

# HANDBOOK 11: Focusing on Student Learning

## CONTENTS

|                                                                |   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Understanding the Need for a Focus on Student Learning..... | 3 |
| 2. Understanding how Students Learn .....                      | 4 |
| 3. Improving Learning by Reducing the Taught/Learned Gap.....  | 6 |
| References .....                                               | 8 |

A Handbook in the Collaboration for Excellence Series  
North Dakota Division of Independent Study  
Office of Curriculum and Improvement  
North Dakota Department of Public Instruction © 2000

This handbook is one of a series published for the project Collaboration for Excellence: The North Dakota Curriculum Project.

The publication is free to public school educators in North Dakota, who may make copies without permission.

These handbooks represent a team product. A major contributor was Ann Clapper, who was previously Director of the Office of Curriculum Leadership and Improvement. Numerous educators in North Dakota reviewed all these materials and made valuable suggestions. Especially helpful were the following North Dakota educators: Janet Edlund, Dakota Prairie High School; Cheryl Kuhas, North Dakota Department of Public Instruction; Karen Nelson, Hettinger; Sandra Willprecht, Forman. Allan A. Glatthorn, Distinguished Research Professor at East Carolina University, served as consultant to the project.

It should be emphasized that the processes suggested here should be seen only as recommendations, not mandates. The authors value the ability of North Dakota educators to develop their own processes that reflect the needs and resources of their schools.

## 1. UNDERSTANDING THE NEED FOR A FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Throughout these handbooks, there has been much discussion of administrative processes and teacher actions. While these are critical, there is a vital need to keep the focus on student learning.

### Reasons for the Focus

For several reasons a “student-learning” focus is essential:

- ! Student learning is all that matters.
  - " Such ancillary issues as the methods that teachers use and the quality of the textbook are only contributory. In this sense student learning (or what Glatthorn, 1998, calls the “taught curriculum”) can be seen as the “bottom line” curriculum.
- ! Educators who emphasize only the contributory elements are likely to miss some key interactions involving student learning.
  - " Thus, an observer who focuses on the methods of instruction may evaluate the teaching as satisfactory because certain skills are being employed, but may be oblivious to the fact that little learning is taking place.
- ! There is a growing body of research on how learning occurs, this knowledge base can inform teaching only if a learning focus is maintained. (See, for example, Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999.)

## 2. UNDERSTANDING HOW STUDENTS LEARN

Teachers can best facilitate learning if they have a solid understanding of how school learning is fostered. The following discussion emphasizes research-based principles that have applications for the classroom. (The discussion is based chiefly on two excellent syntheses: Branson, Brown, and Cockering, 1999; and National Research Council, 1994.)

### A Learning-Centered Environment

- ! Students believe that their culture is valued and its special features are used to facilitate learning.
- ! Students have many opportunities to express their current knowledge and understanding, as a basis for further development.
- ! Students are encouraged to construct their own meanings.
- ! Students have multiple opportunities and means to develop their knowledge in-depth and to use that knowledge in solving problems.
- ! Students understand the structure of the discipline—the essential concepts and their relationships.
- ! Students believe that they are a contributing member of a community, where cooperation and mutual assistance are valued.

### Classroom Learning Experiences

In addition to profiting from those environmental aspects, students will learn better when they have the following learning experiences:

- ! Students experience instruction in accessing and using generative knowledge.
- ! Students use that knowledge to solve meaningful problems.
- ! Students have sufficient instruction and reinforcement of knowledge and skills that they can transfer that knowledge and those skills to new situations. Such transfer best occurs when the students have learned general principles and concepts.
- ! Students learn how to use certain learning strategies, mental operations that aid in problem solving, such as grouping in order to classify.
- ! Students learn how to use metacognitive monitoring, checking on their own thinking and problem-solving processes.
- ! Students have frequent opportunities to work together and learn from interactions with

each other.

- ! Students experience assessments and receive feedback about their performance.

This last guideline is so important that it needs special treatment.

