Building Students’ Strategy for Learning

Just as teens use strategy to play a video game to get to the next level, or to think about and execute a play in sports, students also need to use strategy for learning. Strategy is most powerful when students draw on a wide range of techniques, tools and processes which allow them to be agile in a variety of learning situations.

Strategy Means...

- setting goals, and creating, following and monitoring plans using subject-specific processes
- using subject-specific processes
- applying comprehension strategies for reading/listening/viewing
- accessing and using subject-specific vocabulary and texts
- using active reading, writing, viewing, listening, speaking, and representing techniques
- using a writing process
- selecting and using appropriate organizers and technology to gather and manage ideas

“Adolescents deserve expert teachers who model and provide explicit instruction in reading comprehension and study strategies across the curriculum.”

Ivey & Fisher, 2006
Why Teach It?

Strategy refers to students purposefully selecting and using techniques and processes in order to construct and communicate meaning. This means students use a variety of knowledge and skills in order to learn. For example, they need to create plans. They need to select and evaluate a number of sources in various forms and from a variety of perspectives. They need to read texts deeply, and their reading may cause them to shift their purpose, ideas, and plans. They need to use subject-specific texts which may contain print, visual and graphical information. When reading is difficult, they need to find ways to help them understand. They need to sift through vast amounts of information and make judgments about appropriateness and validity of those sources. They need to make notes, synthesize information, talk about work in progress, and articulate where they are and where they need to go. They need to communicate their thinking in particular forms, for specific purposes and audiences, perhaps by using technology. And on it goes.

Although students enter the intermediate grades with many literacy skills, they still need to acquire and deepen those skills: “as texts become increasingly complex, multimodal, and necessary for discipline-specific learning, middle and high school students must adapt more advanced, specific strategies for deeper understanding and composing” (International Reading Association, 2012). As Mark Conley points out, “adolescents will need to master cognitive strategies for reading, writing, and thinking in complex situations where texts, skills, or requisite knowledge are fluid and not always clearly understood” (Conley, 2008).

Effective learners “stick to a task until it is completed. They don’t give up easily. They are able to analyze a problem, to develop a system, structure, or strategy to attack a problem. They employ a range and have a repertoire of alternative strategies for problem solving. They collect evidence to indicate their problem-solving strategy is working, and if one strategy doesn’t work, they know how to back up and try another.”

Costa & Kallick, 2010

Listen to Chris MacDonald metacognitively talk about his use of strategies, and how they’ve made a difference for his learning.

The video, Promoting Meaningful Student Involvement, is available at

http://www.edugains.ca/newsite/literacy2/adolescent/strategy.html
**HOW TO TEACH IT**

Teachers can deliberately use instructional strategies so that students build their own strategy. Teachers use instruction to “orchestrate learning for depth and exploration” and simulate processes and skills in structured ways to explicitly show how learning and thinking may occur (Conley, 2008, Alexander & Jetton, 2000). For example, when teachers use a think aloud to demonstrate how they understand a text, they explicitly show learners what ‘experts’ do and why they do it. Teachers gradually release responsibility to students so that their use of these skills and processes is transportable and transparent, and becomes part of the students’ thinking to be independently and automatically applied across subject areas (Ivey & Fisher, 2006).

As teachers guide students toward independent practice, they should also invite learners to make choices and decisions. For example, teachers may model the use of a variety of graphic organizers to demonstrate their purpose and structure. As students gain confidence using various organizers, they should be selecting graphic organizers themselves that best fit the task and the thinking they are demonstrating, rather than the teacher prescribing a single organizer.

Another area in which teens need explicit instruction so they work toward independent practice is applying comprehension skills (e.g., predicting, making connections, visualizing) purposefully and strategically to subject-specific texts. “A challenge in adolescent literacy is the number and variety of structures that underlie expository and informational text. These are much more varied than narrative structures, both across and within subjects. The challenges are compounded by less familiar content, dense information and unfamiliar vocabulary” (RAND as quoted in Literacy GAINS, 2008). Subject teachers need to move from generalized instruction of comprehension skills to explicitly showing students how to work with texts for specific purposes within their disciplines. For example, a science teacher may explicitly demonstrate how predicting may be used in a particular way in science.

Across the disciplines, adolescent learners are also expected to use a number of processes. Whether it be a writing process or subject-specific processes (e.g., creative process in the Arts), it is important to show students that these are not intended to be followed lock-step. At various stages in a process, the learner may need to revisit certain stages and/or reflect on their progress. Furthermore, subject-specific processes represent ways in which experts in the disciplines build knowledge and understanding, and when “teachers apprentice students in the literacy practices of their disciplines, they make explicit the tacit reasoning processes, strategies, and discourse rules that shape successful readers’ and writers’ work... one should be constructing understanding rather than passively carrying out prescribed procedures” (Schoenbach & Greenleaf, 2009). Students also need opportunities to articulate the kinds of decisions they make as they engage in a process.

“Good thinkers, after all, are more than people who simply think well when they think. They also think at the right times with the right commitments – to truth and evidence, creativity and perspective taking, sound decisions, and apt solutions.”

*Ritchhart & Perkins, 2005*
STRATEGY IN THE CLASSROOM

A number of subject areas use particular processes which support understanding in the discipline. Often these processes represent how experts in the subject area think. Some examples include the design process for the planning and development of products or services in Technological Education, the scientific investigation process for inquiry and research in Science, and the critical analysis process for responding to, connecting with and appreciating art works in the Arts.

The following outlines a way teachers can support students’ use of a particular process:

- Model the use of a process for an authentic task. During modeling, cue students to note what is happening. Use a think aloud to make explicit the thinking of an expert.
- Invite students to deconstruct the modeled process.
- Co-construct an anchor chart representing the process.
- Guide students in applying the process for a task.
- Monitor the students’ use of the process, and provide feedback. If needed, respond to any misconceptions and provide responsive support.
- Ask students to document their use of the process. Have students visually represent their thinking by posting on the anchor chart stickie note reflections on their use of the process.
- Continue to refer to the process throughout a unit or course. Use the anchor chart to remind students where they are in the process.
- Provide opportunities for students to reflect on their use of the process and how it may have changed their thinking.

“Literacy demands change drastically in grades 4-12. So, too, do the students who must meet these demands… secondary grade students are expected to learn new words, new facts, and new ideas from reading, as well as to interpret, critique, and summarize texts they read. The literate practices embedded in these tasks, combining literacy skills and content knowledge, are often invisible (or taken for granted) and yet require a high level of sophistication.”

Time to Act, Carnegie Report, 2010

REFERENCES


