Dr. Charles K. Ross describes working with students, teaching them, mentoring them, and advising them, as being comparable to investing in the stock market. A non-trivial analogy, think about how one enters the stock market. If one thought that the investment would be wasted, then there would be no reason for making it. Similarly working with students at the University of Mississippi is an investment of faculty time and energy. If faculty members thought the investment would not be worth the effort, they likely would not make that investment.

Once the decision is made to invest in students, faculty members need to consider watching over, monitoring, and nurturing the investment. The monitoring and nurturing of students can take many forms. In a new semester’s classes, faculty can begin the first day by “learning” who their students are. Dr. Ross talks about speaking with each student, gaining a bit of their history with names, geographical data, majors, and other information so that he becomes acquainted with them personally. He describes having students interact with him and others in his classes. He allows no outliers and calls on people who are timid and reserved. All need to be a part of the class.

This approach by the Director of the African American Studies is not surprising. He is personable and faces issues by taking a direct approach. He exemplifies black male leadership for students on the campus, but considers himself a facilitator of learning and talks about getting students to investigate issues, to focus or re-focus on what is important, and to discuss issues and concepts from an educated point of view. He says, “Teaching can be thought of as a simple process. Students need to understand information, absorb it, and to illustrate that they comprehend it through papers, examinations or other forms of assessment. It is the faculty member’s role to help students in this process. Our goal is not to prove to students that we know more than they do. But it is to help them find out what they don’t know when they come to a class and to give them avenues to learn what is missing.”

To do this, a faculty member needs to approach classes with “a positive perspective, build students up even when and if they have opinions that are relatively negative or have built those opinions on shaky foundations. We need to educate them to investigate the foundations of their opinions, to seek out more information that will help them learn and grow and rebuild shaky foundations into solid ones. It is a challenge to do this and in the process, the faculty member cannot be dismissive of student thoughts and ideas. Faculty members could take the easy way out by simply presenting material and being aloof from the students. But we have to remember when doing that, we impact these young people who hold the future of our society, state and country. We need to treat the students like stocks; we want them to grow and build the society to make it better in the future.”

continued on Page 5
The amount of information readily accessible to students has increased tremendously with the advent of technology and the internet. Most (if not all) of the content we teach can be found online. We know, however, that having access to data does not lead directly to learning and understanding that data. In fact, sometimes too much information can lead to overwhelming feelings of frustration and disengagement. Therefore, a critical aspect of our job as professors and instructors is to attend to the processes by which students learn to understand the content of our field. These processes can be categorized as cognition, metacognition, and executive function. The focus of this article is executive function.

Executive function is an umbrella term for a number of higher-level processes that manage attention, thoughts, and actions. These processes are learned as we develop from children to adults. Executive function processes include:

- initiating and maintaining activities
- planning and organizing activities and information
- prioritizing and selecting relevant task goals
- focusing on relevant ideas rather than irrelevant details
- retaining information in working memory
- shifting strategies flexibly
- inhibiting competing actions
- self-awareness, monitoring, and regulating behaviors

Research studies have shown that students can be taught executive function processes in the classroom and they are most effective when they are repeated and embedded in the curriculum. In a perfect world, students develop expertise in many of these processes before they graduate from high school. However, these processes can also be shaped at the university level.

Executive functions can be strengthened by assigning (and reinforcing) outside reading. Many people need a reason to learn new things. Explaining to students the purpose of outside reading can create a buy-in. Once the purpose has been established, explaining how to read and process the readings is helpful; reading should be an active process wherein students should read, reflect on the reading, and take notes. They should monitor whether the reading makes sense, and if it does not, they should re-read the material, develop questions for class, or consult additional resources. Students can be held responsible for outside reading by giving a daily quiz (online or in class) or by requiring students to keep a notebook of reading notes to be handed in on test day.

Planning and organizing activities and information is typically a very difficult executive function to learn, as evidenced by procrastination among us all. Students can strengthen this executive function by developing a system for tackling large projects via planning, goal setting, and organization. Requiring students to provide evidence of their system could be done by asking students to include their planning documents with their completed project.

A learning diary can be used to expand goal-setting and time-management. In completing a learning diary, students set learning goals (along the dimension of time or content) and monitor their progress towards those goals. Students can use their learning diaries to reflect on their actions (e.g., persistence, attention, active involvement) and beliefs (e.g., subject-related intelligence and ability). Learning diaries encourage volition and strengthen motivation.

Explicit instructions on learning processes can also be quite useful and easy to incorporate into lectures. Lessons about how the mind works and the nature of learning include:

- New information is best learned and retained by connecting it to what is already known about that subject.
- Organized knowledge is easier to recall than random, unrelated facts because of the smaller space it takes in our working memory.
- Information that is processed (questioned and put into one’s own words) is more deeply understood and more easily recalled than memorized information.
- While practice may not always make perfect, it does make better learning.
- High ability people have well-developed prior knowledge, not smarter genes.
- Learning is an active process that often requires awareness and control of thinking.

