CHAPTER 1: MAKING BRAIN CONNECTIONS TO BECOME AN EXPERT READER

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

- ***From the Desk of Janet Zadina***
  Student to Student – Terry Clark

The purpose of the S*tudent to Student* feature is to provide for many aspects of brain-compatible learning: real-life situations, social learning, and modeling. They are meant to provide supporting information from peers as opposed to solely from authors and instructors. Terry was chosen to open the book for several reasons. First, he is an older student looking back at his attitude toward reading when he was in college and how it changed over the years as his attitudes, needs, and motivation changed. He is sending a message to students that you need reading for many aspects of your later life that may not occur to students now. In addition, the brief biography of Terry shows that he has many talents and these make up a person who needs to read. It is hoped that students will identify with one of his strengths and see that learning to become a better reader does apply to real life. They may identify with his former attitude about reading but see how it does affect being successful in life later, even if you are in a job that doesn't require a great deal of reading. It is a real life skill.

- ***From the Desk of Deborah Daiek***
  Activity 1a – Reading Survey

Activity 1a was designed by investigating the skills and strategies successful students use, and it is also the result of working with developmental readers in reading courses. Some students come to reading classes using a limited mix of effective skills and strategies while others haven't tried or learned most of them. The impetus for developing this survey was to differentiate those skills and strategies students are using effectively from those they have not yet learned. It gives instructors insight regarding what students already know and what they can or should focus on in *Science and Strategies* to help their students become better readers.

The reading survey is suggested as a way to introduce students to your reading course. Students won't change the way they read or study unless they see the need to change. Most students who are coming to your class directly from high school have not had to read much, and haven't been accountable for their reading up to this point. So, they believe that they are reading well enough, and most don't realize that reading is a lifelong activity. They think that once they finish this class, they will never have to read for main ideas, supporting details, or implied main ideas again. They are surprised to learn that they will probably be taking reading tests and asked to do a great amount of reading when they enter the workforce. This is an excellent time to engage older, returning students into a class discussion regarding reading in the work place. They will be able to reinforce what you are saying, and can attest to the fact that reading and pay rate are highly correlated.

Activity 1a requires students to evaluate and be reflective regarding their current reading skills and abilities. It serves as a starting point in self-regulation and metacognition; this is critical, if substantive change is to occur. Once students realize that their own specific reading challenges will be addressed, they are usually more willing and more motivated to do the work. I wouldn't require students to share their survey results with the class unless they choose to share. Reading, like writing, is personal and trust needs to be developed first.

- ***From the Desk of Rita Smilkstein***

The Natural Human Learning Process & Activity 1e – See the NHLP in Action

This research is the critical activity to introduce students to invaluable metacognitive knowledge about how human beings learn, about how they themselves learn, and about them being natural-born learners. Teaching this material and *Activity 1e* is most effectively done during the first class because it immediately creates confidence in both the teacher and students about the students' ability to be successful learners. Its effect is immediately noticeable and persists throughout the term.

With every one of the hundreds of groups and thousands of participants who have done this activity, the results have been consistent with the results shown in this chapter. (See also Smilkstein, *We're Born to Learn: Using the Brain's Natural Learning Process to Create Today's Curriculum*, 2nd ed., 2011, Corwin Press.) Teachers need to keep in mind that the directions in the chapter have been used successfully with every class or group, and therefore, they should follow these directions exactly as listed.

- ***From the Desk of Nancy Anter***

Write in a Journal

I use journals with my students both as a means of communication between my students and me, and as a metacognitive tool. Early in the semester, I give small writing prompts that help students think about themselves as learners. I ask questions such as: "What college subjects most interest you? What makes them interesting to you? What college subjects prove very challenging? Why?" I also invite students to share their hesitations about reading and college in general.

