



Profile of a Quality Learner

by Carol Nancarrow, Sinclair Community College

Quality learners exhibit definable behaviors that optimize learning and predict successful performance. These behaviors can be classified and assessed. By recognizing these behaviors, learners and instructors can work toward the ideal behaviors, and instructors can design instruction to foster growth in learning behaviors.

The Learner's Affect

For very young children, learning is a survival instinct. The joy of persevering through failure to reach success shines on every toddler's face as he or she takes first steps or puts together a simple puzzle. A quality learner brings that same joy to calculus formulas, Russian grammar, or medieval art. But not every learner is a quality learner. There are cases of very bright youths with great potential who have not achieved their potential through formal education. In other cases, however, students have overcome significant barriers to achievement. The difference in performance may well lie in learning behaviors. The good news is that quality learning behavior can be defined, measured, and taught.

What is a Quality Learner?

Quality learners are intrinsically motivated to learn and grow, with or without external rewards. Learning for them is not limited to external structures such as classes. Learning, like breathing, is an integral part of daily experience, a natural and necessary part of life. Quality learners exhibit learning behaviors that lead to success, consciously using the opportunities in their personal experiences and learning environments to meet their personal learning objectives. Learning behaviors are more complex than the learning skills introduced in the module ***Classification of Learning Skills***. A learning behavior involves choosing and using appropriate combinations of learning skills from across domains, aligning cognitive skills with values and attitudes. Some learners possess skills that they choose not to use when an appropriate context for that skill presents itself. For the quality learner, however, learning behaviors are fully integrated into the personality and routine of daily life. A quality learner has the ability to choose and use the right combinations of skills for a given set of circumstances.

Research Studies on Learning Behavior

Educational psychologists have researched behavior that affects learning, though there is still much work to do in this area. Albert Bandura's cognitive theory of personality asserts that individuals can and do control

their own motivation and thought processes, using observation and self-assessment to change their behaviors in order to accomplish their goals. Bandura uses the term "self-regulation" to refer to the individual's cognitive control of his or her behavior. Self-regulation occurs in the planning, performance, and assessment phases of a process (Zimmerman, 2002). In the context of learning, self-regulation refers to "active management by students of their motivations, cognitions, and behaviors to achieve their goals" (Garavilia & Gredler, 2002). Researchers have found a positive correlation between students' ability to self-regulate and academic success.

Bandura (1999) found that self-efficacy beliefs tend to correspond to one's actual ability to perform and therefore have a great influence on the self-regulation of one's personal behavior related to performance. Successful learners have strong self-efficacy beliefs about their learning-to-learn skills; when they are faced with new learning challenges, these skills inform their decisions about how to improve the regulation of their strategies, effort, scheduling, and other relevant variables. Those whose self-efficacy for a performance is lower tend to perform poorly but often do not understand why. Educators can help learners with low self-efficacy to identify the methods that will improve performance and thereby also make it clear that performance can be managed and is not due to personal characteristics or luck.

While Bandura's concept of self-regulation is largely cognitive and involves such specific learning skills as rehearsal, self-testing, and active reading, Schapiro and Livingstone (2000) have extended the concept to include "dynamic self-regulation." Dynamic self-regulation is a way of being that provides a drive for learning, including curiosity, enthusiasm, and risk-taking. Dynamic self-regulated students look for new applications and connections, persist despite difficulties, and apply learning in new contexts.

The best news from these studies is that self-regulation can be consciously embedded in courses and produce significant growth in essential learning behaviors (Garavilia & Gredler, 2002; Schapiro & Livingstone, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002). Schapiro and Livingstone, for example, studied 342 freshmen and sophomore students

Table 1

Profile of a Quality Learner

Information Processing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accesses information quickly • Distinguishes relevant from irrelevant information • Engages all senses to access information • Uses appropriate tools and technology • Learns new tools and technologies to facilitate learning • Attributes results to causation
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a vision for life and can articulate goals and objectives with measurable outcomes • Uses learning to clarify his or her personal value system • Responds ethically to strong challenges • Respects and values the difficulty and importance of learning • Approaches tasks with confidence in his or her ability to master new learning
Learning Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes responsibility for his or her own learning process • Demonstrates interest, motivation, and desire to seek out new information, concepts, and challenges • Validates his or her own growth and understanding, without the need for outside affirmation • Actively seeks out ways to improve his or her learning skills • Integrates new concepts within a general systems perspective and grasps instructions as part of a logical structure • Develops stronger learning skills by modeling the learning process itself
Interpersonal Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interacts easily with other people in productive teams • Seeks models and mentors to enhance learning • Understands and appreciates the values of others
Intrapersonal Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses energy on the task at hand • Perseveres through difficult tasks, making good decisions about when to seek help • Judiciously takes risks to advance personal growth • Uses failure as a frequent and productive road to success • Prioritizes tasks to effectively live a balanced life • Assesses goals and makes appropriate changes to reach them • Structures the physical and social environment to facilitate goal attainment
Thinking Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquires, questions, and thinks critically in order to gain new insights • Clarifies, validates, and assesses his or her understanding of concepts • Applies concepts to new contexts • Transfers and synthesizes concepts to solve problems • Continually assesses his or her own performance • Clarifies, validates, and assesses his or her understanding of concepts • Takes appropriate action to get back on track when the planned path is blocked or ineffective

before and after a course entitled “Methods of Inquiry.” They found significant growth in dynamic self-regulation, with nearly half of the low-quadrant students moving into the high quadrant by the end of the course (2000).

Profile of a Quality Learner

Through ten years of evolution, Pacific Crest has developed a profile that describes a quality learner based on positive behaviors in the learning function. The advantage of such a profile is that faculty can encourage students to use the behaviors in the profile to set goals and take responsibility for improving their own learning behavior. Table 1 presents areas of learner performance common to quality learners, including information processing, values, learning skills, interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills, and thinking skills.

