



STUDYING FOR SUCCESS:

The Habits and Skills That Every Student
Should Know and Every Educator
Should Promote



Introduction

We have been there—waiting anxiously for an exam, test, or quiz to start and wondering if we are prepared. Study skills are so important, but few people recall being taught these essential skills. Most of us learn these skills through a period of trial and error that, for some, can last all the way through college. However, we should be preparing our students with these skills early. Productive and effective study skills become more and more critical for students every year as they prepare for college and career success. This guide is designed to help educators like you take the guesswork out of how to support student success through the introduction of positive study skills and habits. Featuring helpful tips, tricks, and advice from brilliant learning scientists, educators, and curriculum developers, the valuable lessons and information in this handy guide can be applied in the classroom and practiced remotely from home.

Thank you for nurturing the minds of the next generation and—to your students—good luck studying!

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Why Study Skills Matter

Adapted from a blog by Dr. Doug Fisher—Professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University

Is part of being a student the fact that you study? It seems reasonable to suggest that studying would be part of the definition of what makes a student. But as far as I can tell, most students never learn how to study and teaching students to study doesn't seem to be a priority within the education system—but it should be. Perhaps it's because many people associate studying as merely a means to an end: usually passing a test. Or maybe people think that students already know how to study. Perhaps we don't think studying is something that is universally effective, after all, many of us have had really bad experiences with studying, where we crammed for a test and then forgot everything. I would like to suggest that it's time to reinvigorate study skills. In part, I suggest this because they work, but more importantly, I suggest this because teaching students how to study brings them closer to taking ownership of their learning.

Study Skills Help Students Become Better Learners

Most of us remember “studying” as creating flash cards to review or re-reading our notes. However, there is a lot more to studying than that. In fact, there are three categories of essential study skills, and the previously mentioned techniques only fall within the first, and most basic, category. The three categories are:



Cognitive skills. This category includes a number of effective approaches to studying, including taking and reviewing notes, summarizing information, reviewing vocabulary terms, and annotating a text.

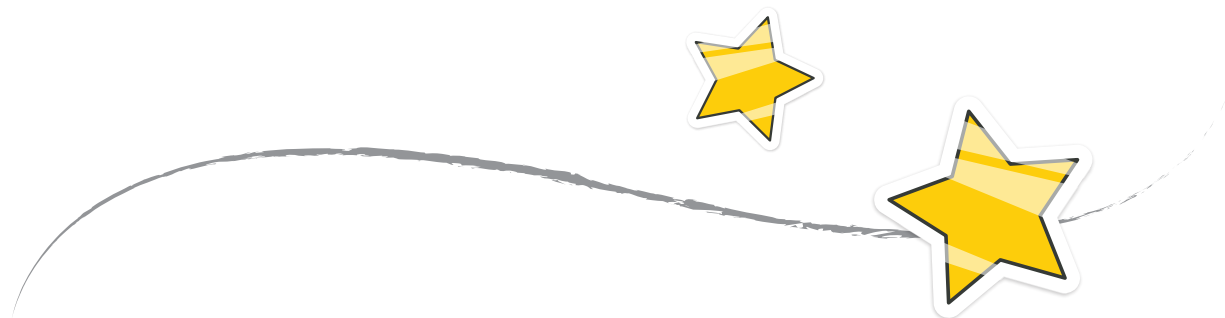


Metacognitive skills. In addition to cognitive skills, students should be taught to plan and monitor their studying, set goals, engage in self-questioning, and recognize when they should use specific cognitive skills.