As the semester progresses, I ask students to write in their journals after reading an assignment. I ask them to connect information they already know with information they just learned from the reading. I also ask them to write questions about anything that was unclear to them in the reading. I use these questions to focus my instruction for the next class session. At other times, I ask students to write about their experiences with the different reading strategies presented in *Science and Strategies*. I ask them which ones worked and which ones didn't. When students write about using reading strategies, they are more vocal during class discussions that involve reading strategies. Another very helpful use of the journal is to ask students to write after they have their tests handed back and, as a class, we have gone through the correct answers. They write an assessment of their performance and develop a specific plan for improvement, if necessary. Having them come up with a plan for improvement encourages them to own their learning experience.

I collect the journals about once a week and write back to the students. I don't grade the journal content, just the effort. Once students realize that I actually read what they write and respond to them personally, they often write more honestly.

- ***From the Desk of Nancy Anter***

Use the Checkmark Monitoring System

Using the checkmark monitoring system, students analyze their concentration efforts and learn what enhances and inhibits their concentration. They also notice differences in their concentration level as they read for different subjects. This analysis allows student to become more self-aware and motivates them to make positive changes to their current learning environment.

The checkmark monitoring system allows you as the instructor to see when and how often students lose concentration. It makes an invisible process visible to both student and instructor. Usually, instructors will ask if students have good concentration or not, and most don't know. This awareness of losing concentration and getting back on track is an important step for the development of metacognition (self-regulation) skills.

To introduce the checkmark monitoring system, I explain it explicitly and then I do the *Concentration Activity* described in the activities that follow. After students realize they can direct their concentration, they understand how the checkmark monitoring system serves as a reading tool.

ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1: Concentration

Goal

This activity teaches students that purposeful attention is a skill that can be taught, and when applied, increases comprehension. It introduces and makes the checkmark monitoring system relevant.

Materials

- any reading selection (you could use Chapter 1 of *Science and Strategies*)
- stapler
- two hardcover books
- any collection of three items one would not normally see in a classroom (e.g., a roll of toilet paper, a rubber snake, salt-and-pepper shakers, a trowel)

Directions

1. Briefly describe the checkmark monitoring system to the class. (The checkmark monitoring system is way to monitor concentration. To use it, students begin reading and when they lose their concentration, they put a checkmark in the margin of their reading assignment.)
2. Direct students to read the assigned reading selection for ten minutes and put a checkmark in the margin each time they lose their concentration.
3. After ten minutes, tell students to stop reading and ask them to total their checkmarks. Discuss the results with the class. Ask individual students how many checkmarks they have. Ask why they think they lost concentration at those points in their reading. They can look at the text next to their checkmark to see if the content caused them to lose concentration, or they can speculate about other reasons.
4. Explain to the class that one way to combat the loss of concentration is to purposely attend to what they are reading and purposely block out everything else. They can control what they concentrate on through focused intent and mental effort.
5. Tell students that you will time their reading again, this time for fifteen minutes. Ask them to purposely attend to their reading and block out any distracters. They should put a checkmark in the margin any time they lose their concentration.
6. Begin timing them. After about seven minutes, slowly create a little noise. Staple some paper together. Wait a minute. Then, take the two hardcover books out of your bag. Monitor students' behavior. Some may notice your activity but will quickly get back to work. If they do so, continue to provide distractions, allowing a minute or so of quiet in between each distraction. If students are easily distracted, wait a few more minutes before creating another distraction. Some examples of distractions that work well are:
    - Walk to the door. Close it if it is open; open it if it is closed.
    - Walk to the other side of the room and inconspicuously slip off one shoe and leave it there. Then walk back to your desk and inconspicuously take off your other shoe and place it quietly on your desk.
    - Carefully and quietly put the roll of toilet paper somewhere in the room.

- Continue placing objects in the room, making sure that students do not notice you and that you space out your distractions so that a lot of activity does not occur at once.

7. End the timed reading after fifteen minutes, making sure that you are behind your desk. Have students total their checkmarks for this timed reading and compare their results with the totals of the last timed reading. Discuss. Many students will have fewer checkmarks for the second timed reading even though the time was longer and the distractions increased.
8. Emphasize the point that concentration can be controlled. Ask how many students heard you staple the paper together. Most will raise their hands. Ask how many heard you take books out of your bag. Some will have heard this but might say that they quickly went back to their reading. Ask about the door closing. Ask how many students saw you take off your shoes. (A showing of bare feet at this point usually results in a laugh from students.) Show students where you put your shoes. Ask how many saw you place the toilet paper roll in the room. Continue until you have identified all of the objects you placed in the room.
9. Remind students that even though the second timed reading was longer and you were purposely adding distractions to the environment, most of them were able to block the distracters out, even the outrageous ones.
10. Reiterate the point: Concentration can be controlled. It's a mind game. They can play it to their advantage.

