Help Students Improve their Study Skills

Author: Jane Dupree

A resource for students, parents and teachers alike, as well as teaching assistants. This book provides a practical and accessible insight into the different ways that students learn. Offering advice and guidance needed to effectively support the reading skills, writing skills, memory and revision and exam technique of students in order for them to competently take responsibility for their own study. It includes: photocopiable resources for use in practice, examples of children’s work that transfer theory into a practical context, advice and guidance on effective study support with no prior knowledge of learning styles and theories required. Fully inclusive strategies that can be used with pupils of all abilities.

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Chapter 2 - Developing Independent learners

Chapter Overview

When we are born we are totally dependent on others for survival. As we develop we gradually become more independent. To be successful in study involves becoming an independent learner. This requires a high level of ‘intra-personal skills’, (knowing yourself). This chapter will look at what these skills are and your role in developing these in students. By the end of this chapter you will

• understand your role in the classroom in developing these skills
• support effective time management of class-work, homework and extended course work
• have practical examples of how to encourage organisational skills development
• help students improve their work using the ‘feedback sandwich’

The better these skills are developed the less a student will need you.
Towards an effective learner

Chapter one examines different learning styles and how these can improve success in school. However, there are several other factors involved in being successful. What else makes an effective learner and how can knowing such skills help you to support your students? Howard Gardner (1983), himself at one time a failed student who was forced to repeat a year of schooling, introduced the idea of multiple intelligences. He notes that there are several different types of intelligence. When we describe ourselves as ‘clever’ or ‘average’ or, unhappily ‘thick’ we are usually measuring ourselves against only a small sample of these intelligence types, in particular the first two as described. Broadly these intelligences are: analytical intelligence, pattern intelligence, musical intelligence, physical intelligence, practical intelligence, intra-personal intelligence (knowing your self) and inter-personal intelligence (getting on with others). You can see that different cultures may value the differing intelligences to a greater or lesser degree. Which intelligences are valued within our education system? Which intelligences do we as a society currently pay large sums of money in admiration of? Which of these are strengths in your self and the students you work with? How we value these intelligences in others and praise when we see them affects our self-esteem and motivation.

Intra personal intelligence

Whatever your feelings with regard to the importance of each of these multiple intelligence, and the importance you would place on having each one, there is no doubt that there is a need for intra-personal intelligence in order to study successfully. Intra-personal intelligence deals with a person’s own ability to self-monitor, self motivate and target set. Some students find these skills develop naturally (if they have high levels of intra personal intelligence), but many students do not. They will need you to help set small targets for them and to celebrate when such targets have been reached. By doing this, both self-esteem and motivation will be raised and so the student will become more successful. Within each of the areas discussed this chapter encourages you to:-

1. Know where a student is in relation to each of the intra personal skills discussed
2. Set one small, achievable next step target for one area
3. Create practical solutions to achieve it
4. Celebrate success when it is reached
5. Monitor the student in maintaining that success (this stage is often rushed past)
6. Celebrate its maintenance
7. Return to 2. in a spiralling cycle of success
Since we know that targets have a higher chance of success if they are written down, there is a template in the appendices for you to photo-copy and use. (Appendix 2.1)

Managing time

Time management in the classroom

The awareness of time is called temporal awareness. Some students have a good feel for time and others do not. Students with specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia or attention deficit disorder, whether identified as having the difficulty or not, often have a very poorly developed sense of time. So when asked to get their books and equipment out in 2 minutes, or to complete what they are writing in the next ten minutes they have difficulty. This does not mean they cannot tell the time, but that they find it difficult to judge time lapses. The Key Stage 3 strategy, and the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy at Key Stage 2 have both helped, since students will have had plenty of experience of working in lessons divided into 10 minute starter sessions and 20 minutes working independently. These should be used as examples to support your students when given tasks to be completed in set times.

But what about the student who loses focus very quickly, starts chatting as soon as you are not there to focus them or finds it difficult to ‘start off’ and who then ends up with piles of homework as a finishing off task? Below is an example of how to use the spiralling target setting described above.