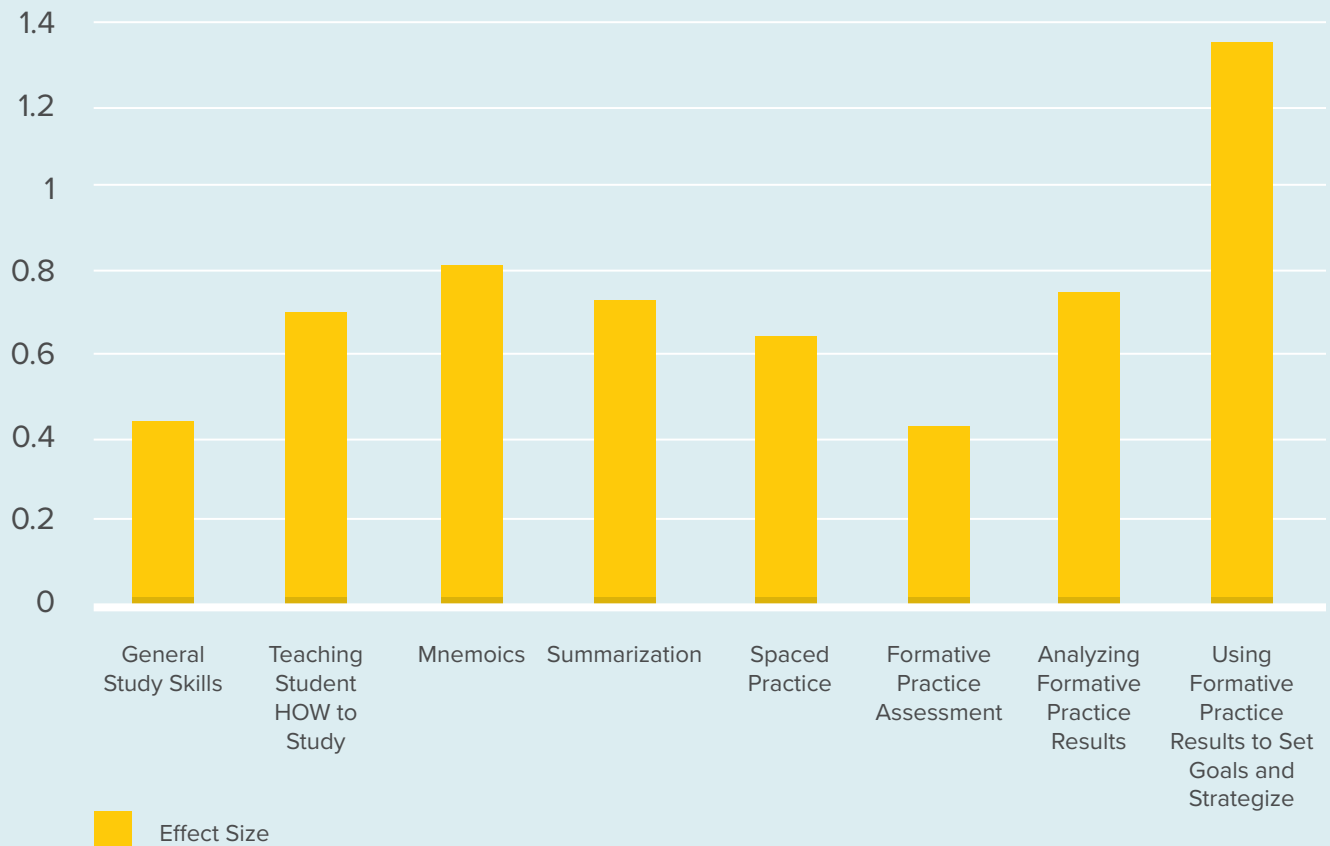


Affective skills. Beyond metacognitive skills, students need to develop motivation, agency, and self-concept if they are to integrate study skills as a habit.

Ideally, students should be taught a number of different cognitive study skills. As part of their learning, they should be provided opportunities to plan and monitor their studying and reflect on the impact of their studies. Over time, and with practice, these metacognitive skills will develop. When students can identify useful tools for studying and when to use those tools, their ownership of learning is enhanced. When students understand that their studying has a positive return on investment, they start to define themselves as students who are skilled at studying. Their motivation increases and their agency, or belief that their efforts will be effective, increases.



Effect Size of Study Skills and Strategies



Cramming Doesn't Improve Learning

Studying is not a one-and-done phenomenon—spaced practice is an essential element of long-term retention. That's why the cramming you did before a big test did not result in improved learning (even if you were able to recall some items on the assessment and get a little better grade). Instead, students need to be provided opportunities to study in a distributed, spaced way. This habit is formed over time as students assume increased responsibility for their own learning. They see themselves as one of their teachers and use the adults in their lives as a resource for additional learning.

Using Formative Assessment as a Study Blueprint








Formative practice testing is an interesting way to teach students to study and can be applied in variety of ways. Students are provided a practice version of an assessment, which could be an essay, constructed response, multiple choice, or whatever in advance of the “real” assessment. Practice formative testing on its own is an effective way to improve summative scores, and the results tend to hold for a year after instruction and the practice tests.

However, when students analyze their own results and identify which items they got wrong and which they got right, they tend to perform even better. We can take this a step further by giving students more ownership of their learning. They can analyze their assessment results and attribute a level of difficulty to their right and wrong answers.

When students record their responses in a student analysis chart (like the one provided on the following page) and identify what areas to study and where additional learning is needed, the increase in effectiveness is astonishing. In fact, this technique is more than twice as effective as formative practice testing alone, and is simple enough for students of any age to use with a little guidance.



How Can I Help My Child Study?

-  Make sure your child is learning a variety of cognitive study skills to use as needed.
-  Discuss with your child what study skills they think they should be using in different scenarios.
-  Use spaced practice by frequently studying for short periods of time.
-  Create review games and activities.
-  Focus on growth mindset and encourage them to take ownership of their learning.
-  Analyze prior work together and see if they can identify their learning gaps.
-  Help them set realistic goals and create strategies on how they can achieve them

Self-Review Study Strategy Sheet

Hard things I got right:

Easy things I got right:

Hard things I got wrong:

Easy things I got wrong:

What did I
do well?

What do I need
to study?

What do I need my
teacher to teach me?



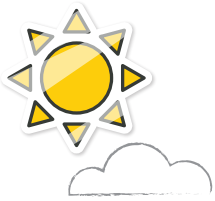
Five Ways to Help Create a Productive Study Environment for Your Students

This guide can help your student boost their productivity, concentration, and test scores by implementing simple solutions for optimizing their study space. Here are some quick tips that your learner can use to create a productive study environment at home.



1. Good Room Lighting

Poor room lighting dulls our ability to concentrate fully on a task and makes it difficult for us to give a task our full attention. According to the University of Georgia, poor lighting can cause the brain to gather less information when studying. One way to improve lighting is to check the lumens (the measurement of brightness) of the light bulbs being used in your student's study space. LED bulbs provide more light while using fewer watts of electricity. Using a side lamp in addition to the primary light source in the room is another great and cost-effective way to improve the amount and quality of light in your learner's study environment. Some side lamps even have two lights, which is a double bonus!



2. Use Natural Light When Possible

Natural light does wonders for the brain and body, so if your students enjoy sitting next to a window with some sun coming through, study time is the perfect time to do so. Natural light not only increases their ability to concentrate on a task, it can also help them feel refreshed and energized even afterwards. That's because natural light allows our bodies to take in melatonin, which helps regulate our internal clocks and allows us to sleep better at night. When your students are well-rested, they perform better in school and are able to concentrate more when studying.



3. A Comfortable Chair

Nothing is worse than sitting in an uncomfortable chair for hours. It is hard for students to concentrate when they're experiencing discomfort. If students are working remotely, an office chair or desk chair with a more flexible backing is the ideal seating option, if one is available. Comfortable orthopedic seating is an excellent investment for any study space—if that option is available. When a new chair just isn't an option, try using a chair cushion, which will lessen the amount of pressure that is placed on the lower back. This will allow students to study for longer periods of time. When engaged in simple activities, like reading, consider using alternative seating, such as sitting on a beanbag or lying on the floor with a few pillows.



