Working Effective Study Strategies into Daily Curriculum to Increase Independent Learning
Hope Bolfe
Falls Church High School
Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools
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Abstract

Often teachers are frustrated with the low grades that students earn. Teachers tend to blame the students for not studying. Teachers try to reinforce the importance of studying daily. However, low grades and poor knowledge of the skills continue to plague the students. Teachers continue to struggle with the idea that students are not being responsible enough to study. What do we do with these students? How do we make sure they learn the material necessary to be successful? With all of the demands on class time, it is nearly impossible to re-teach all the material necessary. And if we did, would the students study any more than in the past?

The sad reality is that the teachers are correct; many students are not studying. However, most students do not have the skills necessary to study and most do not know how to study. Will using precious class time to teach the study skills necessary to study independently encourage students to study more? The answer is yes. Guiding students through different study skills and putting the strategies to practical use in class will increase the understanding of the material and improve student’s grades.

Introduction

In my years of teaching I have always struggled with the lack of studying the students do. I frequently hear students say that they do not understand why they continue to earn low scores on tests and quizzes when they study so much. Often my thought has been that they are just saying that and they are not really studying. I have even allowed the students opportunities to retake quizzes when they earned low scores. And again, the majority of the students still earned low scores the second time around. This only added to my frustration. What can I do to get the students motivated to study?

I tried to make sure my lessons included ways to reach students with different learning styles. We played games, did hands on activities, demonstrated topics with visual aids, and so on. However, students were just not performing to my or their expectations. Like many teachers, my students were not completing homework, they were earning low quiz and test grades, they were unproductive in class due to the lack of preparation outside of class and often students had poor attendance. I needed to find out why my students were so unmotivated and what I could do so they would be more responsible in their own learning.

The first step that needed to be taken was to find out why my students were not achieving. Was it lack of motivation? Unclear instruction? Uncertainty of expectations? Poor study habits? Although, after examining these issues, I discovered that for the majority of the students, they wanted to perform better in class. They had the desire to
succeed. Most said they felt they understood in class, and even understood the material at home, but could not comprehend it when it came to a test or quiz. Students felt that they knew I had high expectations for them. Other students expressed the feeling of guilt when they did not complete homework or earn high grades because they felt they had let me, their parents, and themselves down. (I knew poor attendance was a problem for some students. However, the majority were attending classes regularly and still not succeeding. The issue of attendance has so many facets, that I did not spend much time exploring this issue.) This left us with the issue of study habits. The students were telling me they were studying, so how could this be the problem? At the high school level should they not already know how to study? After some probing, it was evident that this was the problem and this was what we needed to focus on.

The need to teach the students how to study posed yet another problem. How was I going to fit another topic into the curriculum? Already I was having difficulties teaching the required material in one short year. Finally, I decided that students lacked the skills necessary to independently study and prepare for class efficiently. Teaching effective study skills and strategies was a valuable way to use class time.

Connections to the Literature

I am not alone in my frustrations of student’s lack of study skills. As Carl Thum, Director of the Academic Skills Center at Darmouth College says “it’s a rare [incoming] student who has been exposed to specific study/learning skills.” Like high school teachers, college professors often “assume students know how to study when they arrive” (Strauss A6). Teachers are not the only ones frustrated. Student, Katy Hume said “her public school teachers … simply hand out review sheets and ‘then they [teachers] get mad at us when we don’t know how to study’” (Strauss A6). Students need to learn different strategies at an early age. Not only do they need to learn these different study strategies, they need to continue practicing them through middle and high school. “Expecting that students will attain success just because we want them to, or tell them that they can is unfair and unrealistic” (Risher 102).

This does not mean that the responsibility of learning lies solely on the teacher. We already know that learning activities such as sports or music takes continuous practice and guidance. Learning anything will usually “require action and constant exercise” (Risher 103). We as teachers need to make sure that students are offered the repetition necessary. This also means when they are learning the skills to study independently. By doing this, teachers will enable students to practice on their own. They will be more confident independent learners when they are successful in the classroom. As in all subjects of the curriculum, teachers can demonstrate the subject matter and how to solve problems, but how well the students comprehend the material is up to how much the students put into learning and practicing it (Risher 103). However, without knowing how to study, how can we expect students to practice individually? As teachers we do not assume that students learn the material after one go- around and we may spend days reviewing some topics. Why is it we assume that students will remember how to study when teachers are not constantly reinforcing the skills? This is why it is so important to continue to review and build on the studying skills and strategies.
When students have the studying skills necessary to learn independently, they will have more confidence in their learning, while also putting the responsibility back on the students. Risher states that “the exhilaration that one feels after meeting the challenge and winning is incredible. Setting goals and reaching them—this is the essence, the source of individual self-esteem” (Risher 104). Teachers can continue to challenge students and raise the bar when they know they can succeed. This all comes back to the fact that students need the tools necessary to succeed.

