

TEACHING STUDY SKILLS AND LEARNING STRATEGIES TO THERAPISTS, TEACHERS, AND TUTORS

How to Give Help and Hope to Disorganized Students

by Diane Newton

A couple of weeks before school started last year a small group of students were talking about getting ready for the first day of class. One student said she had bought a brand new notebook for school. She said she put it together with new supplies including a zipper bag, cute pens and pencils, dividers, and folders just like the ones she had carried the year before. A boy in the group asked why she didn't just use the notebook binder she had from last year. Her answer was classic, "Well, I lost it and have no earthly idea where it is!"

As the scenario above suggests, students do not always know how to organize for school. Likewise, rarely do students who need a solution today for a test coming up tomorrow actually take the time to read a study skills book. If students are to have organization, study skills and learning strategies at the point when they need them, the skills have to be taught ahead of time. By middle school, or certainly no later than high school, students need specific instruction, demonstration, ample practice, and in many cases careful monitoring to become proficient with learning strategies and to use them automatically. Furthermore, in order for students to "buy into" and make use of skills such as getting organized for school, taking effective notes, mastering complex textbooks, or writing brilliant answers to essay tests, they need a rationale and a more global picture of how organization and study skills can help them. Fabulous note-taking strategies or any other study tactic will not work unless students use them.

In short all students need a well- designed, thorough organization and study skills program that presents the essential skills *and* motivates students to make use of them. Yet in order for students to have access to a program of study skills, parents, school administrators, and especially educators must be committed first to the view that organization and study skills are important, second to the idea that a special curriculum for study skills is crucial, and finally to the belief that in order to implement the first two commitments, educators themselves must learn how to teach organization and study skills.

Teaching organization and study skills is in many ways different from teaching a content course such as social studies or chemistry. Although study skills courses have content information to be sure, the actual task of the study skills teacher is more akin to that of a coach than a teacher. Webster's Dictionary defines a coach as a person who trains. This simple definition, however, does not connote the essence of what coaches really do. Granted a coach "trains" by making sure his or her players know all the rules and all the possible plays and can accomplish them successfully and with

ease. But a coach, in addition, makes certain the players know all about the "opponent," have all the best and necessary equipment and are confident and inspired about winning the "game."

The purpose of this article is to help teachers, therapists, tutors, and even parents, if necessary, become study coaches. Using a "what-to-do, how-to-do-it" approach, the article presents (1) ideas and information for becoming a study and organization coach, (2) a list and explanation of the requisite demonstration tools for teaching, (3) the characteristics of a study skills program, (4) a possible sequence for teaching a course on organization and study skills and learning strategies, and (5) suggestions for monitoring the study and organizational skill progress of students who have had a course in study skills. The information here is adapted from the curriculum of a three-credit graduate therapist-training course taught at Southern Methodist University. Although the model is explicit and regards certain concepts for organization and study skills programs as essential, it also takes into account that such courses can be taught several ways.

Becoming a Study Coach: The Background

Becoming a study coach requires studying. Whenever possible, teachers, therapists, and tutors should take college courses and continuing education programs or at least attend workshops and lectures on teaching study and organization skills. A good program for learning how to teach study and organization and learning strategies should be just as structured and as sequential as the curriculum for teaching any other school subject because "structured teaching... unites the teacher and student in a learning partnership by providing informed, explicit, and interactive instruction" (Deshler et al, 1996).

If courses and lectures are not accessible, there are many well-written study skills books on the market. Some good ones include *How to Study in College* by Walter Pauk, *How to Study* by Ron Fry, *Improve Your Grades* by Veltisezar Bautista, *Learning To Learn* by Gloria Frender, *The How to Study Book* by Alan Brown, "Organization and Study Skills" by Claire Nissenbaum in *Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills*. The Internet is also an excellent source for study skills information. Many universities have websites to help their own students, but the information is available to everyone.

Getting Ready: Demonstration Materials, Lesson Plans, and a Little Laughter

This is a list and explanation of the most important demonstration materials study coaches will need for teaching students how to get organized. Although there are other items a study coach may want or need, wall posters about study skills, examples of student work, and so forth, the following items are essential for actually showing students what is available. Also, since the demonstration materials will be the principle guide source for students, the study coach should make sure they are top quality. In the same sense that professionals such as physicians or musicians want and need the best instruments for accomplishing excellent work, we want students to have the best tools possible for accomplishing theirs.