4. Eliminate and/or Reduce Distractions

To eliminate distractions, students should go to a room that does not have a television. It is even better if you can go to a room that isn't even near a television. If this is something that they can't avoid, they should move as far away from the TV as possible, sit with their back facing the TV, and put in earplugs. If having the TV on is vital for some reason, closed captioning is a great compromise because it allows the viewer to continue to watch their program on mute or at a lower volume, so students can focus on studying.

Personal electronics, such as smartphones or tablets, are also common distractions. The bright screens, the notification, the alerts, and temptation caused by the fear of missing out can prevent someone from remaining focused on the task at hand. A great way to avoid these distractions is to put devices on “Do Not Disturb” mode, which will temporarily turn off any sounds, texts, and calls for a short time—just remember to turn that feature off once study time is over. Apps are a great way to encourage better study habits. “Stay Focused” can block websites at certain times to help students finish their work. The app “Forest: Stay Focused, Be Present” allows them to “grow” trees by focusing on the task at hand and not distractions, but if they close the application or go to a site on the blacklist their tree will wither and die.

Sometimes other people are a distraction, which can be tricky, especially for students. It’s best to establish clear boundaries pertaining to study time and understand that compromises might be necessary.

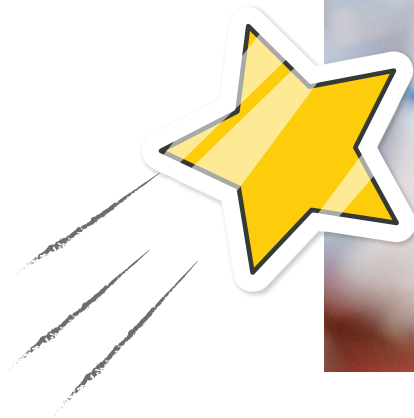


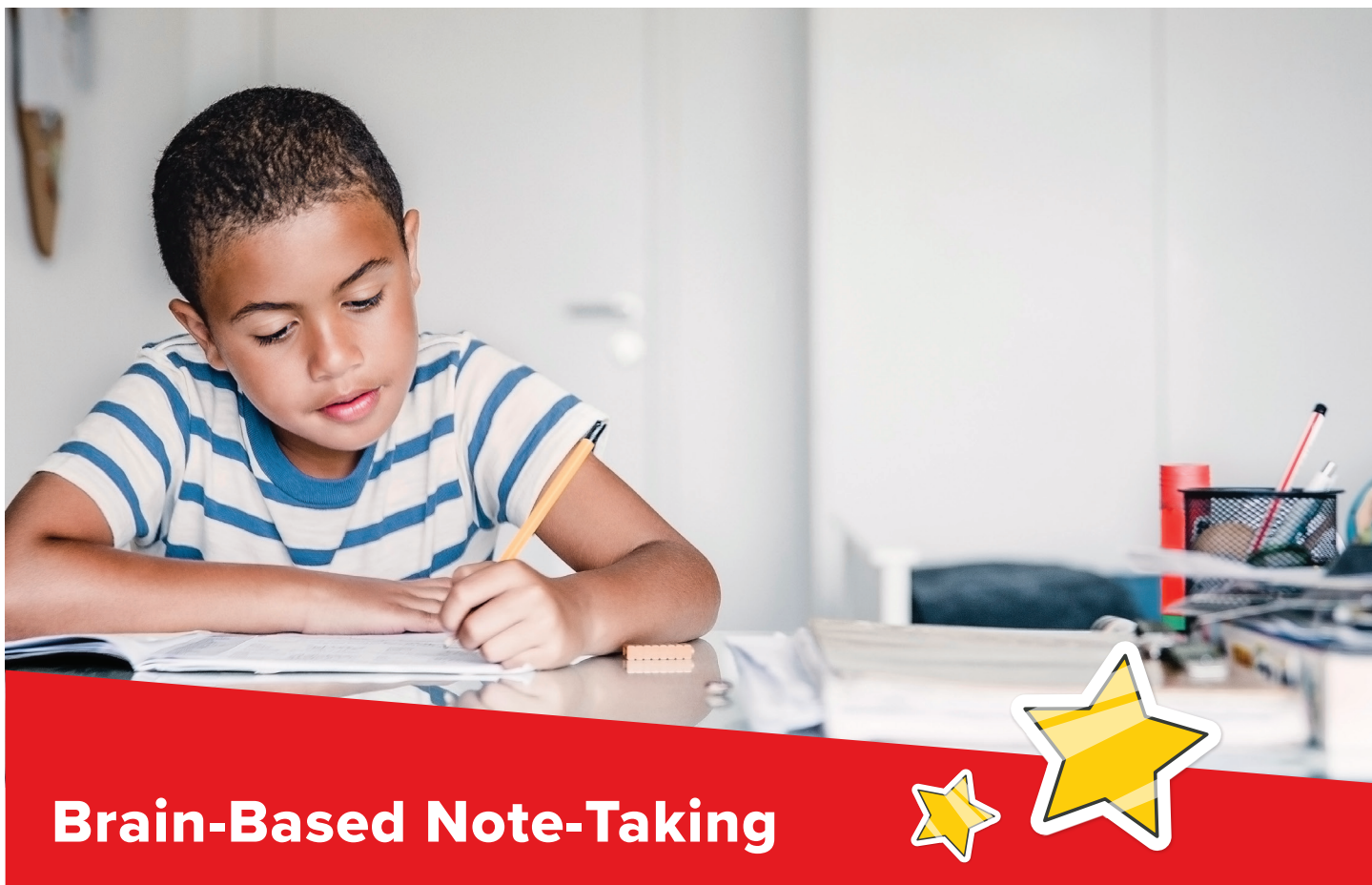
5. Clean the Study Area

Having a messy, disorganized space makes it more difficult to focus because it can create anxiety and even cause frustration, discomfort, or stress. When students are stressed out, it is harder for them to focus on the task. This will affect working memory and the ability to retain information. Before students start a study session, have them take a look around the room. If there are things out of place or out of order, students should put them away before beginning. Taking five to ten minutes to put things away, neatly stack papers, and remove any dirt or debris from their desk or table will help eliminate distractions and prevent potential frustrations. If their room is messy, encourage them to set aside some time to clean it. A tidy environment will put their mind at ease and make it easier for them to concentrate.