Having this knowledge made my decision to spend class time teaching the study skills necessary easy. Not only was it important, it was imperative. I knew it may have meant sacrificing other pertinent material.

**Data Collection and Findings**

In my classroom there were four major questions that I needed to consider to determine what the problem was. I needed to examine the motivation of the students, the students understanding of the instruction, the expectations that I had for them and the students study habits. To do this I used the 124 students in my Spanish 2 and 3 classes. In the two charts below you will see the ethnic and gender breakdown of the students. The student population in my classes was rich in diversity and nearly equal parts males and females.

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**Student Diversity**

- African-American: 10%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 6%
- Caucasian: 19%
- Hispanic: 19%
- Middle Eastern: 9%
- Other: 6%
- 37%

**Student Gender**

- Male: 58
- Female: 66

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The first problem I examined was the level of motivation of the students. This was difficult to measure so I gave a survey to determine how motivated the students thought they were (Appendix A). The questions focused on students’ importance of completing homework assignments, earning high marks, studying and preparing for class and the importance of the class in general. To my relief, the findings showed that for the majority of the students earning a high grade was important to them. Students were more motivated as a whole than I had originally perceived. Most students were completing homework assignments and felt they were preparing for class sufficiently. Out of the 124 students surveyed, only 3 students said they could care less for the class and that they did not prepare for class, study, or complete homework assignments. As
“Samuel R. John..., said ‘The most effective catalyst for academic success—for me, anyway—has been motivation’” (Strauss A6). It is imperative that students are self-motivated to succeed.

The second issue considered was the way I was giving the instruction. I tried to make sure my lessons varied in instruction. I gave notes in a variety of ways such as orally, in an organized power point presentation, using an overhead projector, using different visuals. Often I used students to demonstrate different parts of speech and the order of the words in a sentence. Some students preferred to use the book and copy the notes, discuss them briefly and then practice. We tried a variety of methods. While guiding the students through the new material, I frequently asked the students if they had questions and if the material was clear. Most of the time however, students did not ask many questions. I then would try to assess the students orally or with a quick writing activity to check for clarity. Students practiced the new topics in a variety of ways also. We played games, did hands on activities, written activities, and practice dialogues.

I felt as if my instruction was clear and concise. The students seemed to follow along well. However, I gave them another survey to find out their perception of the clarity of the instruction (Appendix B). This survey was given on a day I was not in the classroom. It asked questions about how they liked to learn, how they prefer notes to be given, whether they understood the information or not, and if they felt their questions were answered.

The majority of the students said the explanations of the material were easy to understand. The students felt that their questions were taken seriously and were answered in class. All of the students said they would ask for help at some point if they did not “get” the information. I felt satisfied that this was not the cause of the big issue of low grades in my class.

The next area I focused on was the issue of expectations. Did the students understand what was expected of them? Did I meet the expectations of a good teacher for my students? In the beginning of the year, I stressed the importance of completing assignments, studying and preparing for class. Each day I would remind them to do each of these. In order to help them keep assignments organized, I gave them an Assignment Log (Appendix C). At the end of each 90 minute class, I left the last ten minutes for students to write down the upcoming assignments, quizzes, or tests and the dates. They also could ask any questions or get assistance with homework. When they completed an assignment, the Assignment Log was to be signed by a parent or guardian. (Students could use an agenda in place of Assignment Log if they chose to). I felt as if I was meeting the student’s expectations by varying instruction, being fair and consistent with classroom management, and making myself available to students when they needed me.

The last question that needed to be answered was, “were the students really studying?” When I asked them as a class or individually if they studied, the answer was usually yes. So finally I asked them “HOW do you study?” To my amazement most students stared blankly at me. Some said they look over their notes, others said they memorized the vocabulary; many shrugged their shoulders and gave a shy smile. This was the problem. The students did not know how to study.
Steps in Teaching Effective Studying Strategies and Skills Taught

The first thing that I did in class was to take the last five minutes to discuss how, when, and where the students were studying. I asked them to start thinking about this topic. I also told them we were going to begin to do activities in class that would make studying at home easier.

The second step I made was changing the seating arrangement of the students. They already had assigned seats, but I paired the desks up. Each student had one or two people to sit with. This was their partner for in-class dialogues and any practice activities or for peer tutoring. Most students were matched up by putting a high achieving student with a struggling student. The seating arrangement was changed periodically. Students were often given time to review vocabulary or notes before a quiz or test. Most students used their partner to begin homework assignments and ask questions of clarification during class. The students also exchanged phone numbers and/or email addresses with their partners. We discussed as a class how they could practice at home by calling their partner. This gave students an avenue to vocalize words or review notes, when they did not have siblings or parents at home to help them study.

