In the past year, this column has been devoted to highlighting a number of the instructional strategies identified by Robert Marzano and his research group as providing the highest yield in student achievement. This year, SOS continues to focus on additional strategies that are featured in Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement.

The featured strategy for this column is Summarizing. As Marzano et al. (2001) suggest, this strategy, when used consistently, can account for significant achievement gains for students. Three generalizations can be drawn from the research.

1. To effectively summarize, students must delete some information, substitute some information and keep some information.
2. To effectively delete, substitute and keep information, students must analyze the information at a fairly deep level.
3. Being aware of the explicit structure of information is an aid to summarizing information.

Although seemingly easy, summarizing can be a difficult task. Imagine a young student who sees a movie that has been newly released. You ask, “What is the movie about?” In response, you may get a very detailed account of everything (including the most minute of details). With this recounting of all the details, it is quite possible that the most important elements (plot, setting and character) may be omitted or not fully explained or not consciously noted by the student. Simply “telling all” often misses deep comprehension and meaning.

This experience parallels many classroom encounters when students are asked to summarize course content and the summary becomes a retelling of the content more than an actual summary. There is a lack of strategy when students are asked to perform this task and students are not actively engaged in deleting, substituting and maintaining information as part of the summary. As a result, vital components are not reported, while the likelihood of extraneous details being included in the summary is great.

In order to have a good summary, students need to determine what details can be omitted, which elements can be combined and which elements are essential to the summary.

**Steps for explicitly teaching summarizing**

One method to help students learn the critical skill of summarizing is through the use of summary frames. As Marzano suggests, summary frames are concrete graphic organizers that help students see the explicit structure of the information to be summarized. By providing the salient features of the genre of material being summarized (for example, summarizing a narrative or an argument or a problem and its solutions, etc.), the frame guides students to focus on the exact information to be summarized. The frame helps them learn what to delete, substitute and keep for an effective summary in relation to different kinds of material.

Eventually, students will internalize the different organizers, which will help them in transferring these skills to other settings. Marzano presents six types of summary frames. (Student templates illustrating each of these frames can be found at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness Web site at www.luc.edu/ccse.) The types are as follows:

1. Narrative Frame (used in fiction)
2. Topic Restriction—Illustration Frame (used for expository material)
3. Definition Frame (used to describe a particular concept and identify subordinate concepts)
4. Argumentation Frame (used with passages that contain information designed to support a claim)
5. Problem Solving Frame (used to introduce a problem and identify one or more solutions)
6. Conversation Frame (used with a verbal interchange between two or more people)

These summary frames can be provided to students, with the appropriate frame being matched with the corresponding task. Students can review the material to be summarized and use the relevant frame to record the salient details. Then, in a group, a student can summarize the main details. Students can provide feedback...
to each other to determine if all of the main details were included. After systematic exposure to the frames, students will eventually internalize the template structure and become more strategic in summarizing.

A variation of this method to promote summarizing in younger students is using story retell. A narrative passage is read orally to the students. After hearing the story, students can orally recount the story to an adult. Using a story retell rubric (an example can be found at www.luc.edu/ccse), student responses can be checked from the main criteria listed in this rubric. Student progress can be documented over time to illustrate student growth. Rubrics can be developed to help assess other types of text structures (expository and persuasive).

Pitfalls to avoid

There are a few pitfalls to avoid. First, it is important for students to be able to accurately match the correct summary frame with the correct genre. The summary frame contains the salient features that are critical in conducting a summary appropriate to that genre. Although it is easy to assume that students possess summary knowledge for different kinds of materials, often it is the opposite case. Students must be explicitly taught these skills in order to demonstrate them.

A second pitfall that can occur is related to time. Everyone is pressed to cram a great deal of content into a limited amount of time. Because of this, explicit teaching of process skills such as summarizing can be “glossed over” in favor of covering more material. In this rush, a powerful learning tool is not being used to its greatest potential. When used, this skill, as well as the other high-yield strategies, can make learning more efficient and, as a result, increase time efficiency in the classroom.

Keep in mind that the underlying “power” of the summarizing strategy rests in students’ learning how to analyze different kinds of material for the salient points. This fosters deeper understanding and transfer of learning.

Implementing together

Suggestions for schools to implement this strategy include:

Read and discuss the SOS article and support materials at a faculty meeting or team meetings. (Watch the Web cast together to spark discussion.)

Share examples of how the strategy is currently used by teachers — very specific. Make suggestions for how to use the strategy more effectively. Identify matches between specific summary frames and the content and skills for your course and/or grade level subject.

In learning teams, go deeper. Examine the steps and the pitfalls. Agree on and clearly identify one concrete thing you will all do to improve the use of the strategy of summarizing over the next two weeks. Agree to log your actions and set a schedule for observing each other at least once. Arrange with the principal and/or department chair to observe as well.

Share observations about using the strategy and its impact on learning. Refine and agree on actions for the next two weeks.

Share actions taken and observations of impact at the next faculty meeting.

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References


NCEA honors distinguished principals

NCEA hosted a dinner on October 16 to honor Linda Freebes and Patricia Brady, two of this year’s 62 recipients of the National Distinguished Principals Award.

From left: Br. William Campbell, SM; Dr. Karen Ristau, NCEA president; Linda Freebes, principal, SS. Joachim and Anne School, Queens Village, N.Y.; Patricia Brady, principal, St. Thomas Aquinas School, Fairfield, Conn.; Brother Robert Bimonte, FSC

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