Conclusion

Implementing these five steps can create a productive study environment that establishes a foundation for academic success and improves concentration. All of these steps can be implemented in the classroom or at home, but depending on each student's unique situation, some steps may be easier to implement than others. It is essential to keep working at this and keep trying new solutions, especially when circumstances and situations are fluid. Some spaces have limited natural light, and some have plenty of it, so adjust lighting accordingly each day, if possible. If working remotely, encourage your students to test the different chairs in their homes to see which work best for long or short periods of studying. Think about what distractions might occur in their study environment, which ones can be eliminated, and which ones can only be reduced. Have students take 10 to 15 minutes to tidy up their space every day, so it will only take them a few minutes to get organized before they start to study. No study environment is perfect, but with these five steps, you can help your students be more productive as they prepare to ace that next big test.





Brain-Based Note-Taking



Adapted from a blog by Dr. Jeff Borden—Executive Director of the Institute of Inter-Connected Education

Who taught you to take notes? The question is more than rhetorical. Think about it for a moment. Who gave you note-taking techniques, tips, tricks, or otherwise modeled powerful ways to take notes so that they were helpful to the learning process?

I have asked this question of 2000–3000 people during keynote addresses over time, and I have only ever had a single person give any answer. (When teased out, that answer turned out to be filled with bad ideas, by the way.) The point is, whether you were “taught” how to take notes at some point or not, there is an expectation that students should take notes. Teachers will often nudge students with statements like, “you might want to write this down,” or, “if I were you, I’d make a note of that as it may show up on your test,” etc.

But beyond instruction around notes, we have a much bigger problem to contend with that most probably don’t even realize. The note-taking schemas and models that we see in 99 percent of student notebooks are wrong. (As are the ways we use those notes to study.) Houston, we have a problem.

Traditional Note-Taking Methods Aren't Effective

Brown et al., in “Make It Stick (2014),” explore several studies and experiments which illustrate some fundamental flaws with note-taking techniques. Writing down copious notes, filled with verbatim sentences, does not lead to remembering and highlighting notes (just like highlighting textbook entries) during or after the fact does not lead to learning. Short-hand models do not work. Long-hand models do not work. Volume does not lead to remembering. Cross-indexing between a textbook and hand-written notes does not lead to learning. Notes, as we see them employed by students, are mostly ineffective.

Our Senses Provide a Secret Key to Success

Simultaneously, other neuroscientists have found significantly better ways to encourage both memory and connections between elements of information, even going so far as to suggest how we might architect creativity in others. The use of ambient noise (shoot for ~76 decibels of “white” noise) can increase holistic brain activity and is often seen through brain imaging as the state of a creative brain. (This is posited as the reason authors enjoy writing in a crowded café.)

So, our takeaway is simple. Want to find the classrooms on campus where students are likely at their most creative? Just listen.

Similarly, we know that we can increase memory and connectedness by tapping into the smell receptors and the brain. How? Ensure that a specific scent is present during information gathering by the learner (during a lecture, class discussion, etc.). Then, find a way to have that same scent present that night when the learner sleeps. The learner will retain more of the material, perhaps as much as 11 percent more. Include that scent during the assessment, and scores go up yet again.

So, as we tap into our senses to help (or hinder) memory, connections between ideas, and ultimately learning, it may be no shock that one of the most powerful is sight. To that end, images are a crucial enabler for learning. (Note, this has nothing whatsoever to do with “learning styles” or “visual learner types.”) The human brain simply desires images over text, period.

Dr. John Medina describes a consistently tried and replicated study linked to the effectiveness of images in the book *Brain Rules* (2008). Study participants were given either text or images to remember. After three days, text-based groups could remember approximately ten percent of the words. Image-based groups (who were shown up to 2,500 pictures at one sitting) could remember approximately 90 percent of the images. After 90 days, text-based groups could remember a mere three percent, while image-based groups still remembered two-thirds of the images. The point? The human brain desires images over text. So, it is in the best interest of the instructor and learner to use images whenever possible.