The third change made was the kind of homework I was assigning. Instead of having them write out a number of activities from their book or workbook, I started to have them make flashcards with vocabulary. Usually I would ask for them to draw a picture to represent the word on one side and write the word in Spanish on the other. I also had them on occasions write the vocabulary words out three to five times to practice spelling. They also practiced using a Vocabulary Fan, in which they had to write the words out in English and Spanish from memory a number of times. Once they had practice doing each of these, I gave them the option to choose one when they needed to study vocabulary. When students would come to class with the flashcards, written words or vocabulary fan finished, they practiced the words with their partners.

Other types of homework that were assigned were short writing activities. Some still came from the book or workbook. We would go over the first few or students would discuss the assignment with their partner before beginning the assignment. In the Spanish Teacher’s Book of Lists, it suggests dividing the homework into small amounts. It also suggests to do the homework when it is assigned and to not put it off (78). I did not accept late homework from the students. They knew they had to do it when assigned to earn all the points. The students would tell me how easy the assignments were and more and more students were completing the work.

Student organization was an important aspect to focus on. We began by organizing their notebooks. I checked the notebooks once each of the four quarters. Students were required to have a three-ring binder each day in class. It was broken down into five sections. Each section was separated and labeled. Students were then given a Table of Contents (Appendix D) to keep in front of all of the notes given in class. I also put a copy in the classroom so students could check to see if they had all of their notes in case they had been absent. We then discussed ways to stay organized and
the importance of keeping notes and assignments in order. We discussed the importance of keeping their notes organized so when they studied for a test, information was easy to locate. All they needed to do was look at the table of contents and they were able to go straight to the notes they needed to study.

In almost each class period we spent at least five or more minutes discussing and practicing different ways to study. Together we discussed, practiced, and focused on the following strategies.

1. Chunking material, including making note cards
2. Making and using acronyms
3. Constructing outlines (web and linear) of the material
4. Reworking practice exercises and self checking them
5. Working in groups to study
6. Time management when studying

The strategy that students said they liked the most was the note cards. The first time they did them, I provided all of the index cards and we spent about an hour of class time completing the activity. About three class periods before a test we went through the notes and chapter to breakdown the information they needed to know. Together we chunked the information in to smaller bits. When we finished the students reviewed their note cards with their partner or individually. We used this time as a test review. I demonstrated how they could say the information out loud and practice at home, memorizing the contents of the cards. The students then did the same with their partners.

After we practiced with the note cards and the students were tested on the material, I gave the students a survey (Appendix E). Most of the students said it was very helpful and it was the strategy they liked the most. Students felt that they were well prepared for the tests and they would use this strategy in other classes. The only downfall to this strategy for many of the students was the amount of time it took to make the cards. To reduce the amount of time spent all at once, we discussed Landsberger’s suggestion to “review notes immediately after lectures” and make note cards then.

Often for homework assignments, students were to use the grammar rules and make an acronym using the first letter of each grammar rule. The next class period the students would share the acronym with the class or their partner. They would then choose the one they liked the best and try to memorize it when it came time to take a test. They enjoyed this activity and many students continued to use this skill throughout the whole school year.

Before a test, we also would make test outlines. We practiced making them in a web fashion and linearly. This was not something the students enjoyed doing. They said they liked having the material organized, but they did not really know what to do with it after they had it. We discussed using it as a way to “break up the study tasks into manageable chunks” as suggested by Joe Landsberger. I had students come up with a schedule to review each section of the outline before the test. However, many students said they did not use the schedule to study. Most studied the night before.

Teaching the students to study in groups was a difficult task. First the students broke down into groups. Then they used the test outline to breakdown the information. Each student was responsible for coming up with two or three questions or example questions that they might see on the test. They then shared the questions and quizzed
each other. After they studied in their group, we came back together as a class to answer general questions prior to the test. About three times throughout the year, students came into class after school to get together with a group. Some felt this was an extremely useful way to prepare for a test. However, the students’ busy schedules made it difficult to meet regularly.

Implications and Reflections

After reviewing and practicing different studying skills and strategies, the students said they felt more confident in class. I felt the students were better prepared for class. They were earning higher grades and the most important factor was they were learning how to study and prepare for class. As stated by Bergen and Mi, “the key factor in this [self-instructional] method is the student’s having responsibility for his or her own learning and updating and for knowing when and how to carry out this process. It makes learning a process of active seeking rather than passive absorbing” (29).

These skills are not only necessary in high school, but college as well. According to Paul Treuer, the skills needed in a college setting are some that my students learned, such as, note taking, memorization techniques, studying in groups, and time management. It is my hope that my students will continue to practice and use the skills they learned in my classroom this year.