Benefit to Students

This activity emphasizes the need to concentrate and that students can learn how to develop concentration.

Benefit to Faculty

Students like this activity because it's a little different, but it's a concrete way to demonstrate the need to develop concentration. Many students believe you either have the ability to concentrate or you don't, but they do not realize it can be learned and developed.

ACTIVITY 2: Making Connections

Goal

This activity will allow students to see connections among ideas.

Directions

This is a twist on a group sentence-making activity where one person says a word and then the next person adds the next word with the process continuing until the whole class has participated. In the end, sentences have been created that are logically connected by topic and grammar.

Start this activity using the word *students* and then let the first student add the next word (for example, *like*, *bring*, or *think*) and have the other students participate one at a time, each adding one word. Direct students to make logical sense as they go and maintain good grammar.

After about three sentences have been created, stop the activity and ask students to describe how they thought up their word. What rules did they use while searching for a word? What did the sentences end up being about? Then, explain how this sentence activity illustrates the concept of making connections in *Science and Strategies*. The idea (which started off as one word, *students*) grew in meaning as each student added and connected a new word. Likewise, in reading, your ideas will grow when you add logically related information that you already know to the new information that you are reading.

Demonstrate how this works by reading aloud the heading of a section in Chapter 1, for example "Critical Reading and Metacognition." Ask one student to add a sentence (not a word this time) that is related to this subject. Read a paragraph and then ask two other students to add a sentence. Continue on, alternating reading aloud with sentences from students until the section is done. Encourage students to ask a question instead of a sentence, especially if something in the reading is unclear. Ask them to make some of the sentences examples of the subject of the reading. Guide students through reader-author dialogue. When you are done, ask students how their sentences/questions helped the class understand the reading.

Benefit to Students
Students practice connecting ideas and they see how connecting new information with other information (prior knowledge, questions, examples) grows their knowledge.

Benefit to Faculty
Instructors can see how easily students are able to connect information to what they are reading. You can decide to remediate, if necessary.

ACTIVITY 3: Active versus Passive

Goal
Students discover how active activities differ from passive activities and why that knowledge is important to learning.

Materials
- The *Chapter 1, Activity 3 Handout: Active versus Passive* found on the next page (Instructors could create a PowerPoint using active and passive pictures instead of using the handout.)

Directions
Give every student the handout and ask them to figure out the difference between the lists. You can prompt students by asking questions such as, "What is the topic of both lists? How are the lists similar?" And then ask, "In which list are the people doing the most physical work?" "How are the lists different?" The goal of the questioning is to lead students to realize that one list contains active situations and the other list has more passive ones. Now ask about List A. "What does it mean to be actively involved in a sport?" What do you think it means to be actively involved in reading?" "Who do you think gets more out of reading: passive readers or active readers? Why?"

Benefit to Students
Students infer from the lists what active participation is. This inference activity helps students see the difference between active and passive reading.

Benefit to Faculty
Instructors guide students through the discovery of active versus passive participation. This activity makes explicit the idea that reading should be active to be beneficial. You can reference back to this activity when teaching Chapter 6 about inference and implied main idea to show students that they do have experience with the skill of inference.

Active versus Passive

List A	List B
• The swimmer finished first in the 200-meter backstroke. • The sprinter ran his personal best but came in second in the race. • The gymnast performed her routine perfectly. • Water polo athletes tread water during the entire match. • In an average basketball game, players run about three miles.	• The teens stood in line at the concession stand. • The audience waited silently. • The coaches watched the match. • One man checked the time on his phone during the race. • Sitting at the stadium for a long time can get uncomfortable.