The Neuroscience Behind Better Note-Taking

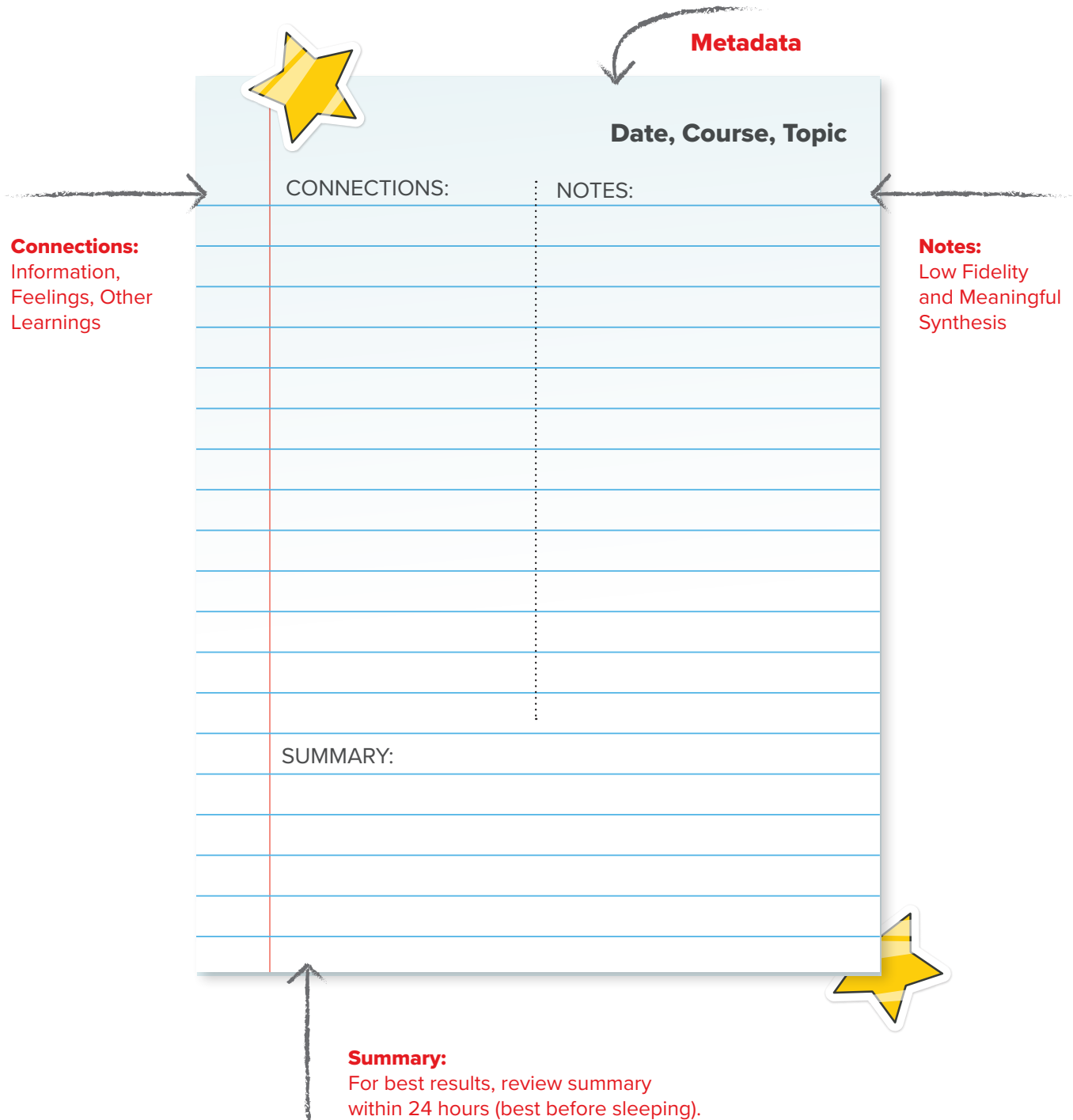
With this in mind, let us come back to note-taking. Dr. Stephen Carroll (Ph.D.) provides a strong framework for note-taking that brings together various sensory, memory-inducing schemas for any learner. Like Carnegie notes and other methods, but with a twist, the idea is to help a learner remember, connect, and learn. However, the idea is more straightforward than most note-taking recommendations and features a simple five steps process:

1. Make sure the notes are easy to find with some reliable indexing (like adding titles, dates, and other meta-data). This step promotes the use of note-taking digitally over paper-based notebooks due to the ease of modern search.
2. On the left side of the page (for right-handed people), write the “connections” made by the learner in as few words as possible. Keywords and phrases that will jog the learner’s memory should not be too detailed nor too developed. These should aim to synthesize, reword, and provide meaningful analysis of the information being presented.
3. The “magic” then happens on the right side of the page. Learners should draw, doodle, or scribble images that cement the connections from the left side. Can’t draw? Even better. Your sketches will require more brain effort (aka, more nodes of the brain processing the information) to make sense.
4. The bottom of the page should then become a summary section. Write the “so-what” or “a-ha” statements—big, over-arching, umbrella concepts. Ideally, these synthesize the framework supported by the “mechanics”/“algorithms”/keywords and drawings above.
5. Finally, for optimal retention, the learner should study the summary section at the bottom before sleeping that evening. Help the encoding process in the brain out by revisiting the information that your brain will try and store as you sleep. This section is also ideal for quick-study as time goes on. (Both the Spacing Effect and the Forgetting Curve are relevant here.)



The following could be considered a template for this model:

Note-Taking Template



The diagram illustrates a note-taking template with various sections and annotations. A yellow star is positioned at the top left of the template. An arrow labeled "Metadata" points to the "Date, Course, Topic" section at the top right. The template is divided into two main columns: "CONNECTIONS:" on the left and "NOTES:" on the right. A red vertical line separates these two columns. The "CONNECTIONS:" column contains a list of horizontal lines for notes. The "NOTES:" column contains a list of horizontal lines for notes. A red arrow points from the "Connections:" label to the "CONNECTIONS:" column. Another red arrow points from the "Notes:" label to the "NOTES:" column. At the bottom of the template, a "SUMMARY:" section is located. A red arrow points from the "Summary:" label to this section. A yellow star is also located at the bottom right of the template. A red arrow points from the "Summary:" label to the "SUMMARY:" section.

Metadata

Date, Course, Topic

CONNECTIONS:

NOTES:

Connections:
Information,
Feelings, Other
Learnings

Notes:
Low Fidelity
and Meaningful
Synthesis

SUMMARY:

Summary:
For best results, review summary
within 24 hours (best before sleeping).



Conclusion

I hope you find this helpful for yourselves. Still, the point here is to encourage you to proactively and intentionally help your learners find better ways to take notes, remember, and ultimately learn. There are proven strategies that do not merely rely on doing what others have blindly tried or emulated, but that will produce better memory, better connections to information, and better learning.



