



# Techniques to Promote Self-Directed Learning

Course content is only a part of what students need to master in order to succeed in the college classroom. They also need to know things like how to adaptively problem solve, how to formulate and defend strong theses, how to read texts quickly, thoroughly and critically, and much more. Yet many students do not consider these skills vital to their grades—at least until after that first low grade! That’s where your guidance and planning can really help.

Use the chart below to identify key skills your students will need to succeed in your course, as well as activities that will help them develop and practice those skills, perform better this semester, and leave your course as stronger and more self-directed learners!

## General Intellectual Skills & Dispositions:

Novice → Self-Directed Learners		Examples of Classroom Activities to Get Them There
<b>Planning</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have vague plan, or no plan at all, about how to get things done.</li> <li>• Have unrealistic expectations about how long things actually take.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan their learning activities by matching concrete tasks with specified times.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early: Ask students to create a plan to accomplish a particular task or project. When the task is done, have students reflect and report on which elements of their plan worked, and which didn't.</li> <li>• Later: Have students create a plan to accomplish course expectations for the remainder of the semester. Have students discuss with each other how long each task is actually going to take.</li> </ul>
<b>Organizing Information</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat all information as equally important.</li> <li>• Perceive disciplines as completely separate bodies of information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create, use, or manipulate hierarchical structures to investigate or clarify relationships between concepts and across disciplines.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early: Demonstrate taking or reorganization of lecture notes, highlighting important information, and imposing a structure onto the information.</li> <li>• Later: Have students share examples of their own notes, and work in small groups to reorganize the notes.</li> </ul>
<b>Awareness of context of information</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach new sources of information with no expectations or goals.</li> <li>• Accept new information without skepticism.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach new sources of info with a goal in mind and questions to be answered, and evaluate whether or not resource met their expectations.</li> <li>• Seek out context of new information: source, time period, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early: Walk through your thought process as you approach a source of info, and the questions you would ask (e.g why this source? What will it provide? What does the context in which it was written tell you? etc.)</li> <li>• Later: Have students generate their own questions about a source of info. After they read it, have students share answers with the class.</li> </ul>
<b>Problem Solving</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pick a strategy at random to solve a problem.</li> <li>• Give up when strategy fails.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach problems with strategies in mind, or develops them as needed, to use on the problem.</li> <li>• Switch strategies rather than giving up.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early: Give students multiple strategies and multiple problems, then ask them to experiment with different combinations.</li> <li>• Later: Present students with a problem, and have them brainstorm multiple ways of achieving a solution, and then have them work through each strategy and evaluate its effectiveness.</li> </ul>
<b>Self-Monitoring</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus learning activities exclusively on practice, and do not seek out evaluation of their work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flip back and forth between practice and evaluation (by themselves, or others), and incorporate feedback into future work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early: Show students examples of good and poor examples of work, and walk them through your thought process as you evaluate them.</li> <li>• Later: Ask students to evaluate their own, or each other's, work and share their evaluation with you and/or the class.</li> </ul>
<b>Attitude toward learning</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid challenging situations, even when challenge is an opportunity for learning.</li> <li>• Believe luck or other people play a large part in their academic success or failure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actively seek out opportunities to learn, embracing challenges.</li> <li>• Believe that their success is largely determined by their own hard work or strategies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early: Share examples of challenges you faced as a student, what you did to resolve them, and what you gained from the experience.</li> <li>• Later: Ask students to discuss strategies they used to face academic challenges. What worked? What didn't?</li> </ul>
<b>Intellectual Empathy</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid, or only passively listen to, ideas or reasoning that do not match their own.</li> <li>• Interpret other's ideas through their own filters or biases.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actively listen to others, asking probing questions to clarify meaning.</li> <li>• Can accurately reconstruct the viewpoints and reasoning of others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early: Give students a question to answer, problem to solve, etc. Have them pair up and explain their answer to their partner, who will then explain it to the class as a whole.</li> <li>• Later: Ask students to explain/defend a position, solution to a problem, belief, etc., that does not match their own.</li> </ul>



## Skills Related to Specific Pursuits or Activities:

Here are just a few that may be relevant to your students. Is anything missing from the list that your students should be developing?

Novice → Self-Directed Learners		Examples of Classroom Activities to Get Them There
<b>Writing</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Think that purpose of an essay is to only to demonstrate knowledge.</li> <li>Unable to formulate an argument or structure and essay.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tailor writing to specific purpose and audience.</li> <li>Can create strong theses and back them up with clearly structured and supported ideas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early: Discuss the attributes of a strong thesis for an essay, then give students several examples of thesis statements and ask them to rate them from strongest to weakest. Lead a discussion on why the students rated them as they did.</li> <li>Later: Break students up into groups and have each group generate a short writing assignment for another group. After groups have completed their assignments, have the group that assigned the writing grade it according to a rubric they have created.</li> </ul>
<b>Test-Taking</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rely on inefficient means of study, such as re-reading notes or textbook.</li> <li>Focus study efforts on memorization.</li> <li>May misread exam questions.</li> <li>Have difficulty distinguishing between questions to which they know the answer and those that they do not.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-test regularly in order to direct their study.</li> <li>Rely on true understanding of material, rather than memorization of facts.</li> <li>Determine precisely what exam question is asking before attempting to answer.</li> <li>Are aware of what they do and do not know.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early: Find or create a practice exam for your students, administer it in class, then lead a discussion about the type of preparation necessary to get a correct answer to each question.</li> <li>Later: Ask students to collect or write their own practice questions. In small groups, have them trade questions, answer them, and then return them for grading and discussion.</li> </ul>
<b>Oral Communication</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Obviously nervous or uncomfortable when speaking.</li> <li>Voice is not clear and may be hard to understand.</li> <li>Ideas are not well organized and point may not be clear.</li> <li>Do not adequately prepare for formal presentations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seem poised and confident when speaking.</li> <li>Speak clearly with good elocution.</li> <li>Ideas are well organized and easy to follow.</li> <li>Put in adequate research and practice to prepare for formal presentations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early: Ask students to give brief (1-2 min.) practice oral presentations in pairs or small groups. Ask the audience to pay attention to one or two specific speaking skills that you want to focus on that day (e.g. elocution, organization, posture, etc.).</li> <li>Later: Ask students to give slightly longer (2-3 min.) practice presentations to the whole class, and ask audience to evaluate presentations according to a rubric you provide. Provide feedback after the presentation.</li> </ul>
<b>Reading a Scholarly Article</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do not understand format of article, so cannot recognize where certain types of information can be found.</li> <li>Cannot identify or differentiate main topic, themes, concepts, or arguments.</li> <li>Difficulty retaining what they learned/read.</li> <li>Difficulty connecting or applying readings to larger course themes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand organization of information in the article and can identify and hone in on most relevant portions.</li> <li>Understand and remember information presented in article and are able to connect it to broader concepts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early: Give students an article and walk them through your approach to reading it. Where do you look first? What questions do you ask about it? What is your thought process as you connect it to other ideas?</li> <li>Later: Give students an article to read and ask them to summarize the main points and explain its importance in relation to other course material. You might also ask them to critique the article: are there any weaknesses in the author's reasoning or evidence?</li> </ul>