The first target would be to know exactly how much the student is capable of writing when concentrating for ten minutes. (The amount for copying from the white board or book would be different from the amount that could be written when creating their own written work, which needs additional thinking time.) This does not have to be completed as a separate exercise; you can use written examples from your observation of them across different subjects. Once you know how much they are capable of writing this can be used to set a target for self-management. You can then use time management strategies. When you are sure they are comfortable with the task you can draw a pencil line in their margin, which shows where they are up to, go away and come back later to see how much they have written. The amount of time they would be left to write independently should be short to begin with and be increased. Each time-target should be set, celebrated, monitored for maintenance...
different subjects, celebrated and then increased. If when you return to the student they have not written enough (or anything) within their own capability you need to discuss what they were doing instead, so that they know and recognise their own time wasting behaviour. This may then become the target, for example “To write without chatting for ....minutes.” What is important is that you gradually
develop from always sitting beside the student to ‘make them write’ and move towards personal responsibility for ‘making themselves write’. By the time a student can write for 15-20 minutes independently they should be well on the way to having achieved this intra personal skill. It may be necessary to use a timer, the student’s own watch as a timer, or rewards for targets achieved. Appropriate rewards will be discussed later in this chapter. A sample student target sheet is shown in Figure 2.2.

Some teachers use a rousing piece of music that lasts exactly two minutes: students must come into the room and get all of their equipment out on the desk before the music ends. They respond very well to this, especially as they become familiar with the piece of music! You may be able to suggest this to some of the teachers you work with.

**Time management in the home**

Time management skills take a long time to develop and we learn from our own experiences about how long we need to finish different tasks. In addition, students with different learning styles (see chapter 1) will wish to manage their time in different ways. This particularly affects how they manage their homework and extended course work at GCSE. You will know of students who prefer to complete homework on the day it is set, and other students who prefer to leave homework and complete it the night before it is due in. Neither style is right nor wrong if managed effectively, although they may not match your preferred style and so ‘feel’ wrong to you. So how can you help support time management skills with homework? Firstly, knowing the amount a student can write independently, as discussed above is crucial. This lets you know their speed of working, which is useful in helping support the student, parents, teachers and SENCOs set homework targets. Secondly, using the school homework organiser is crucial to homework time management. In my opinion it is essential to transfer the day the homework is due in on, forward to that day in the homework organiser as well as the day it is written on. Lots of homework organisers have a ‘due in’ column. However, this does not help the ‘just in time’ student visualise the amount of homework due in on one day if it is spread about several ‘due in’ columns. By transferring the homework to the due in date students can begin to see where lots of homework is piling up. This will enable them to start to prioritise their homework, rather than to start with the one they like or are good at. Otherwise the ‘just in time’ strategy develops into ‘not enough time’.
Target to be reached: **To write without support for 10 minutes**

Number of small steps planned: 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Small step 1</th>
<th>What am I going to do to reach step one?</th>
<th>Date to reach target by</th>
<th>Target achieved</th>
<th>Target maintained for 2 weeks</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Discover how much I write in 10 minutes when I concentrate</strong></td>
<td><strong>Choose a task where I know what to do. Write without help for 10 minutes with the teaching assistant by me count the words</strong></td>
<td><strong>By the end of this week in one subject I am helped in</strong></td>
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<th>Small step 2</th>
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<th>Date to reach target by</th>
<th>Target achieved</th>
<th>Target maintained for 2 weeks</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>To write for 3 minutes without help</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tell the TA I know what to do for the task, draw a pencil line and write on my own. Ask her to come back in 3 mins. Check I am still writing</strong></td>
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<th>Date to reach target by</th>
<th>Target achieved</th>
<th>Target maintained for 2 weeks</th>
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<td><strong>To write for 3 minutes without help in lessons</strong></td>
<td><strong>Take responsibility for knowing what I have to do. Draw my own pencil line and write for 3 minutes without chatting</strong></td>
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<th>Date to reach target by</th>
<th>Target achieved</th>
<th>Target maintained for 2 weeks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>To write on my own for 10 minutes in one lesson</strong></td>
<td><strong>Choose the subject I work well in. Write for 10 minutes without help. Check with the TA that I have written enough (refer to word count on step 1)</strong></td>
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<th>Date to reach target by</th>
<th>Target achieved</th>
<th>Target maintained for 2 weeks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>To write on my own in all lessons for 10 minutes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Take personal responsibility for this final step</strong></td>
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<th>Small step 6</th>
<th>What am I going to do to reach step one?</th>
<th>Date to reach target by</th>
<th>Target achieved</th>
<th>Target maintained for 2 weeks</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Target achieved. Choose next target</strong></td>
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*Figure 2.2 Sample student target sheet*
Prioritising homework