How to Stay Positive After Failure

Adapted from a blog by Kerrie La Rosa—Social Worker and Parent Coach

People often mistake failure for finality and internalize failure as evidence of their faults and weaknesses. But what if instead, we could turn failure into an asset—an opportunity for growth? As Thomas H. Palmer wrote, “Tis a lesson you should heed: Try, try, try again. If at first, you don’t succeed, Try, try, try again.” When students hit a roadblock, they shouldn’t give up. Instead, we should encourage them to try again, find another way, and follow these steps to achieve their goals.

1. Believe in Themselves.

After experiencing a setback, it is reasonable to feel discouraged and to lose confidence. However, getting stuck in those feelings can make overcoming failure impossible. The belief that we’re capable of overcoming obstacles with effort and determination is critical to success.

Stanford University psychologist and author, Carol Dweck, Ph.D., coined this phenomenon known as growth mindset: the belief in his or her own ability to learn and develop skills regardless of natural ability, through determination and hard work.

Therefore, when facing setbacks, we need to help students shift their mindset to a growth mindset. This simple maneuver can fuel their confidence and help them maintain positivity through their struggles. When students practice a fixed mindset, they shut themselves off from opportunities and see roadblocks as game stoppers rather than obstacles that can be overcome. A simple change of semantics from “I will never pass this test” to “I have not passed this test yet” can boost their confidence and ability to keep moving forward.

Students need to imagine themselves overcoming challenges. The fear of failure can dramatically impact confidence and increase test anxiety. However, students can better manage their test anxiety and practice the skills needed to overcome obstacles if they shift their mindset to focus on what they can accomplish rather than fixating on prior setbacks.



2. Embrace Their Mistakes (or Reframe Them as Opportunities to Learn)

Nobody likes making mistakes, but they are necessary. Mistakes provide us with opportunities to grow and learn. Struggling is uncomfortable, but it is in the discomfort and the struggle that we learn and grow. When students feel challenged, it's crucial for them to embrace a growth mindset instead of letting feelings of frustration or discouragement take over their thoughts. Struggling is part of the learning process and is always the precursor to a major breakthrough.

Thomas Edison created more than 1,000 (some say over 5,000) lightbulbs before creating the version that made him famous and changed the world. He did not believe those thousands of attempts were failures, but opportunities to learn and grow. Long before Carol Dweck began her research on growth mindset, Edison was practicing it. He said, “I have not failed 1,000 times. I have successfully discovered 1,000 ways to NOT make a light bulb.” Because of his growth mindset, Edison was able to use the information from his mistakes to discover the solution to the problem he was trying to solve. He continued undeterred because he saw the mistakes not as failures but as opportunities to get closer to achieving his goal.

When students make a mistake, don't let them get stuck in the frustration, but don't gloss over it either. Pay attention to what isn't working and help them use that to learn how to make adjustments and improvements.

3. Process over Product

With an emphasis on measurable outcomes, end results, grades, and test scores, we forget that the purpose of education is to learn. Learning is messy and frustrating and challenging. When we focus too much on the product, we forget to pay attention to the process.

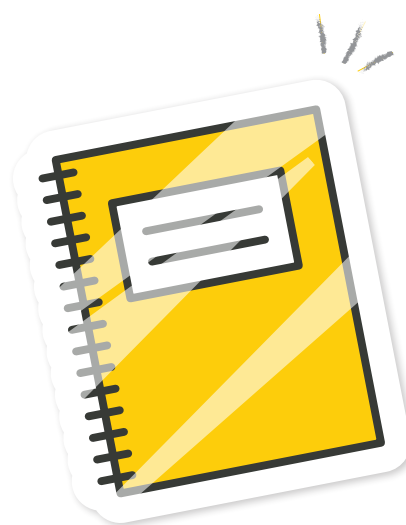
When children learn to walk, they happily stumble and fall before getting back up and trying again. They instinctively know what they need to do, and they are focused on learning the skills necessary to walk rather than achieving the task of walking. Adults are the ones that rush the process and are eager for the child to achieve the goal, often intervening to the point that it becomes detrimental to development.

When we rush the process, we impede proper skill development. When students learn at their own pace and focus on the process, they learn how to catch themselves when they are falling, and they learn how to get back up after stumbling. But if we intervene or rush the process, we prevent them from learning crucial skills that apply to all learning processes.

4. Effort over Outcome

Often failure is not due to a lack of effort (although it can be), but due to a myriad of factors. Plenty of people have committed to a rigorous study schedule, put in all the hard work, tried their very best, and still did not get the outcome they desired (and felt they deserved). Unfortunately, we are never guaranteed the outcome we want. We can spend hours writing a paper and not receive the grade we hoped to achieve. We can train for a race and come in last. We can plan a perfect vacation and have to cancel because of a pandemic.

Students cannot control outcomes. The only thing that is in their control is how much effort they put into something. If they don't put forth the effort, they likely won't get the results we want. Once again, it is about letting go of what they cannot control (the outcome) and focusing on what they can control (the effort).



5. Create Realistic Goals That Focus on Progress—Not Perfection

Once your students accept that they cannot control the outcome, they free themselves to focus on what they can control. Help your students create an actionable plan that allows them to work towards their goals. Ensure that they know that whatever the outcome, they should remain focused on what they are learning in the process. Sometimes a grade can be subjective and depend on myriad factors outside of their control: the choice of questions on the test, the subjectivity of the person grading, or

losing sleep because sirens woke them in the middle of the night. Support your students as they focus on their efforts by helping them create SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely) goals that focus on studying rather than achieving the end result (passing the test). For example, if their goal is to pass their final exam, they should focus on identifying what knowledge they need to have in order to do that.



