

# Digging Deeper

## Helping Students Internalize Principles of Learning: Metacognition

by Carol Santa, an excerpt from “A Vision for Adolescent Literacy: Ours or Theirs”

Effective strategic teaching isn't really about assigning students to take notes or about developing a concept map. Instead, it is about teaching students how to tap into a deeper understanding of themselves as proficient learners. To help them with this, teachers and, more important, students must see how principles of learning operate on their thinking.

For our Montana Academy\* students, we find it works best to teach principles about learning directly before introducing various instructional strategies. These principles become the backdrop for the “why” of strategic instruction. Knowing the “science” behind strategic instruction helps students buy into examining themselves as learners.

Effective learners are metacognitive. We start with the concept of metacognition because we believe it to be the foundation for becoming a successful student. Students who achieve well in school know when they have understood, and they know how to employ a variety of strategies to attain meaning.

I introduce metacognition with a brief lecture. I talk about good readers being in control as they figure out what makes sense in their reading. Competent readers sift through the author's meaning to connect the author's message with their own background knowledge. They know how to use a variety of strategies to meet their goals, and they can revise their learning plans to gain meaning. Successful learners make connections, ask questions, reread, and organize information to understand the meaning of a selection.

While lecturing, I simultaneously model on a transparency how to take notes from my own presentation. Students use my modeling as a guide for recording their own notes. I also break up my lecture with paired discussions. After about ten minutes, I stop and ask students to talk and ask questions about what they have learned so far.

Upon completing my lecture, I have students review their notes and, when they think they are ready, put their notes aside and convert their understanding of metacognition into Picture Notes. “*What does metacognition mean to you? Transform your understanding to pictures.*” The next day, students explain their picture notes to the class. Afterwards, I lead a process conversation. “*What did I do as a teacher to help you know if you understood the concept of metacognition? I go on questioning. How did taking notes from my lecture help? What about paired discussions during my lecture? How did talking with a partner about what you were learning help you gain deeper understanding? In what ways did transforming your understanding to Picture Notes and presenting your notes to the class help you be metacognitive?*”

I also lead discussions about what it means not to be metacognitive. Our conversation might go something like this: “*Struggling students aren't in control of their reading and learning and don't have a clue about how to gain control. They don't see the need to set goals or to make plans for comprehending. During reading, they don't check whether or not they are getting anything out of their reading. While good readers find the struggle to gain meaning a challenge, poor readers simply give up. They quit trying and blame their “stupidity.” They lapse into the familiar sense of being incompetent in school. In most cases, it is not the student's fault. The problem is that no one has ever taught them how to learn.*” Holding conversations about metacognitive differences helps students become more introspective about their learning.

Strategic teaching is far more than a collection of learning strategies. We have to dig deeper. Teenagers deserve to know why and how these approaches make a difference for their learning. When they understand the theoretical principles underlying particular ways of learning, they start changing their sense of themselves as students. It becomes their mission, not ours.

\* Montana Academy is a private therapeutic boarding school for troubled teens co-owned by Carol Santa and her husband.

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