

Approaches to learning --- Self-management skills

This skill category breaks down into two separate areas.

1. Organization skills—managing time and tasks effectively, goal-setting, etc.
2. Affective skills—managing state of mind, self-motivation, resilience, mindfulness, etc.

Affective skills

The development of affective skills is a key part of the development of self-management skills. This can enable students to gain some control over their mood, their motivation and their ability to deal effectively with setbacks and difficulties. There is also an important link between this area of ATL and the crucial area of student health and well-being, which historically has tended to be “mostly separated from other aspects of school life” (Konu and Rimpelä 2002).

Affective self-management skills are teachable and they can make a huge difference to a child’s motivation, resilience and, indeed, academic success; for example, relaxation training can help reduce examination anxiety and increase grades (Hembree 1988). For DP students, three important affective skills that are needed to handle the challenges of this level of study are resilience, self-motivation and mindfulness.

Resilience

Resilience appears to be the affective concept that is most inclusive of almost all other desirable affective elements of the successful DP student. The resilient learner is mindful, persevering, emotionally stable and self-motivated. Through focusing on developing resilience with respect to learning, teachers may find that many other important affective skills are practised and developed as well. The optimal conditions for learning do not seem to be created by goals that are too easy or too difficult, but by goals that are challenging but achievable (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen 1993). For the resilient learner, any challenge entails the possibility of failure and frustration, but it is this possibility that makes the challenge interesting and intrinsically motivating (Alfi, Assor and Katz 2004).

An important connection to highlight between ATL skills and the learner profile is the connection between resilience and the learner profile attribute of being “risk-takers”. Resilience is a vitally important part of self-management, and it includes learning from mistakes. DP students are often under a great deal of pressure to succeed, particularly given the high stakes nature of DP assessment, which can make them reluctant to ever risk failure. Kathryn Schulz, author of *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, is critical of the largely negative view of error, commenting that “Of all the things we are wrong about, this idea of error might well top the list. It is our meta-mistake: We are wrong about what it means to be wrong. Far from being a sign of intellectual inferiority, the capacity to err is crucial to human cognition” (Schulz 2011: 5). Risk-taking is therefore closely linked to the idea of failing well (King 2009), and it is important that teachers create an atmosphere where students do not feel that they have to get things right first time. Regarding learning as a process of gradual improvement through reflection on mistakes can encourage students to ask questions, take risks, be more adventurous in their thinking, and be more creative with their ideas.

Self-motivation

Self-motivation is also at the core of successful learning. As Alfie Kohn points out in *Punished by Rewards* (2000), no one can ever really motivate anyone else; the only true motivation is self-motivation (Brandt 1995). All we can ever hope to do as teachers is to arrange the variables that we have some influence over to help self-motivation to arise and then to facilitate its development. Interestingly, the research into intrinsic motivation shows that classroom environments that actively help develop students' autonomy and self-direction are also those that increase students' intrinsic motivation and help improve their efficacy as learners (Deci 1975), whereas classroom environments that use tangible rewards for performance outcomes tend to undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner and Ryan 1999).

Mindfulness

Psychological techniques, such as mindfulness, focus on the practice of mental relaxation, and in an educational context there is evidence that mindfulness training can lead to improvements in the functioning of the brain (Brown, Ryan and Cresswell 2007), with improvements being reported in reading comprehension and working memory capacity (Mrazek et al. 2013), digital memory span (Chambers, Lo and Allen 2008) and visual/spatial processing efficiency (Kozhevnikov et al. 2009). *Mindfulness* means simply becoming more aware of your own perceptions as they happen, and in your thinking as it occurs.

Helping students learn how to "stay in the moment" can help them to overcome distractions, increase attention and improve concentration (Brefczynski-Lewis et al. 2007). Most students—at all levels of schooling—and most parents as well, acknowledge that the ability to deal with distractions, and to focus and concentrate on schoolwork is probably the single biggest issue to overcome in order to improve academic performance. Of all the skills we could possibly help our students with, learning to concentrate has to be one of the most important and may be worthwhile putting some training into developing.

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Organization skills

One of the most crucial skill sets needed for success in the DP are organizational skills, and within that the particular skill of time management. Students at both secondary and tertiary levels are very aware of their own deficiencies in this area, but often do not have effective strategies to overcome them (Weissberg et al. 1982).

Good time management is a feature of self-managed or self-directed learning (McCombs 1986): it can alleviate stress (Lay and Schouwenburg 1993), increase academic performance (Campbell and Svenson 1992) and contributes significantly to successful “strategic” study (Kirschenbaum and Perri 1982). Time management is not something we can assume that students will do naturally—as with all ATL skills, it is a specific skill that must be taught and also modelled. If we expect our students to be well organized and punctual, to work methodically throughout the year and to meet all deadlines without last minute panic, then we must model strategies to help them achieve this goal. DP teachers can help students organize their time by coordinating their deadlines for students so that assessments are well spread throughout the school year. If teachers also help their students learn how to break down assignments into achievable steps and to timeline each step, plan out revision and study plans for tests and examinations, and build study timetables, then much poor time management will be alleviated.

One reason that has been suggested for poor time management among students is perceived *control of time* (Macan, Shahani, Dipboye and Phillips 1990). Some students feel that control over their time is something that is out of their hands, and consequently feel more stressed, procrastinate more and produce poorer quality work. In these situations, it is not the lack of time that is the key factor—it is the perception of control. Performance improvement in this area, therefore, comes partly out of time-management strategies themselves and partly out of attitude and perception, both of which can be influenced by affective skill development.