Help Your Students Create SMART Study Goals

Helping your students create SMART goals starts with making sure they understand the different attributes of one. Here are some questions that you can ask your students that support all five attributes of a robust SMART goal while promoting effective study habits.



Create a very specific study goal:

What do you need to know?



Make the goal measurable so that you know when it has been achieved:

Outside of the test, how will you measure progress or prove that you achieved your goal?



Make the goal achievable: Can you carve out time and gather the study materials and support needed to achieve this goal?



Make the goal realistic: What you can realistically achieve during your study sessions? How will you build in time to overcome obstacles that may arise?



Make the goal timely: Have you given yourself a deadline for each study task to keep yourself on track to achieve the goal?



The Science of Review— Just Think About It



Adapted from a blog by Michael Shirey—Mathematics
Product Manager at McGraw Hill

One of the most powerful practice methodologies is much simpler than you realize. That method is “thinking about it.” To describe it that way is probably a bit of an oversimplification, but it is at the center of nearly every type of practice we engage in. Regardless of the subject, sport, or job, we improve what we do by actively thinking about the information we need to be able to retrieve efficiently.

If you’ve ever watched a gymnast preparing for a competition, you’ll often see them standing with their eyes closed while moving their hands through the air as they mentally practice their routines. They are not physically practicing. They are mentally going through every step, turn, and jump. They are retrieving the information needed for their routine. This process is called retrieval practice.

Retrieval Practice Is Never One and Done

If this doesn't sound groundbreaking or new, that's because it's not. This is why flashcards exist as a study tool. But we should make sure we use them in the most effective manner. Students often think that creating the flashcards is enough to cement the information into their minds. Once the flashcards have been created, they are often cast aside. However, they are meant to be used over and over again. Between the time that the flashcards were created, and the time that information needs to be retrieved for a quiz, much of that information gets lost.

Spaced Practice Is Key

It is the time between the creation of the flashcards and the quiz that is most crucial. Those flashcards need to be reviewed multiple times in between. And not just a review of the front and the back, but a focused and deliberate effort of reviewing one side, and then mentally retrieving "the answer" without looking at it first. To really solidify that information into the brain, you should also shuffle the card to ensure that you are not accidentally remembering based on the pattern.

Based on the Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve model, we forget nearly half of all new information we are exposed to within 20 minutes of being exposed to it. After just a day, it's much more. If we review that information the following day, we follow a similar curve of forgetting.

But at the end of that second day, we retain just a bit more than the previous day, and with each consecutive day of retrieving that information, our collection of memory increases. Multiple studies tell us that retrieving that information on a continual basis will increase our ability to remember it.

Retrieval Practice Can Be Easy and Maybe Even Fun

When my children were young, I would take advantage of short drives to help them retrieve and retain information. We didn't even need the flashcards. Knowing what they were working on in school was enough to prompt them with questions. While driving my son to his friend's house, I would quiz him on multiplication facts. To give one straightforward example, I would say, "Hey Chris! What's 9×6 ?" If he knew it, I'd give him five more. If he didn't know it, I would help him figure it out, and then I'd give him five more. Over the next few days, I would re-ask him the ones he didn't know. And then again. And then again at least one more time until he remembered them with ease—often with a sigh of annoyance.

Practice does not have to be lengthy, intense sessions of painful repetition. If it's not retrieval for a test, it's better when it's low-stakes and casual. It can be done alone, with a friend, or on a road trip with the family. It can be done while standing in line, sitting on a bus or a subway, or walking to the store. We know that we forget over time. Sometimes all our brain needs is a nudge to remember.



Active Listening

Adapted from a blog by Dr. Jeff Borden—Executive Director of the Institute of Inter-Connected Education

I would like you to consider the social contract regarding listening. Forget the nuances of “active” listening for a moment, and let’s focus on listening in general. I worked my way through grad school as a stand-up comic. I would not even claim to be 1/100th as good as Seinfeld, Hart, or Chapelle, but after two years of grinding away, performing most Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights, I had twelve minutes that I thought were pretty good. I could keep people laughing repeatedly during that set, especially by the end of my run.

But rather than focusing on what it took to prepare or polish such an engagement, I want to focus on the audience here. I want to talk about the social contract we both adhered to during my twelve minutes on stage. The moment I was introduced, did they listen? Yes. They had paid money to be entertained, and I was to provide that. So, out of the gate, they gave me their focus pretty readily. But after my first few jokes, bits, or stories, the question is whether they continued to listen? Without even being there, I think you all know the answer.

The answer is: it depends.

Why does it depend? The answer, again, is likely self-evident. Those that kept on listening found that I met their expectations, and there I was funny enough to stick with me. They got a small hit of dopamine every time I surprised them, moved them, or even delighted them. It was compelling to stay tuned in for some more. But, for others, they did not continue listening. To some, I likely was not even humorous, let alone funny. Some may have found my stuff immature or thought I was a hack, as I made (literal) jokes about bathroom experiences or classroom scenarios. (I was still planning to be an educator after all.) The point is that experience taught me a lot about listening, and scenarios like it should teach you something too.

“WHY” Matters

I know we like to assume that students, especially K–12 students, will listen if we simply direct them to do so. While many parents and non-educators still put some stock in the concept of “learning styles” despite all of the research debunking those models, most educators now know those frameworks to be faulty at best. For almost as long as people have touted the notion of visual or auditory learners, research has proven such constructs to be unfounded. Our brains are far too complex, and learning is far too variable rich to support such linear models. More than ten years ago, the APA reported that “no less than 71 different models of learning styles have been proposed over the years... But psychological research has not found that people learn differently, at least not in the ways learning-styles proponents claim.” However, we have research that shows us the power of “why” for all humans, not merely for adults. Do adults learn better when they know why they need to learn something? Of course. Do children also learn better when they need to know why something is essential? Also, yes.