As students progress through Key Stage 3 to Key stage 4 they will be given more homework with extended handing in dates because it requires research, planning and redrafting skills. It is therefore essential they begin to make their own priorities. Teach them to prioritise work in the time available. The most important work must be completed first. Ensure students begin to recognise procrastination (putting things off) in themselves! We all procrastinate when faced with a task we find difficult. Being able to see that in your self is an asset. (What do you do when you procrastinate? Do you hoover, tidy the house, check your e-mails? )

Support them in planning extended pieces of work. Start with the date the work is due in and work backwards in the diary, putting in deadlines for the final write up, handing in the draft, research period etc. By breaking the work up like this and working backwards they will be able to see the latest date at which they can start each small part of their work. Many students start GCSE course work far too late, but only realise they have not got enough time once started. Then it is too late. If course work makes up a high proportion of the marks then the examiner expects to see that represented in time as well as effort.

Many of these priorities will be very personal and should be respected, for example the career route they may wish to follow, which means they give less time and effort to some homework areas and more to others, the study environment they have at home and access to ICT for revision, research and writing up essays. Some 'homework' may be best completed in school in their free time. Access to school computer suites is often prioritised for students nearing their exams. Your task is to support students in finding the best time to complete homework in the most suitable environment to suite their needs and to guide them if they are not planning ahead and prioritising well. A good example is of a dance student who “hated science” and said she wasn't “too bothered” about her science course work as she already had a place at dance school after GCSEs. As a student whose predicted grade was D/C once she had it explained that should she ever wish to teach as part of her career in school she would need to have Science GCSE Grade C or higher, this refocused her homework efforts with her science. This requires, flexibility, sensitivity, knowing the students you support and a discussion with subject teachers if you are unsure.

Footnote
Examine the time-table for the school you work in. Are there some instances when the student, and you, are required to physically be in two places at once i.e. maths 9.20-10.20 French 10.20-11.20. It is a fact of some school timetables. Vast amounts of students are expected to magically transport them selves from one subject area to another with no time to do this. Whilst teachers recognise this, and make small time allowances for it, students need to know when these occur on their timetable and move swiftly to the next lesson.
Organisational skills

Do you recognise the story that goes with the picture of this student?

Figure 2.3 disorganised student

They arrive at the lesson, late and flustered. They have brought the wrong exercise book (It is the correct colour-pink, but their history book, not their French book which is also pink.) They have lost their pen, although they had two when you were with them earlier in the day. The school bag is bulging with everything that the school curriculum could desire, but not it seems the correct textbook. The teacher asks them to hand in their parent permission slip for the school trip next week, and they look dejected because they were so excited about it, but forget to give the slip to their parents. This is such a familiar story for some students in secondary schools. If you find it frustrating, then imagine how such students themselves find it. It lowers self-esteem, and the poor start to the lesson is demotivating.

