The First Thing to Think About Is Thinking

Vickie thinks studying means getting facts to stick in your brain, so she straps her math book to her head and waits 45 minutes. She thinks that's enough to get her an "A." When she gets an "F" instead, she blames her teacher, her mother, her cat. It never occurs to her to blame her methods.

Here's a better idea: Put Vickie's learning in her hands, not on her head. Teach her to think while she's learning. Use simple questions and strategies to help her focus on what she knows, what she doesn't know, and how she can go about learning what she needs. Educational researchers call this "metacognition."

"Metacognition is thinking about thinking. It teaches kids to take a minute to evaluate what they're studying and why. It teaches them to adjust their focus based on the reason for studying," says Frank Hancock, educational coordinator for Sylvan Learning Centers in the Washington, D.C., area. It's at the root of study skills.

"Study skills can't be taught in isolation; they're a bore. Underneath all these isolated study skills is the 'metacognition' . . . that has to take place," says Carol Springer, educational diagnostician at Wake, Kendall, Springer, Isenman, and Associates in the District of Columbia.

BY EVELYN PORRECA VUKO
Skillful studying begins by asking “Why?”

Using the daily reading assignment, skim through the selection and pull out important words, especially ones ripe with imagery. Make a list. Discuss with the class the images they visualize when they say each word. Then have students take turns reading the selection aloud and discuss whether their images reflect the material.

A variation is for you to read the selection aloud. As you read, each student places a coin or colored square on the table each time a word produces an image in his or her mind. Then ask various students to retell the story using their coins or squares.

Another way that you can put Vickie and her fellow students in the catbird seat of their own learning is by encouraging parents to be actively involved. “Parents need to remember what a number of studies have proved— that the single most important predictor of success in a child’s life is parental involvement,” says clinical psychologist and author Ruth Peters.

By applying these hints, you can show Vickie and her classmates that 45 minutes of self-monitored thinking is just about the best study method they can strap to their brains.


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