

Learning about Learning

Much is now known about how people learn, and educators at all levels are tapping into new insights from cognitive science, educational research, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. But teachers are not the only ones who need to understand the learning process. Research shows that students are more likely to succeed if they understand and can monitor their own learning. This capacity is arguably more important now than ever, as the world becomes more complicated, as boundaries of all kinds shift, and as change becomes a constant expectation. It is a capacity especially important for basic skills learners.

Why? For starters, students in basic skills courses (or other courses in which basic skills are needed for success) often come with a short supply of what might be called "studenting skills." Many have not developed the habits of persistence needed for homework problems and assigned reading. They may not have routines for note taking and studying. Time management is an issue. Some come from settings where even the simple act of "showing up" cannot be taken for granted.

Additionally, many of these students (as is true in higher education generally today) face very real challenges in terms of time and competing priorities. They work, sometimes more than one job; they raise families; they worry about finances. As a consequence, the ability to set goals and to monitor progress is a special imperative for students in basic skills settings.

In turn, teachers have a special responsibility to help students understand themselves as learners. This might mean teaching skills of note taking and outlining. It means helping students monitor their progress -- to understand how grades are calculated, for instance, and what will happen if they receive, say, a D rather than a B on an assigned paper. It means being explicit with students about what is expected and why, and making visible the strategies and processes that have, perhaps, become second nature to more experienced learners. Most of all, it means creating an environment, inside the classroom and beyond, where students can talk openly about their learning, their challenges, and what allows them to succeed.