This research has two crucial implications for college faculty. The first is that teaching students how to be successful learners is both possible and essential. The second is that faculty need to assess students’ beliefs about learning and self-efficacy to help them realize their potential as lifelong learners.

Attempts at Measuring Changes in Learning Behavior

Barbara A. Schaefer and Paul A. McDermott (1999) have been studying the correlations between learning behaviors and scholastic achievement in K-12 students, using a Learning Behavior Scale designed for teacher observations. They report that learning behavior accounts for about one-third of the variance in scholastic performance as measured by grades. They conclude, “Given roughly comparable levels of ability, students trained in optimum levels of learning behavior will have a distinct advantage over those not so trained.” It follows, then, that educators at all levels should be teaching learners how to learn and rewarding learning behaviors that are associated with high achievement. However, for the purpose of defining optimum learner behaviors, the Learning Behavior Scale used by Schaefer and McDermott is limited by its focus on negative behaviors, such as “reluctance to tackle new tasks” and “unwilling to accept needed help,” and by its design for use with young students.

Two other instruments are also used to measure some of the behaviors of learners. The Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) from the University of Texas at Austin, is a self-report questionnaire that measures motivation, self-management, and cognitive strategies (Weinstein,

Zimmerman, & Palmer, 1998). The cognitive scales for LASSI derive from the premise that successful learning depends upon integrating new learning into the framework of previous knowledge. This is consistent with current explanations of how people learn in such books as *How People Learn* (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

The National Center for Research in Improving Post-Secondary Teaching and Learning at the University of Michigan produced another instrument, the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). Also self-reporting, the MSLQ measures goal-orientation, intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, and task value. It includes a measure of the students’ belief that they are in control of their own learning and their level of expectation of success.

LASSI and MSLQ are useful instruments for measuring subsets of the learning behaviors in the profile and could be repeated to show growth over time. Neither of them, however, gives a complete picture of the complex set of behaviors of the quality learner.

Strategies for Using the Profile to Improve Learner Performance

Choosing and Assessing Learning Outcomes

Recognizing the ideal qualities of a learner helps instructors choose which learning outcomes to embed in course designs and helps them assess targeted areas of improvement. Learning environments can be designed to provide learners with opportunities to move toward the ideal and to leverage the qualities that are already present within themselves to maximize learning in any discipline. These qualities can also be used to assess learning performance across disciplines.

The Learning-to-Learn Camp Experience

Students are very receptive to information about how to learn better. In a Learning-to-Learn Camp, students are introduced to the profile of a quality learner, and quality learning behavior is deliberately rewarded and reinforced. Students use self-assessment deliberately to set achievable goals for improving their learning behavior in the short-term and to set long-term goals in their life vision portfolios. After three years of experience with Learning-to-Learn Camps, Sinclair Community College has found that students who attended the week-long camps are continuing to show significantly better success in college, as measured in grade averages and in retention, when compared with the general college population.

The activities in a Learning-to-Learn Camp address all of the areas in the profile. With respect to information processing, learners are introduced to tools such as the Reading Log (Apple, 2000) and methodologies such as the Writing Process Methodology. With respect to values, the Life Vision Portfolio (Mettauer, 2002) fosters an examination of personal values and goals through the personal mission statements that students write. One of many examples of learning skills is the use of a self-paced, computer-based math review in which students validate their own learning. Instruction in the interpersonal skills includes using roles in cooperative learning and using coaches and assistant coaches as mentors. A climate of challenging performance expectations and activities in time management help students develop intrapersonal skills.

Advancing Learner Performance through Instructional Design

Student-centered learning activities give students opportunities to improve their skills as learners. Students who are working in groups on guided discovery activities with critical thinking questions will have to practice skills in all five areas. When designing a guided-inquiry activity, educators can select specific learning skills to improve in the context of the activity. Building specific learning skills enables students to improve their learning behaviors. When students understand that it is largely their own learning behavior that determines how successful they will be at learning, they are motivated to grow their own skills.

Concluding Thoughts

Yogi Berra said, “You’ve got to be very careful if you don’t know where you are going, because you might not get there.” The module *Profile of the Quality Learner* maps out a destination for a lifelong journey. Along with their students, quality faculty members are on this journey as mentors, travel guides, and fellow learners. True learning is not, then, measured in credits and grade points and diplomas, but in the practice of continuing to move toward the ideal.

References

- Apple, D. K. (2000). *The learning assessment journal*. Lisle, IL: Pacific Crest.
- Bandura, A. (1999). The cognitive theory of personality. In D. Cervone & Y. Shoda (Eds.), *The coherence of personality: Social-cognitive bases of consistency, variability, and organization*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (Eds.) (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Garavalia, L. S., & Gredler M. E. (2002). Prior achievement, aptitude, and use of learning strategies as predictors of college student achievement in college. *Student Journal*, 36, 616-25.
- Mettauer, J. (2002). *Life vision portfolio*. Lisle, IL: Pacific Crest.
- Schaefer, B. A., & McDermott, P. A. (1999). Learning behavior and intelligence as explanations for children’s scholastic achievement. *Journal of School Psychology*, 37, 299-313.
- Schapiro, S. R., & Livingstone, J. A. (2000). Dynamic self-regulation: The driving force behind academic achievement. *Innovative Higher Education*, 25 (1) 59-76.
- Weinstein, C. E., Zimmermann, S. A., & Palmer, D. R. (1988). Assessing learning strategies: The design and development of the LASSI. In C. E. Weinstein, & E. T. Goetz (Eds.), *Learning and study strategies: Issues in assessment, instruction, and evaluation*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. *Theory into Practice*, 41.