

Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for advancing teaching and learning at Mona

Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, The UWI Mona



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Special points of interest:

- The Teaching Tips Newsletter is a publication of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the UWI, Mona.
- The Newsletter is published once per month and provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education. It is available online (<http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/CETL/>) as well as in the office of the CETL.
- If you have an area that you would like us to explore in this newsletter, do not hesitate to contact us at the CETL.

Helping Our Students Become Self-Directed Learners

Principle: To become self-directed learners, students must learn to assess the demands of the task, evaluate their own knowledge and skills, plan their approach, monitor their progress, and adjust their strategies as needed.

Self-directed or self-regulated learning is important in the university learning context and of course, in professional life. Helping our students become self-directed learners will invariably involve the use of metacognitive strategies and metacognition requires the engagement in a cyclical process with several phases (see the metacognitive cycle below, figure 1).

The principle noted above is important and underscores the key metacognitive skills that our students are required to have and master to effectively become self-directed learners. These skills are arguably more important at higher levels of education and in professional life as one takes on more tasks and greater responsibilities for one's own learning. For example, in university, students are required to complete longer papers or projects. These are usually more intellectually demanding than those they would have done in high school. The projects might call on students to determine what they already know in order to effectively complete the assignment. They will definitely need to plan an approach to learn this content independently. They might also be called to redefine the scope of the project so that they can realistically achieve it and they most definitely will need to monitor and assess (perhaps adjust too), their approaches to studying and learning.

These skills mentioned above, oftentimes referred to as metacognitive skills are not usually a part of the repertoire of study skills that students possess on entering the UWI. They must be taught these skills. Faculty are therefore challenged to help students improve their metacognitive skills. This is beneficial to our work as

university teachers in relation to our quest to advance the learning of our students. The benefits also include the development of intellectual habits which will entail the establishing of a meaningful approach to studying through the application of planning, thinking about possible alternatives, and evaluating various perspectives that might be competing for attention. Students really need to look at the demands of the tasks assigned and adjust their approach to learning according to what the tasks demands. Hence, in situations where conceptual understanding is required for an assigned task, once the student realise this is what is needed, the requisite plan ought to be completed. Too often students are content in regurgitating descriptive content when conceptual understanding is required. In such cases, they do not realise the demands of the task that they were assigned and hence, they were unable to adjust their approaches to learning and completing the task.

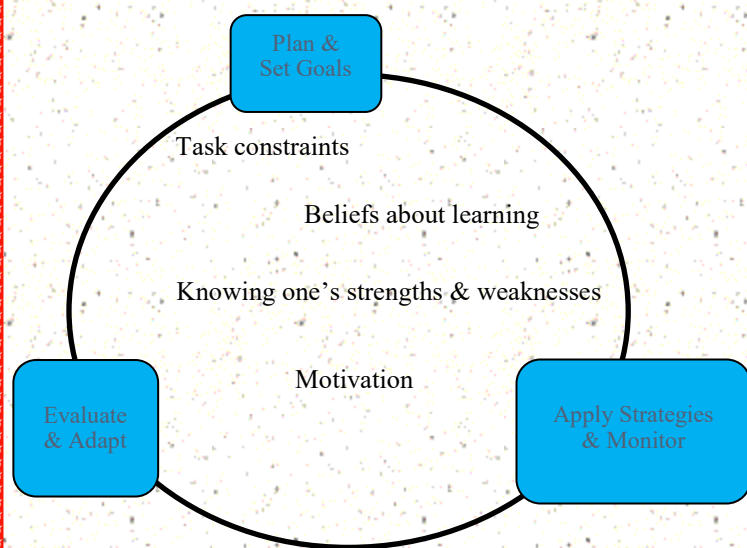
Researchers in metacognition have informed us that learners need to engage in a variety of processes to monitor and control their learning (Butler, 1997; Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2001). These are usually depicted in models. We are supporting our students to become better learners when we help them embrace the basic metacognitive process and apply it to their lives as students. These would include:

- Assess the task at hand, taking into consideration the tasks goals and constraints;

- Evaluate their own knowledge and skills, identifying strengths and weaknesses;
- Plan their approach in a way that accounts for the current situation;
- Apply various strategies to enact their plan, monitoring their progress along the way;
- Reflect on the degree to which their current approach is working so that they can adjust and restart the cycle as needed.

Students are known to inappropriately assess some of the learning tasks assigned. It is not enough to ask them to read an assigned task carefully before attempting the response. Therefore, they need to be 1) taught and learn how to assess the task, 2) practice incorporating this step into their planning and make it become a habit, and 3) receive feedback on the accuracy of their task assessment before they begin working on a given task.

Figure 1: The Metacognitive Cycle/The Self-Regulated Learning Cycle



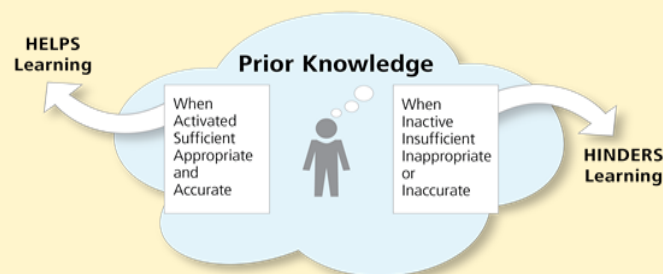
Butler, (1997); Pintrich, (2000); Winne & Hadwin, (1998)

In addition, we must realise that the student's beliefs about intelligence and learning might be problematic. If they believe that intelligence is fixed, then they might not think about changing their approaches to learning. Students who believe intelligence and learning are malleable will definitely adjust study patterns. If they believe learning is quick and easy or slow and effortful, this will also colour their approach to studying. Help them to embrace a belief that intelligence and learning is malleable.

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Prior Learning Can Help or Hinder Learning



Source: Ambrose, S.A., Bridges, M.W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M.C., & Norman, M.K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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