

OVERVIEW

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STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING LEARNING STRATEGIES

Learning, they say, occurs when a person tries to resolve a puzzling situation. If so, I am learning.

The puzzle I am concerned about is posed by Lauren Resnick (p. 12), co-director of the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh, whom I interviewed for this month's issue. Resnick was commissioned by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences to review the available research on teaching thinking. In a landmark report (Resnick 1987), she gave cautious blessing to "the venture as a whole," but warned that thinking probably cannot be taught successfully apart from academic content. In our conversation, she reiterated her conviction that learning strategies should be taught in the context of particular bodies of knowledge. True, she said, competent people have a large repertoire of strategies, but we do not know "whether you can directly put the strategies into other people" (p. 15, this issue).

Several of the authors for this issue apparently think we can. They do not argue for teaching learning strategies in isolation from regular school content; but they do suggest that when students have learned, for example, to represent information graphically (p. 20), or to make text more meaningful by asking elaboration questions (p. 17), they can use these techniques in many different applications. For her part, Resnick insists that even operations like summarizing are different for different areas of knowledge. I recognize that her views are more authoritative than mine, but I take the commonsense view that some aspects of these skills *must* be generic. More important, she and I agree that teachers should consciously try to get students to develop and use these strategies in all subjects.

I continue to be intrigued by the dilemma of general vs. content-specific strategies, but I am even more perplexed by the possible implications of the new learn-



Our thanks to researcher Paula Delo and student Conrad Chase. Photography by Mark Regan. Design by Al Way.

ing research that Resnick talks about. For generations teachers have tried to produce educated people by assigning academic tasks, supervising students' efforts, and grading the results. Sometimes this has worked and sometimes not. Now we are getting a better sense

of the cognitive processes used by successful students and beginning to see how those processes can be made more explicit for others. This does not mean that we can skip teaching content and just teach students how to learn, but it may mean that we can successfully teach difficult content to more students.

I say "may" because our ability to do so depends on our ability to put this new professional knowledge to work on a large scale. In recent years, schools and school districts desiring to make better use of research have turned to the pioneering leadership of Madeline Hunter or to the "effective teaching" research, most of which has been completely generic and relatively behaviorist. The research described in this issue is more sophisticated, harder to understand and summarize. Some of it, like some of the effective teaching research that preceded it, is little more than fancy terminology for what good teachers already know, perhaps intuitively. Some, though, is genuinely revealing and helpful. How are hundreds of thousands of teachers going to learn about and apply it?

As I said earlier, I don't have an answer, but I am itching to find one. And that, I am told, is the stimulus for continued learning. □

Reference

- Resnick, L. B. (1987). *Education and Learning to Think*. Washington, D.C.: Academy Press.

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