At the end of the year, I interviewed students to find out how they felt after learning about different study techniques. Student’s responses were mostly positive. Therefore, in future classes, I will continue to teach study skills. I would like to expand the skills taught to better time management and prioritizing activities. The main complaint from students was the amount of time studying took. Many students said they did not have enough time to study because of work and/or caring for siblings. However, with guidance in time management, I think the students would discover ways to study and have time for outside activities. I would also like to the students to study more in groups and focus on goal setting. We will spend more time on students discovering their own learning styles and work on the areas they are weak in. “Studying is a highly personal process and many students say their methods mesh with their own learning styles” (Strauss A6).

The time spent in class learning studying skills and strategies was a valuable way to use class time. Not only did the students learn the skills necessary to effectively learn on their own, they learned the content of the curriculum better. Students started earning higher grades and participating more in class. They were better prepared each day. My fear of falling behind in covering the material necessary has ceased. Not only did we not fall behind, but the students had a solid understanding of the material covered.
References


Appendix A

Please answer the following questions honestly and frankly regarding homework assignments. Do not write your name on the paper.

1. Do you complete homework assignments?
   a. yes, most of the time (go to question 2)
   b. no (go to question 3)

2. Why? (mark all that apply)
   a. My parents make me.
   b. I want to.
   c. I want to get a good grade.
   d. I just do.
   e. other ______________________________

3. Why not? (mark all that apply)
   a. I just don’t want to.
   b. I don’t get the assignment.
   c. I don’t understand the purpose of homework.
   d. I don’t have time.
   e. I forget to do it.
   f. other ______________________________

4. Do you study and prepare for class?
   a. yes, most of the time (go to question 5)
   b. no, (go to question 6)

5. Why? (mark all that apply)
   a. My parents make me.
   b. I want to.
   c. I want to get a good grade.
   d. I just do.
   e. other ______________________________

6. Why not? (mark all that apply)
   a. I just don’t want to.
   b. I don’t know how to study and/or prepare.
   c. I don’t understand the material.
   d. I don’t have time.
   e. I forget.
   f. other ______________________________

7. What grade would you like to earn for the class?
   a. A
   b. B
   c. C
   d. D
   e. F
   f. I don’t care.

8. What grade (approximately) are you earning for the class?
   a. A
   b. B
   c. C
   d. D
   e. F
   f. I don’t care.

9. How important is this class to you?
   a. very important
   b. somewhat important
   c. indifferent
   d. not very important
   e. not at all important

10. On average, how much time do you spend each night preparing, studying, and/or completing homework for this class?
    a. 0 – 15 minutes
    b. 15 – 30 minutes
    c. 30 – 45 minutes
    d. 45 – 60 minutes
    e. more than 1 hour
Appendix B
I want your opinion. Please answer honestly; keeping in mind that constructive criticism will be taken seriously.

1. When you really concentrate on something, do you prefer
   a. to have complete silence?
   b. to listen to music playing softly?
   c. it doesn’t matter, I cannot concentrate.
   d. other

2. After taking notes in class, how do you USUALLY feel?
   a. completely lost
   b. somewhat confused
   c. I am somewhat confused, but I get it after we practice some.
   d. I usually understand.
   e. other

3. How do you prefer notes to be given?
   a. on the board
   b. using the overhead
   c. using the computer/television with power point
   d. orally (no visuals, just listening)
   e. I prefer to copy the notes from the book.
   f. other

4. Do you feel that spoken explanations of notes/material are clear?
   a. yes
   b. no
   c. half and half
   d. you talk too much
   e. other

5. Do you feel that your questions are answered in class?
   a. yes
   b. no
   c. sometimes
   d. yes, but I still don’t get it.
   e. other

6. If you don’t understand the material, what do you usually do? (mark all that apply)
   a. I ask for clarification in class.
   b. I ask for clarification after class.
   c. I ask for clarification after school.
   d. I don’t care if I understand or not.
   e. other

7. If you could change one thing about the class, what would you change?

__________________________________________________________________________

Please write any additional comments on the back of this paper. Thanks for participating.
# Appendix C

## Assignment Log

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment/Test/Quiz</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Questions?</th>
<th>Signature of Completion</th>
<th>Points Earned</th>
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Appendix D

Table of Contents (NOTES)

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reference Page in Book</th>
<th>Notebook Page</th>
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Appendix E

Note Card Survey

1. How long did you study for the test?

2. Did you use your note cards? If yes, go to number 3. If no, go to number 4.

3. Do you feel the note cards helped to prepare you for the test? If so, how?

4. Why did you not use the note cards?

5. Do you think you’ll ever use the note card method to study for a test in the future? Why or why not?