Total Physical Response

known worldwide as TPR

How to be an All "A" Student

Here is the answer from a psychologist specializing in stress-free learning of complex skills such as foreign languages and mathematics. You must read this article if only to discover how to ace any school exam.

Nothing interests parents more than a desire to see their children be successful in school. In their search for answers they may try different teachers. They may even sell their home and move to a different neighborhood to take advantage of a "better" school. They may switch from a public to a private school. Sometimes these strategies work, but often they don't. Parents wonder, "Well, what else can I do?"

Political leaders tune into this quest by parents and offer their solutions: Test the teachers. Raise academic standards. Reward good teachers with merit pay. Reduce class size. Hard wire each classroom for computers. Each of these ideas has some validity but they are often presented as "glittering generalities"---slogans to attract voters. In the end, the performance of each class is the usual bell-shaped curve with a few "A" students, a few "Fs" and everyone else scattered inbetween. Perhaps that is the best we can do---or is it?

Are "good students" born or can they be shaped by the family and the school? The evidence suggests that academic success is a specific aptitude in the bundle of other aptitudes that each person inherits such as aptitudes for athletics, music, leadership, organization, small details, verbal, and numerical skill. But, like any other aptitude, we may not be a "natural" as Babe Ruth was in the game of baseball, but with motivation, effort, and strategy, anyone can dramatically improve their performance in any activity including academics.

Do colleges and universities create "good students"?

It seems clear that colleges and universities are unable to create "good students." If they could then their admission's policy would be to select high school graduates at random for entrance. They don't. They find "good students" with what is called a "selection ratio." For example, in California, Berkeley selects the top 12% of high school graduates, the state universities select the top 33% and the community colleges will admit any high school graduate. Contrary to the popular belief, the community colleges generally have the most talented instructors (they have to be in order to communicate with the entire bell-shaped curve of the student population). It does not require talent to teach the top 12% who are quite capable of self-instruction. Besides, the rewards in the "prestigious" institutions are for research and not for teaching skill.

How successful are colleges and universities in dealing with "good students"?

Not vary, if you consider that nationwide, the drop-out rate after the first year is 50% or more. This means that of all the fully-qualified students admitted in the freshman year, half will be gone by the sophomore year. What happened? When I ask college presidents this question, the response is, "Well, that is normal. We expect that kind of attrition in all places of higher education."

My reply is, " Please do not take this personally but if you were the CEO of General Motors, IBM or General Foods, the board of directors would fire you. Any executive who is complacent with losing one of every two customers should be replaced."

"What do you suggest we do?" there is a tinge of irritation in the voice.

"An exit interview."

"You want me to interview every student who drops out after the freshman year?"

"No. Only a sample. Invite them into your office, perhaps for lunch and explore the reasons why they did not return. Nothing is more flattering than a personal invitation to the president's office. You will be amazed with what you learn."

Why did they drop out?

Of course there are many reasons. Some are economic necessity, but others are more subtle. For example, if no one in the family is a college graduate, then the student may not be aware that the first year in college is a "rite of passage." The student may be interested in nursing, journalism, or art but the first year, as one young man expressed it, "is more high school." The gestalt psychologist, Kurt Levin, recommended 60 years ago, that the best strategy for holding on to entering students is to give them what they are interested in--- a course in nursing, journalism or art. Later, they will discover on their own that they need those general education courses--and sign up for them.

Can the family help?

Absolutely. For example, the failure rate for those who open a small business is about 70%. Researchers wanted to discover what factors explain the success of the 3 people in 10 who make it. Education, age or socio-economic status had nothing to do with it. The only correlate for those who were successful in a small business was this: Someone in the family---mother, father, uncle, aunt---prospered in running a small business. This suggests the powerful influence of a role model in the immediate family.

Another example of modeling: Year after year, America is represented in almost every category for Nobel Prizes. The top ten percent of high school graduates in the U.S.A. are competitive in science and mathematics with other students anywhere in the world. Researchers wanted to know why. School, age or socio-economic status did not explain the achievements. The only correlate was this--these top students came from homes that had 30 or more books. Of course, a correlation does not prove a cause-effect relationship, but it does suggest that observing others in the family reading books is an attractive incentive for the child to read. Better readers make better students, as Evelyn Woods discovered and then went on to develop her world-famous Eveyln Woods Reading Dynamic course.

How does Hollywood do it?

Hollywood producers have scripts that call for actors to ride a horse, speak French, portray sophisticated sword- fighters, race a chariot at death-defying velocity, lose or gain weight. If an actor does not have the attributes called for, then what? How does the studio, in a short period of time, help an actor go from zero skill to a level that is believable in a movie? The now legendary example of a Hollywood behind-the-scenes transformation is Debbie Reynold's in the classic Singin' in the Rain. Debbie was only seventeen years-old with no dancing training. The script called for her to keep up, step for step, with world-class dancers, Gene Kelly and Donald O'Conner. Ms. Reynold's revealed that she did not believe that she could accomplish this feat. In her mind, it was "impossible." The studio accomplished this "miracle" with a personal trainer, a dance instructor who "lives" with the student until the objective is reached.