Sometimes students lack the executive function processes to be successful in college. But now the study of executive function holds promise for students often diagnosed with learning disabilities. Educators, psychologists, and neurologists are working together to understand and treat people with executive function disorders. To learn more, read Executive function in education: From theory to practice.

Reference
Teaching and Learning

University of Mississippi Considers Supplemental Instruction

by Nancy Wiggers, Learning Specialist

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is an “academic assistance” program designed to enhance educational experiences for all students on university campuses both here and abroad. The University of Mississippi is considering implementing SI for its students in the future.

The focus for SI is the content associated with historically difficult courses at a university. In other words, SI targets courses that all students find particularly challenging. The emphasis on all students is important as SI in particular targets all students wishing to perform better in a class, be they D-students or B-students. Targeting specific courses, not specific student populations, differentiates SI from developmental study skills programs. Because SI is specific to class content, sessions for SI begin with the first class, not after the first test. Individuals who lead SI sessions are ideally former students of the targeted classes who have completed SI training. These SI leaders attend every class meeting of the targeted course. Afterwards, they organize SI sessions with learning activities designed to support the content the instructor presented. The learning activities might range from content-specific study strategies to some form of applied activity related to the content. All activities involve a group dynamic; the SI leader, essentially a “near peer,” models effective strategies and ensures group interaction, but does not deliver content.

From a learning perspective, SI has support from a variety of theories which emphasize modeling, constructing knowledge via experience and social interaction, and empowering learners. The SI leader is essentially a peer whose personal study strategies contributed to successful completion of the course and who demonstrates those strategies to the students in the course. The group dynamic allows exchanges which facilitate students’ content knowledge through various perspectives of others and by clearing up misconceptions or problems that others may have with the content. All of the activities involved with SI reinforce the notion that students are not only responsible for their own learning but also capable of doing it.

SI is supported by learning theories which purport meeting the needs of all students. Differentiated instruction, learning styles, multiple intelligences, and problem-based learning, stem from these theories. Typically, instructors try to address various student needs by organizing small group activities and projects, incorporating various forms of media and technology to support content, conducting formative and summative assessments, among others to ensure that all required course content is addressed during the regular class meetings. However, with a large amount of difficult content and limited class time, the most expeditious way to cover it is via lecture, though this may not be the most expeditious way to promote students’ learning. SI supports the content so that additional time, attention to students’ needs, and collaborative activities can be provided in order to promote learning and retention of the content without having to impose upon limited class time or add to the numerous responsibilities of instructors.

At the University of Mississippi, a pilot SI program for selected classes is planned by the Retention Committee for fall semester 2010. For more information, call either Dr. Nancy Wiggers, 1079, or Dr. Holly Reynolds, 1514.

Reference

Minigrant Awards for 2009-10

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning announced the following minigrant awards on December 1, 2009, for implementation in the spring 2010. Forty-six proposals requesting $36,823 were received and only 8 could be funded for a total of $6445. One additional proposal was funded by the Center for Online Learning and is included in the list here.

- John Campiglio, Department of Modern Languages, Elementary Spanish Language Resources Website, $350
- Michael Dupper, Health, Exercise Science, and Recreation Management, Purchase of Technology Equipment for Improving Teaching in Turner Center Room 113, $913
- Rory Ledbetter and Andi Bedsworth, Theatre Arts, Materials to Create “IPA Pillows,” $185
- Leigh McWhite, Jason Kovari, Ruth Mirtz, and Amy Wells, J. D. Williams Library, Placing Historical Documents Online for Distance Learners and Non-Traditional Students in the Graduate Program of the Department of Leadership and Counselor Education in the School of Education, $1000, funded by Center for Online Learning
- Christopher Sapp and Nicola Schmerbeck, Department of Modern Languages, Language Resource Center Pedagogical Materials, $1000
- Justin Sherman, Danny Riche, and Kayla Stover, Pharmacy Practice, Impact of Implementing Physical Assessment in a Problem-based Pharmacy School Course, $1000
- Greg Snyder, Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, The Use of Real-time Mind-mapping and Audio/Visual Class Podcasting on Student Learning, $849
- Don Summers, Department of Physics and Astronomy, Darkening the Skies for Astronomy Students at Kennon Observatory, $750
- Kirsten Alley Swain, School of Journalism and New Media, Learning Public Opinion Concepts through a Green Civic Journalism Project, $1018

Tips for Teachers

- See http://classweb.howardcc.edu/jbell/learning/active_learning.htm for ideas on active learning.
- For a dialogue on the lifetime value of a student, see http://www.educationdynamics.com/retention_conference/downloads/IsaacLifetimeValueNDSR.pdf. This PowerPoint presentation is from the National Dialogue on Retention, 2008.
- For the keynote address at the National Dialogue on Retention, 2008, by Dr. George Kuh, see http://www.educationdynamics.com/retention_conference/. In particular see his slide on what employers look for in new hires.
- For a discussion of minority recruitment and issues, see http://www.asha.org/about/leadership-projects/multicultural/recruit/litreview.htm.