It is also helpful to keep a box of study tools on hand to show students the latest

marketed products that can help them get and stay organized. These items might include bookmarks, a wire-frame book holder, a timer, Post-It Flags as well as Post-It Notes, and any other supplies business people use that could be helpful for students. ***To teach a course on organization and study skills, the demonstration samples should include:***

File box: This is to show students how and where to store schoolwork at home. One of the best is a file box with a latch and handle for easy portability, the dimensions being roughly 11" x 14". The box should be set up with at least five hanging folders (i.e., one for each potential class) labeled in the order of an "example" student's class schedule. Place six manila folders in each hanging folder, one for each grading period (or four if the student has nine-week reporting periods).

Students then will be able to see where to put all their papers from a single reporting period.

Supply Box: This can be something like a tackle box. It should contain examples of all the potential supplies a student will need for studying at home and the box and contents should be things the student could easily purchase. Items such as pens, pencils, pencil sharpener, three-hole punch, stapler, staples, Post-It Notes and Flags, etc. or anything else students may need when they sit down to study.

The supply box helps students keep everything close-by, fosters attention to the study tasks at hand, and thereby shortens study time since they will not need to leave the study area to "find" something.

Three-ring Demonstration Binder: This will serve as a "show and tell" model of how school notebooks can be set up. Although some schools have students use multiple binders, a one-notebook binder system helps everyone, disorganized students in particular, reduce the number of items they must keep up with on a daily basis. When students carry one notebook, they feel less fragmented because they do not have to keep up with a myriad of items.

Occasionally teachers want students to have additional spirals and folders. If so, these items can be hole punched and added behind the appropriate subject division in the notebook. The suggested order of the demonstration notebook is as follows:

A metal ringed zipper bag. Metal is best because it lasts longer.

A calendar planner. This should have two types of pages, a week-at-a-glance for recording daily assignments and a month-at-a-glance for planning for future tests, papers and projects as well as the student's social and family activities. See the Jenks article in this issue for additional suggestions about how these can be used.

A double-sided pocket folder. One side labeled "homework to be done, papers to be signed" and the other side labeled "graded work." During class, graded homework is placed in the back pocket of the folder and then filed behind the correct tab in the notebook during the home study time.

Two sets of colored tabbed dividers. Separate the sets and match the colors (e.g., two reds together, the two blues together, and so on). One tab will be labeled with the title of the particular subject (e.g., Science, Math, etc.). This section is for daily work and notes. The other tab will be one labeled "tests" or "quizzes." This way, students

can quickly find their old tests and have them available to study for tests or exams at the end of the grading period.

One set of clear tabbed dividers. (optional) for additional subdivisions in a particular subject.

Notebook or "filler" paper.

A student dictionary and/or thesaurus, preferably three-hole punched.

An expandable file folder. three-hole punched with an opening toward the binder rings. This will hold anything that might otherwise become a loose item (e.g., index cards, small paperback books, and so forth).

Study coaches may also want to put together additional notebooks that can show students alternative ways of organization. Since schools often require that students have multiple notebooks, students and their families need to know that the goal is to minimize the number of items students have to keep up with during a school day.

Lesson planning. Once the coach has gathered the "show and tell" materials, they will want to organize the study skills curriculum into lesson plans. As with all education, "training in these areas is an essential component of advanced training in academic therapy" (Perspectives, Fall 1998).

Lesson plans should include an outline for each session of the course and the specific information that will be taught during each session. In addition to plans for the students and their lessons, a parent session can be scheduled.

Tech-help and humor. Especially if the study coach plans to teach in a small group but even in a one-to-one setting, technological equipment and teaching supplies will help communicate the concepts. Equipment and supplies such as overhead slides, computers, power point presentations, tape recorders, dry-erase boards, and study assistance devices like Franklin spellers, reading pens, and Alpha

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Teaching Study Skills and Learning Strategies To Therapists, Teachers, and Tutors

Smart plus ample supplies for the students to use during class are important to have on hand. Study and organization skills can be pretty dull fare unless the study coach presents the information with lively enthusiasm and a great sense of humor. The lessons can be `peppered' with cute cartoons about study skills and stories that give examples of the strategy being taught. Pictures of organized binders, lockers, and study areas are good visual examples as well.

Teaching a Course: The Features and Sequence of a Study Skills Class

Ideally students should take an intensive fifteen-hour (up to thirty-hour) course just prior to the beginning of a school semester either in early August or January. However, if this is not possible, the course can be spread over the length of the semester. For private study coaches, the course can be taught in small groups or in private tutoring sessions. The suggestions here are also adaptable for regular or special education classrooms, in public or private school settings.

If at all possible, study skills curriculum should be taught as a complete unit or course that includes all the skills students are likely to need in order to improve their learning and boost their academic success. This way when students have to use a specific skill such as lecture note taking, with a study coach's assistance, they can quickly review, practice, and extend the skill if need be. Although a study skills course should cover the gamut of skills in a relatively short time (a week to a half semester or so), some topics seem better suited to teaching immediately prior to their occurrence. How to plan and study for final exams is an example. About three weeks before the scheduled final exams, students should return to the study skills coach for a separate exam preparation session designed to take them step-by-step through the process of preparing for important, usually cumulative exams.