The problems could be eased; you could carry a box of equipment and stationery that you loan out. The teacher could always collect in exercise books and set homework on paper. Textbooks could not be allowed home. However, none of these develop intra-personal skills and so, although they are quick fixes for the exasperated, which help the lesson organisation, they do not develop the skills students need. Developing organisation skills is an essential intra personal intelligence as you progress to adult hood; the pencil case will be replaced by a bank-card, arriving late for work has more serious consequences than arriving late for a lesson and losing a document you have worked on all week with colleagues more frustrating. So as a teaching assistant how can you help them develop?
The homework organiser

This is an essential tool in school. Students must take responsibility for it themselves. By using the staged target approach discussed above, this means that they must be able to

- write in their own homework independently exactly as written by the teacher
  (Just because they can remember at the time what to do with small scribbled notes is no insurance they will later, particularly if they are a student who likes to leave homework until the day before the due in date.)
- take responsibility for checking they understand the task or asking the teaching assistant or teacher for an explanation before the end of the lesson
- use a method to suit themselves, e.g. highlighter pens, to cross off in the diary when a homework has been completed.
- Use a method to suit themselves to ensure they hand homework in on the correct day (as noted in time management)
- Find a suitable study buddy for additional 'emergency' support when stuck on homework. A study buddy is not necessarily a close friend. They are a person in your group that you get on with, with the same learning style as you so that they can explain things to you, by text, e-mail or a phone call, in the way that you will understand. They should have better organisational skills than you.

Remember each of the bullet points is one target. Students with very poor organisational skills may need to improve all of them, but this takes time. Make your first choice the one that will improve self-esteem the most. This will motivate them to move on to the next target.

Organising equipment

Today's secondary school student is likely to end up with major back problems. They no longer use school desks to keep possession in. Some schools have lockers, but the student with poor organisational skills will have lost the key to this. In addition as they know they have poor organisational skills they carry everything in their bag, not leaving anything at home in case it is needed. The result is a very heavy bag, which feeds the organisation problem as students lose equipment, notes and books in its depths. This is a priority intra personal skill that must be developed from Year 7. Bringing to school only what you need is essential. It may sound simple, but it shows planning skills, and time management skills and eventually self-confidence. So how might the end target of packing their own bag with the correct equipment and books look like in the small staged response for a student who refuses to move towards this skill? Below is a suggested order.
1. Select one day on the timetable where the lesson load is not complicated, i.e. no P.E. etc. Have that as the first target day for bringing only what is needed.

2. Decide if they are a morning or evening person, including when are they less rushed, and decide to pack the bag in the evening or the next morning.

3. Stage 1. The student packs the bag with their parent or carer. Provide a small laminated checklist if necessary. As shown in figure 4. Celebrate success, either with their parent or carer, when they get home and they had everything they needed for that day or with you the next day. (If something was forgotten add to the checklist if necessary and repeat until achieved.)

4. Stage 2. The student packs their bag on their own for the same day. The bag is then checked for them, by their parent or carer. Celebrate success

5. Maintain this and celebrate success

6. The student packs their own bag, and does not have it checked.

7. Celebrate success, maintain and celebrate success.

8. Choose another, more complicated day. Repeat.

Experience shows that once students realise they can do this they will ride small disasters where they occasionally forget something, realising that this is normal. The following suggestions will also help those students with extremely poor organisational skills, who may live in disorganised family environments. For example, one characteristic of dyslexia is organisational skills difficulties. But dyslexia is hereditary and so both parents may also find these skills a challenge too. Busy working parents with several children, all in different schools, may find it difficult to remember what each school’s system is. You have no control over this, but you can provide suggestions, targets and appropriate rewards.

- Suggest the use of two pencil cases filled with cheap stationery. One is left at home for homework, the other permanently stays in the school bag. Lost equipment is replaced in the school pencil case each weekend and returned to the bag immediately.
- Use a box at home. Anything school related found lying around the house is put into the box. This can help students who are hunting for an exercise book feel more at ease that it has probably been handed in for marking if it is not in their box.
- In school, whenever an exercise book is handed in get them to write in their homework organiser on that day. Wipe the note through with a highlighter pen once the exercise book is given back to the student.
- Don’t permanently lend out equipment. This de-skills a student. Lend it out occasionally but expect them to take responsibility for having equipment themselves.
All of these suggestions seem very simple. But a student who has their equipment, arrives to lesson on time, having completed their homework and handed it in on time is becoming a student with good basic intra personal study skills.