Resources

- For thoughts, ideas and resources used in other places to promote diversity, see the following: http://www.diversityweb.org/diversity_innovations/campus_and_community/campus_community_partnerships/index.cfm.
- For a discussion of things that affect minority students in community colleges, see the following: http://www.ericdigests.org/2001-4/minority.html.
None of the teaching philosophy of Dr. Ross is surprising. As a native of Columbus, Ohio, and a graduate of Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Professor Ross earned master’s degrees in both black studies and history and a Ph. D. in history from Ohio State University. He took a somewhat circuitous route to the University of Mississippi. Coming here before completing his doctorate, he had never lived in nor worked in Mississippi and had misgivings about coming to a campus with a checkered racial history. And he came at a time when the university was deciding to remove confederate flags from the stadium during football games. But decisions made by that period’s administration convinced him that the university offered real personal opportunities for him and real opportunities for all Mississippi students. The wisdom of his coming is evidenced now by over 900 students taking African American studies classes last year and students now able to earn a bachelor’s degree in the program. The excitement of being in a campus program where both black and white students can and do learn about African American history, culture, political and social institutions that they may not have been exposed to in high schools is evident as Professor Ross talks. “The classroom is the place for me. By having contact with students and engaging in discourse with them gives me an opportunity to foster relationships with students in mentoring situations. What could be more enjoyable?”

Dr. Ross talks about the need for structure in undergraduate classes. He says that he can “understand student concerns and can be sensitive to their concerns while still being acutely aware of the need to get them to learn information from classes. Students complain about professors who have vague syllabi, change deadlines and make assignments with generalities. A faculty member is more apt to have honest students when they have a set schedule to follow. And this goes for all students regardless of race.”

Dr. Ross discusses campus issues when recruiting minority students. He says that minority students either realize before they come or very quickly afterwards that they are on a predominantly white campus. In the majority of their classes, they are the minority. “Psychologically, this is something that students have to work through. While some will not hesitate to interact in courses regardless of racial make-up, some students may not take chances in courses that are predominantly white with a white professor. This is something that faculty members need to be aware of even if they have never experienced it personally.”

The world has changed significantly since 1995 when Dr. Ross came to Oxford. Minority students have visual role models in the highest places. They know that they can do virtually anything in today’s world. But there are still obstacles. “Students and people new to this campus come to learn in a hurry that this place is a conundrum. It is unlike other institutions. There are many contradictions. It has a significant African American enrollment and a significant number of minority faculty members compared to other southeastern universities. It has changed fundamentally in the past 15 years, has worked hard to improve race relations and has tried to address problems when they arise. But the university’s image, important both in the state and nationally, still involves images and symbols that shock parents, visitors, students and perspective faculty members. We have to work around and recruit around symbols that tie up too much time with people vested in the university.” Dr. Ross adds, “We need to distance ourselves from anything remotely interpreted as being racially insensitive or negative. Our students are now willing to explore, debate, and discuss traditions and I would like to think the vast majority are willing to consider what is needed to move the university forward. Dr. Martin Luther King had a dream of going to a mountain top and living in a country where all people are treated as human beings regardless of skin color. On a more mundane level, I have a dream of going to the university bookstore and being able to buy University of Mississippi paraphernalia without historical ties to racial inequities or symbols even remotely interpreted as being racially insensitive. We need to continue to change if we are truly going to be a great American university.” This philosophy continues the analogy of stocks. Wise investors, faculty, future students, and alumni, must be willing to make change when change is needed.

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**Black History Month**

- For a look at African American educators who have been influential in America’s history, see [www.olemiss.edu/depts/cetl](http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/cetl) and follow links to the educators during each day in February.
- Look for information on the **Day of Dialogue**, February 24 in the Overby Center.
Graduate Instructor/Teaching Assistant Award for Teaching Excellence

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning is calling for nominations for this $1000 award and trophy for exemplary instruction to recognize the importance of the teaching role performed by graduate students. Complete nomination packets are due to the Center, Room 105 Hill Hall by 5:00 P.M. on February 5, 2010. For selection criteria, see www.olemiss.edu/depts/cetl/GRADAward.html.

Graduate instructors or teaching assistants who are currently teaching or have taught during the current academic year are eligible for nomination. They must be nominated by a department, a faculty member, or a set of students from the nominee’s class.

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