Some students learn how to learn quickly, use organization and study skills easily, and follow instructions and teacher-directed tasks without much thought or effort. Others, particularly students with learning disabilities, take more time. They will need additional monitoring and sufficient occasions for practice and application of the techniques. The ultimate goal is to help students develop problem-solving skills. To do so requires instructional strategies purposefully intended to help students develop their metacognitive abilities. That is, you are teaching them to "think about their thinking" by developing a course of action to be taken in studying a subject and then maintaining that plan over time (Costa, 1984). They will learn how to analyze, follow a sequence of operations, develop time management awareness, keep up with materials, and keep track of the steps at the conscious level for the duration of an assignment. For example, teachers do this every day in the course of planning and carrying out their daily lessons. They develop a strategy for a subject lesson and, keeping that in mind, instruct, reflect and evaluate the strategy effectiveness in order to produce the desired outcome of the lesson.

A possible presentation sequence. The information presented below takes about fifteen hours of instruction time, not including the finals exam preparation class. The general topics listed here are followed by the key concepts included in each

topic. In using the following sequence for planning your lessons, of course, adapt the quantity and depth of information you present to the needs of the students you are working with, their grade level, and the amount of time you have for presenting it. Begin the first class session with personal introductions, an outline of the presentation of skills, class rules, and a rapport-building discussion. The rest of the classes might follow this pattern:

Organization Sessions: How to organize a locker, how to set up a home study area; how to follow a routine for home study. Setting up a notebook system, using a file box and supply tote, and how to organize study time.

1. **Learning Styles Sessions:** Include assessments on learning modalities, personality temperaments and left brain/right brain learning.
2. **Study Strategies Sessions:** Include the ones used at school and at home.
3. **Finals Session:** Go over steps to prepare for final exams, write out the plan.
4. **Memory Strategies:** Teach several mnemonic devices during the course.

Some presentation details. During the first session, ask students why they want or need a course for study skills. Most of the time students answer that their mother or father made them come. To win students over, coaches must have honest respect for their predicament, give continual positive feedback, and give hope that grades can and will get better. Give students examples of what academic disorganization looks like and show them how they can start with a clean slate. Tell them about the difference between a teacher, who teaches a whole curriculum; a tutor, who teaches part of a curriculum or helps fill in information/ability gaps; a therapist, who helps with remediation of language learning differences; and a study coach, who refines and extends their skills so they can pick up speed in learning and studying. Show students the effects of being fragmented and how to use a new system of organization and learning strategies. Teach them the rules of study. These rules are first learn it, then learn it well, and finally learn it well enough to answer it quickly on a test (Williams 1984).

At the first session, students get a supply list of everything they will need to purchase in order to get organized. Then, they receive a teacher-developed study skills notebook to work from during the course. The study coach demonstrates how to organize the notebook for school, the file box, and the supply box. At this point, even the most discouraged students get excited about the prospect of having all new supplies and a structure for organization.

The study coach teaches students how to become organized in the home and school environment and then how to monitor their own time. How to use calendar planners both weekly and monthly, are modeled for the student. The instructor shows how to break assignments down onto a calendar, how to plan for future projects, how to manage time for daily homework as well as for future tests. A daily routine is established

which is followed Monday through Thursday. The student may have to do additional homework or study on the weekend, but should maintain this routine during the school week. The study routine goes like this: After taking a short break, the student goes to the study area and does three things.

- Updates calendar by putting future assignments on the monthly calendar.
- Files all papers by taking graded work from the back pocket folder in the school notebook, punching holes in papers and filing them behind the appropriate subject tab.
- Studies subject-by-subject in the order of the day. This routine gives the student a place to begin so that homework is always completed. A five to ten minute review in subjects where no homework has been assigned serves as a good review or enables students to get ahead.

The special case of students with dyslexia. For students with dyslexia, a study and organizational skills course can be a godsend. Structure and organization are often serious problems for them and some need very meticulous help in organizing materials, time, and teacher given tasks. Learning how to organize is a good first step toward helping them feel better about their schoolwork.

Study skills as part of the school curriculum. In classroom settings, an organization and study strategies course can be taught according to grade level taking into account the size of the class and the amount of time that can be set-aside to teach it during normal school hours. For example, teaching the curriculum for forty-five days, twenty minutes a session for middle school students, or for twenty days, in fifty-minute sessions for high school students. Each class session may be further divided into additional segments when specific skills are expanded. Once learning strategies have been presented, classroom teachers have the added control to immediately reinforce the skills during the students' other classes. By practicing a particular study skill in a subject area, like taking good notes in a history class, the skill is strengthened and the students become proficient and adept at using the strategy. Ultimately, the goal is for students to learn a developmentally sound hierarchy of skills and then have plenty of time to practice them.