**Higher-level intra personal skills**

Many students will display the basic intra personal skills that have been discussed so far. Higher-level intra personal skills will enable them to achieve their academic potential. They include, motivation, persistence and the ability to act on constructive criticism and target set from it.

**Motivation**

People are motivated in different ways. You have to know what motivates students. For some, it is external rewards. This is because rewarding behaviour that you desire, rather than punishing and focusing on behaviour that you do not want will always be more successful in improving intra personal skills. Behaviour does not just mean being good, behaviour means what you do, how you as an individual react in different situations.

**External rewards**

External rewards could be merit marks, achievement certificates, free time or even vouchers to use at popular stores. Some educators argue that all of these external rewards are poor at developing the correct motivational factors as part of a person’s intra personal skills. However, for students who have only ever been punished, who have never achieved or never known success they are a useful first step. They are currently being used in some educational authorities to motivate students to improve their attendance and hence their skills. You would also agree that as adults many of our motivations are external rewards. However, if external rewards are to be used as motivators they must maintain their value. Do not give stickers, merit marks or whatever is used within your school unless you know that it represents some sort of improvement or effort from that student in moving towards a target. Students do not need to be treated the same in order to be treated fairly. The end product or behaviour will look different in each student as you give the reward, but the effort factor will be similar.

**Internal motivation**

Ultimately internal motivation is one of the most useful intra personal skills to develop. It usually involves *delayed gratification*. This means putting off the reward until later whilst focusing on the task. That may mean staying in to study whilst your friends go out every night. It may mean switching off the
television and making a start on your homework. Ultimately in higher education it often means going without money and getting in to debt to realise your dreams. Delayed gratification is known to be one of the best indicators of future academic success even in children as young as three years old. Would you have passed the chocolate experiment below?

Individual children were left alone in a room with one chocolate, but told that if they could wait until the adult came back into the room before eating the chocolate they could have two instead of one. The children fell into two groups: those who could wait for the two chocolates and those who could not wait and gobbled up the first chocolate as soon as the adult left the room. Both groups have been followed through until adulthood. The first group have been more academically successful when compared to similarly intelligent children.

Therefore try to develop delayed gratification in the students you support. Try to point out to them internal rewards for what they are doing, as well as giving external rewards. Giving praise is more valuable to many students than a sticker or a merit mark.

Persistence
Thomas Edison invented the light bulb after 143 unsuccessful attempts. He was a very persistent man. We were all persistent as babies when learning to walk. We all will have fallen several times, but got up and tried again until we could do it. So why is this lost in some students? Students need to recognise if they give up easily. They may need help to be persistent. This often means pointing out small successes when all they see is failure. It includes not focussing on negative comments but on the positive ones. It may involve encouraging them to have one more try than they would like to have. And it most certainly means rewarding and praising persistence as an excellent behaviour rather than always rewarding end results.

Supporting students using the ‘feedback sandwich’
You are in a privileged position. Students will often show you a piece of their work first before handing it to a teacher. They commonly ask you, “Is this okay?” So how can you answer honestly, so that you tell them what is good about their work and also help them by suggesting ways it could be improved thus moving them forward without damaging their self esteem? The answer is … the ‘feedback sandwich’.

