

# ANOTHER APPROACH TO MASTERY LEARNING

STUDENTS LEARN IN ECRI  
CLASSROOMS BECAUSE THEY  
RESPOND MORE FREQUENTLY AND  
USE THEIR TIME MORE  
PRODUCTIVELY.

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**A**s developer of a mastery learning approach that is undoubtedly one of those in greatest use today in the United States at all grade levels, K-12, I feel compelled to comment on three issues raised in some of the articles in the November 1979 *Educational Leadership*.

The Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction (ECRI) offers an approach to mastery learning different from Bloom's group approach and Keller's personalized system. An ECRI mastery learning teacher instructs small groups of students, but the students are not working toward mastery at the same level or with the same tasks. (And this is not taking something from each of the other models and creating a composite model.)

I dislike, as does Carl Glickman, the idea of keeping a group of students working together until all master, but I also dislike self-instructional learning that deemphasizes the need for teacher involvement during instruction or practice toward mastery. I appreciate the fact, however, that both of these mastery models are significantly better than conventional methods of instruction.

The ECRI approach has several elements, one of which is a carefully planned system using group responses in unison and other procedures that dramatically increase each student's active participation in learning. Stu-

dents speak aloud during small group work in spelling, penmanship, and word recognition skills, and even when they are working individually at their own rate on comprehension, study, and creative writing instruction.

It is true that teaching for mastery in language instruction takes more teacher and pupil time than that usually spent in conventional classrooms, but greater proficiency in students' use of oral and written language creates opportunities for more, not less, participation in other activities.

Glickman (1979) said that in his observations of mastery learning classrooms, it was "common to see the extra time required of learners who are 'slow' in the basics (that is, reading) being taken from time spent in what they enjoy the most (art, dramatizations, independent projects)" (p. 102).

It is a sad commentary on our conventional schools that reading is considered a non-preferred activity and that students enjoy art, dramatizations, and independent projects more than reading!

In ECRI mastery classrooms pupils enjoy instruction in reading and in other language skills. They enjoy using the reading and writing they have learned in significant ways in their lives. They also learn to appreciate and to develop skills in art; music; geography; drama; mathematics; social, physical, and biological sciences; and many other areas.

Glickman describes a mastery classroom as a place where a few "slower" students spend more time or require more practices to learn than other "faster" students do. This is not a mastery classroom. Learning takes less and less time for every student once mastery occurs. Mastery



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eliminates the stereotype of "slower" students. Although one group of students could be reading on a lower reading grade level, students within that group read with the same fluency, expression, understanding, and enthusiasm as students reading from a book at a higher reading grade level. They also spell and write as well.

Glickman's description of a student spending an inordinate amount of time to master is a description of a *conventional* classroom in which the teacher, unable to teach effectively and lacking necessary management techniques and materials, tries to keep students at a task until they learn it on their own.

Mastery in an ECRI classroom is a natural product of efficient instruction and prescribed activities for achieving mastery. No student struggles or suffers to master. No one is in doubt or undecided about teacher expectations.

**H**ow does this third approach, or ECRI, operate? And why teach to groups if the students' activities are individualized? ECRI teachers require responses from every member of the group because it makes students more secure who would otherwise not respond, and because it gives continuous feedback to the teacher, not to show that students have learned, but only that they have done what was requested. Mastery isn't expected to occur during group instruction; that usually occurs as each individual works toward mastery.

Practice time is a critical part of a mastery classroom schedule. It is a time when every pupil works toward individual mastery as the teacher moves from student to student conferring, assisting, reteaching, and reinforcing. ECRI's studies indicate that the time needed for individual practice toward mastery is twice as long as the reading and creative writing skills instructional time—or equivalent to the total language instructional time if spelling, penmanship, and proofing skills instructional time is also calculated.

ECRI teachers don't wait until time to test for mastery to prescribe correction procedures or provide feedback to students. They do this during the daily individual conferences described above and in small group discussions. Students also de-

termine their own readiness for mastery, as well as learning appropriate ways to prepare for mastery.

Second, students' responses don't differ as greatly as we have supposed. It's their use of time that differs. Glickman wrote that research supports student individuality rather than sameness and Bloom is quoted as saying that the slowest 10 percent of students may need about five to six times as much rehearsal, practice, or participation to master.

With the use of observational recorders that yield rated and sequential data of teacher and pupil behavior, it's easy to understand why some students "learn" more effectively (score better on tests, talk more readily about what they have done or read) than others. The "high ability" student doesn't have as many lapses in responses or as much null time between responses as does the "low ability" student. The "high ability" student's response is of shorter duration than the "low ability" student's response. "Lows" don't respond as frequently as "highs," and often they don't respond at all. Some students under observation haven't made a response that could be observed and recorded in 15 days of reading instruction. They are allowed by their teachers to procrastinate doing what other students do. They are allowed to procrastinate learning.

I was unable to understand this problem as a former secondary and elementary teacher, principal, and supervisor. I knew that some students didn't get their work done, but I too thought it was because they needed more practice or took a longer time to learn. Instead, they only needed to use time in the same way as the students who were learning.