The concept of a "personal trainer" probably explains the success of children who achieve fluency in a "home" language. One or both parents play the role of personal trainers who live with the "student" 24 hours a day. The second language teacher at school, for comparison, is with the student less than one hour a day.

Strategies That Work

Since most information in school from the first grade through college is delivered through reading, this is a fundamental skill for academic success. Yet, a massive study by the National Assessment of Education involving 1.4 million children between 9 and 17 showed disappointing results. Most of our students can read a simple text, perform basic addition, and remember everyday facts about science. But, 61% of our 17 year-olds cannot understand high school textbooks nor simple newspaper essays. Since they experience difficulty reading, school becomes a threatening place where the child must cope with failure everyday. It is appalling that in the most prosperous industrial nation on earth, 25 million native-born adult Americans cannot read the label on a bottle of poison.

While phonics is helpful in the initial stages of acquiring reading skill, seeing larger chunks of print by expanding one's span of attention is important for reading speed.

Slow-motion Readers

Most of us who have graduated from high school or college feel that we are proficient readers. This may be an illusion. The average reading speed is about 300 words per minute when a modest goal of 1,500 words per minute is a reasonable expectation for any high school graduate. Afterall, we are not asking students to match the reading speed of the youngest President of the United States, Theordore Roosevelt, who read a book a day. The five foot eight, 200 pound, "Teddy" Roosevelt also wrote 40 books on naval history and 160,000 letters which is spectacular in the days before computers.

Three suggestions for accelerating reading speed

First, a simple strategy is to ask elementary school teachers to continue speed training beyond the 6th grade and into high school. Most of us are stuck on a plateau of 300 words per minute set in about the 6th grade when the teacher announced, "Good news! You can read. Now we will go on to something else." We have been frozen at that speed for so long that we feel it is comfortable and "natural." When I mentioned this to my brother-in-law, he commented, "But I enjoy reading slowly."

Second, except for signs, bumper stickers, and messages on T- shirts, we don't just read to read. There is a purpose. There is a goal. For each goal, there is a different strategy that will help us arrive at our destination faster. For example, in reading technical material anywhere in my field, I ask myself one question: "What does this person know that I don't know?" I find that I can fly through the article with my hand sweeping across each page because there is only about ten percent that is novel. The rest is filler.

The mathematician, Sheilla Tobias, revealed that her father who is also a mathematician, shared a successful strategy for reading a chapter in any mathematics book. Math books are not stories that one reads starting at the top of the page. The secret is to "read up" rather than the tendency of non- mathematicians to "read down." Use the book as a reference. Start at the bottom by looking at examples and refer back to the text for clues as to the meaning. One should move back and forth from examples to the text with a pencil in hand to create examples of your own to test your understanding.

Another strategy for understanding a novel concept in science or mathematics is to find the subject in the children's section of the library. For children, technical writers are creative in their attempt to communicate in simple English. College textbooks, for comparison, are written for professors rather than students. The reason: Colleagues select the books used in any course and must be pleased with what they read. As one mathematic's professor commented, "We don't want to make it too easy."

For fiction and poetry, language rather than the message is the salient feature. Hence, one may want to read more slowly to savor prosodic and lyrical features of the proses.

The third strategy I recommend is skill with "mind-maps" rather than the traditional linear outline for lectures and chapters in a textbook. The power of a mind-map is that on one sheet of paper, the student can see at a glance the interconnections of the entire lecture or a chapter in a technical book. Seeing the interconnections plays to the pattern-seeking right brain which can understand in one exposure and retain the information forever.

How to ace any school exam

I saved the big secret until the end. Nobody tells students. It is the best kept secret in education from first grade through the university. School exams are not designed to test competency. That, of course, is the intention of the instructor and that is what educators imagine they are doing.

School exams are a game of small details. The student who can retrieve from memory the greatest number of small details gets the "A+." Once one realizes this fact, the rest is easy. Ask yourself, "What strategy will help me recover on cue the small details required by the instructor?"

Here is one strategy to become an all "A" student that I used myself and recommend to others . I typed up a detailed outline of each chapter in the textbook, then threw away the book. If five chapters are to be covered on the next exam, then on a few pieces of paper, there were all the small details. Rather than thumbing through pages and pages of a textbook to find highlighted information, it was all there in a few sheets of self-made "Cliff Notes." Turning pages in a textbook to find details disrupts the student's focus. It is like trying to find a handful of needles in an academic haystack. A detailed outline puts the needles within easy reach in a thimble and throws away the haystack.

I suppose we don't want to reveal this secret to everyone. Otherwise, everyone would be an all "A" student. How would we explain that to our supervisor?

This article was excerpted from the writer's book, "The Super School of the 21st Century: Teaching on the Right Side of the Brain." Published by Sky Oaks Productions, Inc., P.O. Box 1102, Los Gatos, California 95031. Your comments and suggestions are welcomed at the writer's e-mail address of tprworld@aol.com

---

Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.

P.O. Box 1102
Los Gatos, CA 95031 USA
Phone: (408) 395-7600
Fax: (408) 395-8440
tprworld@aol.com