This brings me back to the example of my comedic audience. The “why” was understood by them and by me. So, let’s explore how “active” listening entered those shows, going beyond simple listening

What Is Active Listening?

Honestly, active listening is relatively simple to understand. Active listening is when the listener (decoder) is engaged with the presenter (encoder) in a way that is meaningful to the listener (decoder). And active listening is something we can measure outwardly. An active listener displays nonverbal communication behaviors. From leaning in and nodding to reactionary facial expressions, it is not hard to see if a learner is actively listening to (i.e., focusing on, paying attention to, engaging with, etc.) the teacher. However, it goes deeper than that.



Is the listener trying to deconstruct the information? Is the listener trying to apply the new information to past information? Are they attempting to “pick a winner” when new information juxtaposes itself against past assumptions and sometimes augments or reinforces previously learned information? That is harder to see outwardly, although this can sometimes be seen via the notes people take and the questions asked during the encounter.

Yes, there are techniques, tips, and even some tricks to encourage people to be better active listeners. Sitting in close proximity to the information giver is one way to increase “audience arousal” in a listener. Removing visual distractions can help a person actively listen. Note-taking, especially when done well, can help a person transition from passive to active listening.

But let us go back to that social contract again. Just like my stand-up audience, listening was not only their job; it was also mine to support. It was on me to meet their needs, provide appropriate triggers, and facilitate the information they desired to consume.

So, the first question should not be whether my students are actively listening. It is more important to know whether or not I activated listening. Did I fulfill my part of the teaching and learning contract?

Active Listening in The Classroom

Going back to the notion that kids will do what they are told, do I have some students who will engage in (relatively) more active listening than others most of the time? Yes, I think we all have those students. Do I have students who are listening because they are afraid of their parent’s wrath? Probably. Do some listen to me because they are people pleasers? Likely. Do some actively listen because they love that specific subject or simply enjoy learning? Also, likely.

But does that represent that majority of students? We all know it does not. Most students I have ever had (and those in every study I have ever read) would choose just about anything over sitting in class. If given a choice, they would likely choose to play, watch tv, sleep, eat, or do nothing rather than learn. This should not be seen as a bad thing as much as it is a human thing. Our brains are wired to do whatever is easiest, and critical thinking and/or problem-solving are not typically the easiest things to do.

Instead, most of our students need to be motivated to listen (let alone do so actively). And that is my job. Researchers can also outwardly identify active listening catalysts by instructors. Audience arousal can be encouraged when the teacher differentiates vocalics, when visual cues reinforce, represent, and make a learner ask how the image jives with the instruction, or when the instructor creates conditions for listeners that are compelling—not too anxiety-producing with just enough skill required.

I can generate a reason to listen when I engage in Generative learning. By asking students to accomplish something that they do not yet know how to accomplish gives them a reason to learn. Why couldn't they accomplish that thing? They want to know! Rather than starting with "how" or "when", we start by doing the thing. I start instruction with, "You try it before I show you how." When we start with the application before establishing context, we are really starting with the "why."






Students quickly see why the information they are about to learn is essential. From my perspective, the key is to remember that active listening is part of the learning contract. I have just as much responsibility to find motivators and catalysts for my students to listen as they have a responsibility to do so in an active manner. In other words, active learning may be the student's job, but it's also a powerful barometer for the teacher.








Active Listening Strategies



For Students:

-  Listen for the purpose.
-  Try to give the speaker your undivided attention.
-  Use body language to show that you are listening.
-  Take notes and paraphrase or summarize what the speaker said. Use brain-based notetaking strategies.
-  Ask questions and actively engage in conversation.

For Teachers:

-  Provide students with the "why."
-  Model good listening strategies.
-  Have students practice active listening with partners.
-  Play the "20 Questions" game with your class.
-  Ask questions so you can listen as much as you talk.

About the Authors



Doug Fisher

Douglas Fisher is a professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High & Middle College. He is a member of the California Reading Hall of Fame and was honored as an exemplary leader by the Conference on English Leadership.



Melody Johnson

Melody Johnson is a curriculum developer, educator, and creator. She is also a writer, and loves coffee (hot or cold), reading, writing, and baking. She is a proclaimed supermom, combustible content creator, and aspiring future pet lover of two Sphinx cats or hermit crabs, old or young! Born a New Yorker, but living and loving the Southern life in Georgia, she is married, with three amazing kids.



Dr. Jeff Borden

Dr. Jeff Borden is the Executive Director of the Institute for Inter-Connected Education, the CAO for Campus, and a Davis Scholar in Residence (Akilah Institute, Rwanda). Having spoken to educators at every level, from Provosts to Principals, in 39 countries and every state, Dr. Borden is showcasing the best possible instructional ideas and strategies to transform learning at scale. Through award-winning “learning ecosystem” creation, curated book chapters, large scale learning games, and more, Dr. Borden will inspire change. Having presented to more than 5,000 audiences in 20 years, he will blog about practical, researched, intentional learning strategies.



Kerrie LaRosa

Kerrie LaRosa is a parent coach, clinical social worker, and mother helping parents connect with their children, enhance their relationships, and improve their parenting skills. You can connect with Kerrie at www.larosaparentcoach.com and facebook.com/LaRosaParentCoach.



Michael Shirey

Michael Shirey has been with McGraw Hill since 1996 when he joined the Software Support department. Before starting at McGraw Hill, he worked with underprivileged, under-performing, and at-risk students in both classroom and one-on-one tutoring settings. His focus currently centers around secondary mathematics, but his passion has always been around helping students understand the concepts that they deem impossible to comprehend. This passion drives his never-ending quest to learn more about the science behind engagement and learning and how that knowledge can be used to help make McGraw Hill more successful. With his children all now off on their own, when Mike's not at work, he likes to work on his photography skills and try new photo-challenges, like photographing tiny insects and spiders or photos of the moon.





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