I recognize now the harmful effect of someone never responding or doing anything in school. "Culture screens," "variations in learning," "linguistic levels," and "interests" are terms used by educators to explain away the differences that are created in students by some of them responding to instruction and others not.

"Cultural screens," "variations in learning," "linguistic levels," and "interests" could create an unwillingness in some students to respond and make it more difficult for them to respond if the teacher isn't skillful in managing behavior. But the

teacher's responsibility is to ensure that each student responds correctly, whether in a group or individually.

When one reads a computer sheet that records pupil responses, and 100 percent of one pupil's time appears in the null time column, while another pupil works at a rate of 22 responses a minute, one obtains a clearer picture of "individuality" as being mostly responsiveness.

**I**n ECRI mastery classrooms, teachers use less time to instruct, reteach, and reinforce than teachers in conventional classrooms. Pupils respond more frequently. Responses are of shorter duration. Less time occurs between responses. Glickman's "Sara" doesn't need extra time; she has more than enough. Sara should be taught to use her time differently.

Additional time or practices are not needed to learn. Carroll and Bloom are mistaken when they say this is the key in helping all to master. If the "low ability" students respond at the same rate, in a sequence of learning activities that guarantees success, they aren't "slow" any longer. Research at ECRI (Winterton, 1971, pp. 42-43) demonstrated in experimental studies that obtaining high rates of response from "low ability" students produced students who learned more quickly than former "high ability" pupils who had lower rates expected of them. The positions of the "high" and "low" ability students changed places because of differences in teacher expectations.

To assure that each first grade pupil would respond equally well in reading, writing, and spelling, one teacher had brief individual meetings with six of her pupils after school during the first four months of school. This additional instruction was needed to compensate for experiences they had missed in their homes and in kindergarten. But once their rates of response changed and mastery occurred, differences diminished in the way they and other pupils used their time.

One study at ECRI (Bates, 1971) investigated the amount of time in which pupils were not given an opportunity to respond. It ranged from 0 to 5 percent in an ECRI reading class compared to 50 to 80 percent in conventional classrooms.

In yet another study in which ECRI and non-ECRI teachers were observed (Wadham, Young, and Rencher, 1976, p. 21) the ECRI-taught groups had less off-task behavior for a shorter duration of time; pupils in the ECRI group had a greater frequency of correct responses and their responses took less time; ECRI teachers reinforced more consistently and for a longer period of time; they checked their pupils' responses more frequently using less time per check; they asked more questions, provided more instruction, explained, prompted, modeled, and directed more frequently.

Third, it was stated in some of the articles that mastery learning programs dealt less with the development of higher mental processes and more with the lower levels. Glickman accused mastery classrooms of teaching

and evaluate. Expecting mastery doesn't limit what is taught. For example, in an ECRI classroom, divergent thinking is a product of creative comprehension and creative writing instruction. Mastery is expected in this, also.

Concepts are developed first with concrete, sensory experiences; second, with vicarious or laboratory experiences; third, with audio and visual devices; and, lastly, through words, both spoken and read. Conventional classrooms are as guilty of dealing first with abstractions and later with first-hand experiences as are mastery classrooms. A wise teacher, however, doesn't wait to instruct and expect mastery in language acquisition until experiences are amassed. Reading, writing, and speaking enhance experiences. They serve to connect the learner with an ex-

skills and knowledge" (p. 102).

Since our compulsory education system is based on the premise that it is "good" for us to go to school and to learn to speak and read and write and manipulate numbers—and to attain other skills and values that each local community outlines as goals to be achieved—I want students to be "equally masterful." Why does Glickman believe mastery destroys individuality or prevents someone from developing his or her abilities and interests? The more people learn, the more options are available to them. Does he suppose that mastery prevents someone from moving to whatever heights he or she is able to achieve? The first thing that happens in a mastery classroom is that those students who are most responsive move faster than they have ever done in the past. Their levels skyrocket. It is surprising to them and their teachers to discover all they are capable of doing when they are allowed to move from one level to the next as rapidly as they can master.

In conventional classrooms educators have been led to expect poor work from some pupils and mediocre work from all the others. Then they defend the student's right to fail. The time has come to prevent pupils from failing. Why should some students be taught to believe they are inadequate—that they can't learn—when, in another teacher's room, they would have been successful?

ECRI mastery teachers spend more time and require more of their students and of themselves than many conventional teachers. Because they believe all their students can learn, they expect all their students to be "equally masterful" of the same skills and knowledge. Is it worth the effort? You be the judge. ■



students what they cannot possibly learn and depriving them of the experiences (concrete manipulation) that are essential to learn abstractions (p. 102).

If this is true of some mastery classrooms, it is not true of others. These same accusations could be leveled at conventional classroom teachers. These problems are not peculiar to mastery classrooms.

The stimulation of "higher mental processes" is important in an ECRI classroom, and teachers teach skills so students can infer, analyze, apply,

experience. Words, both written and spoken, stimulate the person's involvement in and utilization of his/her experiences. ECRI mastery classroom teachers provide an environment for learning and activities students need to learn, since all students are expected to master whatever is taught. They are the best models to be found of any definition Glickman could apply to an "effective" teacher!

Glickman writes that even if mastery learning "works," we still need to ask ourselves if we want students to be equally masterful of the same

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