

Learning About Thinking and Thinking About Learning

Wirth, Karl R., Geology Department, Macalester College, St. Paul, MN 55105
(wirth@macalester.edu)

Dexter Perkins, Department of Geology, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202
(dexter_perkins@und.nodak.edu)

A recent report by the AAC&U (2002) advocates greater emphasis on educating students to be “intentional learners” who are purposeful and self-directing, empowered through intellectual and practical skills, informed by knowledge and ways of knowing, and responsible for personal actions and civic values. Self-directing learners take initiative to diagnose their learning needs, they formulate learning goals, they select and implement learning strategies, and they evaluate their learning outcomes. It is commonly assumed that students will develop these sorts of skills for lifelong learning in the course of mastering content, but this is not necessarily the case. If an important goal of education is for students to become intentional learners, shouldn’t our curricula address these goals more explicitly? In an effort to help students develop these skills, we are developing and introducing learning co-curricula into our courses. These curricula not only provide a foundation for developing life-long learning skills, they also provide scaffolding as students undertake greater responsibility for their own learning in learner-centered classrooms. Here, and in the accompanying paper by Perkins and Wirth (this volume), we present results of our efforts to develop a co-curriculum on learning that can be implemented in any course.

What should our students know about thinking and learning? Remarkably, there are few articles suitable for students to read about the essential elements of learning. Our approach began with developing focused readings on a shortlist of learning topics culled from faculty teaching seminars. Students in our courses read a document entitled “Learning to Learn” (available from: <http://www.macalester.edu/geology/wirth/learning.pdf>) that explores learning, understanding, and development. It also highlights research on the brain, learning styles, metacognition, the affective domain, intellectual development, collaborative learning, and the behavioral dimensions of grades. The learning document not only provides students with an introduction to learning, it also helps establish faculty expectations for learning: that student learning goals should go far beyond memorizing content. After reading and discussing the learning document, students often remark that they feel empowered with a deeper understanding of learning and that it helps them in all of their courses. Other activities (e.g., journaling and portfolios) are also being used to help students reflect more deeply on the learning process (see Perkins and Wirth, this volume).

We solicit input from the community about the topics our students should understand about thinking and learning and we seek to cultivate community-wide discussions about educating intentional learners.