain has the ability to learn by default and once it is properly trained, thinking and learning should be natural to it. However, the brain will not perform its functions if it is not challenged to do so.

As Christian educators, we believe that every student is created in the image of God with the ability to think. Ellen White, in speaking about the purpose of education, wrote: “Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the creator – individuality, power to think and to do. The men in whom this power is developed are the men who bear responsibilities, who are leaders in enterprise, and who influence character. It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought” (White, 1903).

Our world is becoming more and more competitive. As a result of this, students expect to receive high grades in spite of the quality of work that they produce. And, to a very large extent, judgements about the quality of instruction provided to students are based on student achievement scores. The focus of education has shifted from process to product, and many reason that high grades indicate that adequate learning has taken place. Yes, it is true that a teacher's greatest joy is to see his or her students reach their maximum potential and receive excellent achievement scores. But what comes first? Is it the process or the product? If students focus on developing their learning and thinking skills, their grades will automatically improve. Grades are not rewarded as a result of attending school; rather they are achieved as a result of diligent effort.

Teaching our students to learn by default will require moving away from traditional practices and providing “instructional scaffolding” when necessary. One of the benchmarks of content-literate students is that they know how to learn with text independently. Yet many students in today's diverse classrooms have trouble handling the conceptual demands inherent in reading material when left to their own devices to learn with text (Vacca, 2005). This is why teachers must provide support to students as they are introduced to new tasks. But teachers must also lead students to develop effective strategies for completing literacy tasks on their own. This means that instead of utilizing traditional direct-teaching methodologies, other strategies must be employed. Some of these include discovery learning, creative thinking, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, cooperative learning, and metacognitive strategies.

What are our students really lacking and how can we best help them? Could it be that they just don't understand how they learn? Metacognition refers to knowledge about one's own learning or knowing how to learn. It involves bringing to a conscious level the kinds of procedures people follow as they think. Metacognitive processes serve an important monitoring function. When people are aware of the steps they are taking as they think, they make more conscious choices when selecting strategies to complete a given task. The basic idea is to help develop conscious control over the process of learning. As teachers, we can all provide instructional experiences that assist students in acquiring strategies for monitoring and modifying their thinking patterns (Savage, et al, 2006).

The decisions that we make with regards to our pedagogical practices may not always be popular. However, the need to be appreciated by those whom we serve should not influence us to neglect our professional responsibility. It is our duty to create a classroom environment that fosters the growth of independent learners. Society is depending on us to develop minds that are creative and innovative. If a student is to grasp the structure of a subject, he or she must be actively engaged in the learning process. This kind of activity requires students to identify the concepts, the principles and their relationships for themselves (Woolfolk, 1995). This kind of process requires deliberate and detailed preparation by the teacher, and willing cooperation and participation of the student.

What do you want education to do for your students? Do you want them to take what they have learned in school and apply it to real situations? If so, you are one of the many people who see education as a process dedicated to preparing students for life. This orientation will lead you to help students develop sophisticated thinking processes such as comparing, contrasting, interpreting, generalizing, identifying assumptions, making valid inferences, criticizing, and summarizing. As educators, we often refer to these abilities as "higher level thinking skills" (Savage, et al, 2006). It is only as we endeavour to bring our students to an awareness of the fact that most of what they will learn in life will be learned by default, without the assistance of a teacher, can we call ourselves true educators.

References

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