

Trends

Educational Research

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Improving Student Attention

Children with learning problems often have difficulty paying attention in school. Teachers frequently work one-on-one with such students to increase attention. But such special treatment is not always possible and, even when it is available, children's thoughts may wander when the teacher is not immediately at hand. One promising solution may be teaching children to monitor their own attention.

Researchers at the University of Virginia have developed methods to teach children how to assess their own intentional behavior. Daniel Hallahan and his colleagues have found that when children use *self-monitoring*, their involvement and academic productivity increase.

A teacher needs three things to teach children how to self-monitor their attention: a tape recorder, a cassette tape, and a sheet of paper for the student's record. The tape must have prerecorded beeps spaced at random intervals anywhere from 10 to 90 seconds apart. The average interval, about 45 seconds for most students, can be adjusted upward or downward as needed. On the paper, marked in a column, the student checks if he or she is on- or off-task when the beep sounds.

Before students can use self-monitoring, they must understand what "paying attention" and "not paying attention" mean. The teacher may demonstrate paying attention by sitting with eyes forward while an imaginary teacher is talking at the front of the room. To show inattention, the teacher might gaze out the window while an imaginary teacher speaks. The teacher instructs the student to self-monitor during seatwork by asking, "Was I paying attention?" each time the beep sounds. The student then marks the answer on paper. Students working in small groups may use a common signal cue, using wrist counters instead of paper to record their attention.

Do children who have been taught to self-monitor need to carry a tape recorder for the rest of their lives? Obviously, no. To wean the successful child from this procedure, the researchers suggest that the teacher can take away either the recorder or the paper, and eventually both. Instead of using prompts, the child asks silently, "Was I paying attention?" If the answer is "Yes," then the child is encouraged to say to himself or herself, "Good job."

Self-monitoring has proven particularly useful with learning-disabled

children working alone at their desks or in small groups, but it may not work well with children who have severe behavioral problems. The researchers also warn that self-monitoring will not help students learn new material. The approach works best with drill-and-practice exercises in which children are strengthening knowledge they have already acquired.

For more information, send for *Improving Attention and Self-Monitoring: A Manual for Teachers* by Daniel Hallahan, John Lloyd, and Laura Stoller at the Learning Disabilities Research Institute, 405 Emmet St., University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903.

This column was prepared as part of the American Educational Research Association's Editor-at-Large Program. The project promotes the continuing role of research in educational excellence with materials showing the implications of research for improved practice.

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Textbooks

CONNIE MUTHER

What To Do When All Textbooks Fail

Brant W. Abrahamson, a 20-year veteran social studies teacher at the Riverside-Brookfield High School in Riverside, Illinois, wrote to me that he had developed a simple technique for locating Western bias in world history textbooks. Abrahamson and his colleagues identified the sections intend-

ed for use as daily assignments and tabulated content by region. A relatively quick page count revealed that all 11 world history textbooks studied showed an overwhelming Western bias—devoting between 45 and 75 percent of the total content from 1000 BC to 1950 AD to Europe and the Anglo world. This was only the beginning of an extensive study resulting in the

rejection of *all* textbooks. Then he wrote to me for suggestions.

What can you do if you decide to reject all major textbook programs?

1. *If you already have quality materials that are out-of-print, call the publisher for permission to duplicate.* In many cases your request will be granted.

2. *Investigate materials (not necessarily "textbooks") produced by small*

publishers. Often small publishers have more freedom to experiment with unique materials and methods. You'll find them by spending a great deal of time describing your problem to representatives at exhibit booths at your subject association's convention; examining curriculum guides and materials displayed at these conventions by other school districts; and contacting subject associations, collaboratives, and consortiums. (Example: Social Studies Education Consortium publishes a yearly *Data Book* describing social studies materials available for purchase.)²

3. *Find out how others solved the problem* by contacting your national subject association for a list of "exemplary schools,"³ or contacting your state facilitator for the National Diffusion Network.⁴ Read each program description for your subject, and then telephone to learn what materials these schools use. You can also contact your state department subject consultant, area research and development exchange, or local educational service center to identify other local schools that may have solved, or are working on, the same problem.

4. *Write, or adapt, your own materials and keep small publishers informed.* This is how many products are developed. A shrewd reading of the *Literary Market Place*,⁵ available at your local library, will identify publishers, specific discipline editors, and the general grade range. (Example: The Chicago Mastery Learning program, published by Mastery Education Corporation, was originally developed within the Chicago public schools.)

Some school districts, and consortiums of districts, are creating interactive computer-videodisc-literature curriculum materials to enhance (or eventually replace) the standard textbook. Wasatch Education Systems,⁶ a leader in this innovation, has already developed programs in communication arts, biology, and physics. The possibility of interactive computer-videodisc programs, enhanced with recent periodical literature, creates new dimensions for instruction—and instructional design.

5. *Notify your national subject association.*⁷ Contact their journal editor or their book or resources editor.⁸ Most national associations have formed committees to address the textbook problem, have featured textbook issues in their publications, or have become involved in textbook evaluation. The National Council of Social Studies recently formed a committee to determine if they should evaluate textbooks. The National Council of Teachers of English⁹ has designed a tool to help selectors evaluate textbooks. (As of this writing it has not been approved for sale.)

The American Association for the Advancement of Science¹⁰ has pub-



lished (and is publishing) textbook evaluations in *Science Books and Films*: biology (May/June 1985), chemistry (May/June 1986), and physics (possibly September 1986).

6. *Write to me*, and I will try to direct you to someone who can help. If not, the issue could be addressed in this column.□

1. For more information contact: Brant W. Abrahamson, social studies teacher, Riverside-Brookfield High School, Riverside, IL 60546 (312/442-7500).

2. Social Studies Education Consortium (SSEC), 855 Broadway, Boulder, CO 80302 (303/492-8154). The *Data Book* is, of necessity, an eclectic collection of materials. The FSEC however, is responsive to suggestions from the field. Example: I noted that the *Data Book* omitted The Independent School Press, a small publisher producing many teacher-written paperbacks. They will correct this for 1987.

3. Many national associations are identifying exemplary schools and disseminating descriptions to encourage exchange of ideas. Example: The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) "Centers of Excellence in the English/Language Arts."

4. National Diffusion Network, U.S. Department of Education, 1200 19th St., N.W., Room 714 F, Washington, DC 20036 (202/653-7006).

5. *The Literary Market Place* (a yearly publication), R. R. Bowker Company, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, NY 10017 (212/916-1794).

6. Wasatch Education Systems, 1214 Wilmington Ave., Salt Lake City, UT 84106 (800/624-1732).

7. For social studies the national association is: National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), 3501 Newark St., N.W., Washington, DC 20016 (202/966-7840).

8. The NCSS publication is: *Social Education*. The theme of the January 1986 issue was social studies textbooks. Louis M. Vanaria is the book review editor of *Social Education*.

9. National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801 (217/328-3870).

10. *Science Books and Films*, American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), 1333 H St., N.W., Washington, DC 20005 (202/326-6454).

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