### **Assessing Student Learning**

How is learning assessed? The obvious answer is, by giving tests that closely match what was taught. However, educators should search for other indicators.

#### **Short-Term Indicators**

Teachers should systematically look for multiple indicators as often as they can.

- ! Responses to oral quizzes that check for learning in progress
- ! Volunteered answers in discussions
- ! Classroom behavior and discipline referrals: a decrease may indicate that social learning is occurring
- ! Attentiveness in the classroom
- ! Quality of homework

Considered individually, each factor may not be a sign of learning or not learning. However, taken collectively they can yield some tentative findings.

#### **Long-Term Indicators**

In addition to these short-term indicators, administrators, counselors, and teachers should use the following indicators in order to discern long-term trends.

- ! Enrollments in advanced courses. Low enrollments in a subject such as physics may indicate negative attitudes towards that subject.
- ! Attendance over the school year. Poor attendance may result from the student's lack of progress and resulting frustration.
- ! Recurring signs of stress. Persistent stress may also be the surface manifestation of academic failure.

### 3. IMPROVING LEARNING BY REDUCING THE TAUGHT/ LEARNED GAP

The general principles discussed in the previous chapter are general guidelines that can be applied at the classroom level to enhance learning. However, even in the best of situations there is a significant gap between what is taught and what is learned. (See, for example, Barton, 1997; and VanSledright, 1995.)

*For example, in a history class, even though the teacher emphasized historical trends and concepts, students focused on individuals. One student reported that African Americans were slaves because “the white people were greedy” (Barton, 1997; p. 299).*

#### Causes of the Taught/Learned Gap

The causes of the gap are several and can be usefully categorized into three groups: environmental; student; and teacher.

#### Environmental Factors

- ! Classroom climate
  - " If the climate is conflict-ridden, students will be inclined to deal with the conflict, thus taking their minds off what the teacher is teaching. If the climate is too “hot,” in the sense of extreme closeness of teacher and students, then too much time will be spent on interpersonal issues.
- ! External noise
  - " Although internal noise does not seem to be a factor, external noise distracts (trains, construction, trucks, fire engines, airplanes).

#### Teacher Factors

- ! Organizes lesson poorly
- ! Does not explain concepts clearly, with insufficient examples
- ! Speaks without sufficient volume or clarity
- ! Does not monitor and assess sufficiently
- ! Interrupts explanations with disciplinary concepts and actions
- ! Does not provide corrective feedback to students
- ! Lacks sufficient content knowledge
- ! Chooses lesson content that is not developmentally appropriate

**Student Factors**

- ! Is inattentive
- ! Lacks prior knowledge—or has incorrect prior knowledge
- ! Is disabled—learning, hearing, seeing
- ! Is emotionally troubled
- ! Is absorbed with personal agenda
- ! Is influenced by peers who disparage school learning
- ! Does not connect with lesson content
- ! Is fatigued or not physically well
- ! Experiences interference because of cultural differences
- ! Prefers to avoid failure rather than being embarrassed by participating

**What Can Be Done to Narrow the Gap?**

Perhaps the best approach is for teachers to work together in a problem solving mode. Here is a process that two-person teams can use.

Teacher A begins by observing Teacher B, focusing on student learning. At the end of the lesson, Teacher B administers a brief quiz. Teacher A and B confer to analyze both the observational data and the quiz results. They tentatively identify the extent of the gap and the likely reasons for it, designing an intervention based on the analysis. Then the teachers switch roles: B observes A.

As Handbook 12 explains, the gap can also be decreased through learning-centered supervision.

## REFERENCES

- Barton, K. C. (1997). "Bossed around by the queen": Elementary students' understanding of individuals and institutions in history. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision, 12*, 290-314.
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (1999). *How People Learn*. Washington, DC: National Research Council.
- National Research Council. (1994). *Learning, Remembering, and Believing*. Washington, DC: Author.
- VanSledright, B. A. (1995). "I don't remember--the ideas are all jumbled in my head": 8th graders' reconstructions of Colonial American history. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision, 317-345*.