**What is a ‘feedback sandwich?’**

When a student has worked very hard on a piece of work it is really difficult for them to accept some constructive comments that would improve it. In addition when you have seen how hard they have worked it is difficult to offer this support. But instant verbal feedback is really useful for students. You need to talk to them about their work carefully. Self-esteem is easily damaged and the wrong comment at the wrong time can be de-motivating. The feedback sandwich allows you to offer useful instant oral support. The constructive criticism, which will move the student on, is sandwiched between two positive comments and praise for the work. This means that the first and last thing that the student hears you talk about in relation to their work is positive. This keeps self-esteem in place and they are more likely to accept and act on the suggestions you offer in the middle of the sandwich to improve it. It may sound like this

| “You have looked really carefully at the essay title and answered it exactly the way you need to. Your introduction is very interesting. It makes me want to read on.” |
| “You could improve the conclusion by making it a separate paragraph that sums up what you have decided to agree with. At the moment I cannot see your final decision clearly.” |
| “Wow, does that really happen when they fox hunt? I didn’t know that. You have taught me something new today. You have really learnt a lot during this essay. You must have read lots about it before you started writing.” |

*Figure 2.4 The ‘Feedback Sandwich’*
Written feedback

Most written comments to students will also have comments of praise and constructive criticism. You may need to reorder them for the student into the shape of the feedback sandwich if they feel unhappy or dejected when they receive written feedback.

Marks and grades in homework, assessments and tests have two purposes. The first purpose is to let the teacher and the student know what level that they are performing at. The second purpose is far more important. It allows the teacher and the student to know within that level what they are good at and which areas to focus on next in order to improve. For example, it is not much use knowing you have achieved level 5 in the Key Stage 3 maths SAT unless you also know where your strengths and weaknesses are within the areas of shape and space, numeracy, algebra and data handling. Therefore comments and feedback on homework, coursework, essays and exams are important. If all of the comments are praise then the student knows what they did correctly for the grade. But they do not know the next step needed to move one grade higher. If comments are all negative then the student knows what they did wrong that prevented a higher grade, but they do not know which parts of their work were good and so will not know what aspects of their learning and skills to change and what to keep the same. Teachers are skilled in giving feedback and it usually comes in the form of the ‘feedback sandwich’. There will be some praise, showing what was good and what has been achieved, followed by some constructive criticism of what the focus needs to be, followed by a final comment of praise.

Higher order intra personal skills involve studying the feedback carefully. Many of them just look at the grade and put the work away. Both praise and constructive criticism need to be analysed. The student then needs to accept the support and together with the teacher and the teaching assistant plan the target for the next step. In many instances this target will be transferable to several areas of the curriculum. Look at the following written feedback sandwiches for the same student. How would you explain to this student what they were good at and what their next step needs to be?

"You have clearly learned a lot about volcanoes. You have described the effects they have on people well. The question also asked you to look at the benefits of living near a volcano in detail. Your case study information was detailed enough which suggested you revised well."

"I wonder why you have written this as a letter? The question asked you to explain in detail the benefits of a chosen career." Your essay flows well and you have some good ideas but you have lost marks by lack of detail and using the style of a letter."
In both cases the student clearly has the ability to write well. In both instances they have demonstrated that they have the correct subject knowledge. But in both comments you can see that they have mis-read or misinterpreted the question and that their answers lack detail.

This student probably revised well. They are probably good at retaining information. Currently they need to focus on developing answers in more detail. (See chapter 4) They also need to learn how to read questions in exams (see chapter 6.) If this was a year 10 student what would you focus on first as a target and why? What else might you also want to know before deciding?

This chapter has looked at some of the social and psychological factors that affect studying. As a teaching assistant many of these are outside your control. But understanding their effect on study and how you can intervene to provide effective support is important. Sometimes good support means taking a step back and allowing a student to accept responsibility for them self and their learning.

END OF CHAPTER CHECKLIST (tick when achieved)

- I understand that targets need small steps planning.
- I have planned and supported a student in achieving a target using small steps.
- I am aware of the difference between intra personal and interpersonal skills
- I am aware that different students are motivated by either external or internal rewards
- I understand the school's reward system.
- I know which students require external rewards and use them fairly
- I understand delayed gratification.
- I have used the feedback sandwich when a student asks me for advice about their work
- I have supported a student in reviewing a teachers' written feedback using the feedback sandwich.
### Appendix 2.1

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<tr>
<th>Small step</th>
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