Parents can be a big help. In addition to the regular class sessions, the study coach should also set up a session to meet with parents. The meeting can be either before the study skills class begins or shortly after the class ends. Many parents say they would like to help their student but do not know how. The parent meeting shows them specifically what to look for and ways to help. For example, they can see if completed homework is filed in the designated homework folder, ready to be turned in the next day. This is



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a time for parents to become familiar with the new organization system as well as the study skills strategies being taught to their students. In the parent meeting, the coach describes the goals for the study skills class and suggests ways in which the parents can help at home or if need be, work as their child's advocate with the school.

The parents can help watch over the home environment, materials, and skills, assisting when necessary and without emotion, communicating acceptance and love toward the child. Parents need to know also that children do not have a system to protect themselves against words like, "you are so lazy" and "try harder" when it is obvious they are trying. These words will stick with them forever. Discuss ways in which the parent may contribute positively to the academic success of their child by overseeing the organization system, making sure materials are in their proper place, checking assignments, providing a quiet atmosphere to study, and being a cheerleader for their children's successes.

After the Class: Monitoring

By monitoring progress, a study coach helps students use what they have learned to turn their skills into habits. In the context of study skills, the word 'monitoring' means to guide or direct students in the process of learning how to apply a strategy. In some ways monitoring is similar to a tutor who helps a student improve a precise part of the curriculum he or she does not quite understand. In other ways, monitoring is more like some aspects of athletic coaching in that a coach oversees, refines, and encourages (or pushes) players to work harder and improve so that they can perform the sport faster and more efficiently. The academic coach does the same for their students in the area of applying newly acquired study, organization, and learning skills. It is the application of the skills that makes the biggest difference in learning more easily, learning more, learning faster, and achieving better grades, not just knowing about the skills themselves.

A routine for monitoring. Monitoring sessions are usually an hour long. Each session has several components. First, the coach greets the student or students and asks specific questions about how they are progressing. Specific questions are best so students do not answer with the customary, "everything is fine." For instance, "Did you have a conference with your teacher about the grade you made on your last test?"

Second, the coach checks students' notebooks. If necessary, the organization system is refined and modified or altered to meet students' needs or the school's requirements. Third, the study coach extends a concept previously taught, for example, teaching how to take discussion notes in a science class. The fourth part of the monitoring session offers suggestions to further refine the skills or maximize progress. For example, a coach might ask a student to set up an appointment with a teacher in order to check whether the science notes are complete, or might remind a student to correct his or her mistakes on the most recent Spanish exam.

During the monitoring session, the study coach praises students for using a

specific learning strategy and encourages them to continue tapping into their acquired skills. At the end of the session, the coach records comments about the students' progress and academic needs for reference on future lesson plans or for talking to a parent about their student.

Final Reflections and a Caveat

John Quincy Adams said, "Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence" (May 8, 1780). Teaching study skills and learning strategies is a noteworthy endeavor. The study coach must be able to inspire, motivate, encourage, and hearten students whose disorganization and lack of study skills training have often made them seem disinterested, unmotivated, discouraged, and disheartened and, worst of all, made them feel as if they could not learn.

As a study coach you are "a manager, an instructional leader, and a mediator of learning who demonstrates how to think about a task, apply strategies, and problem-solve in novel situations" (Deshler 1996). With sufficient instruction and enough guided practice, students will begin using their newly acquired skills. As they see the positive results of study, they gain greater self-confidence and better self-esteem; they make higher grades and more efficient and rapid progress in course work; they grow into independent learners and realize their extraordinary potential. This is the `payoff' of study and organization skills both for them and for their study coaches. For the study coach there is no greater professional reward than helping troubled and floundering students become successful learners.

Finally, remember if you give someone a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach someone how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. Teaching organization, study skills and learning strategies is really about teaching students how to fish for knowledge for a lifetime!

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Diane Newton is a certified Academic Language Therapist and ALIA Qualified Instructor in private practice in Arlington, Texas, As one of the staff members of the Learning Therapy Program at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, which accredits professional training in dyslexia, she teaches advanced students the Study Skills and Learning Strategies curriculum. She is currently the Branch Council Vice-Chair of The International Dyslexia Association and a member of the Academic Language Therapy Association (ALTA). She is a past president of the Dallas Branch of IDA and a specialist in dyslexia training for twelve years. She is a frequent speaker at IDA and other conferences and workshops across the country