Promoting better learning using written modules

Present information in smaller segments

Provide a task

Transform information from one form to another

→ changing words to a diagram
→ describing the idea from a diagram or chart orally

Break the learning into smaller chunks

The same issues of limited concentration span can be true of self-paced learning from printed modules. After a certain time students cannot keep on reading, as they become restless and bored, or in some cases plain reading is just not effective for them.

As one trade teachers saw it:

'The students won't read – they don't read the whole thing
– they read the questions, then go back and look for an answer.'

Creating new written modules

Although it expresses his frustration, this comment also provides a clue for a strategy to keep in mind when producing learning materials. According to his observations, the students sought the information when they needed it for a purpose, that is, to answer the questions. So it makes sense to present the information in smaller segments and then provide a task that requires students to act or do something with it. For the sake of effective learning, these tasks should encourage learners to engage with the language and content in a way that will make it their own.

Active learning strategies for written learning materials

Engagement or ownership can occur through actively transforming or changing information from one form to another, for example, changing words into a diagram, describing the idea from a diagram or chart orally, creating a summary sequence of key words with arrows that can be a reminder of an important process. This type of learning task will not only help students to understand the language and content but will assist them to become independent learners themselves by modelling these typical active learning strategies.

Simple activities such as true or false, matching words with meanings, labelling blank spaces on diagrams or arranging items into categories, can be effectively introduced into written materials to keep students actively engaged with the content.

Active learning strategies to supplement existing written materials

Rewriting the learning materials is not always an option. But it is possible to break existing resources into more digestible chunks yourself and to encourage students to engage in tasks that involve literacy modes other than just reading.

Breaking the modules into chunks

During a professional development program one of the trade teachers became more aware of students' problems related to language and reading when using self paced modules. Instead of relying wholly on the notes, he began to combine some direct teaching with the modules in order to break the learning into smaller chunks.

He used several strategies to do this: sometimes teaching the content of a topic or process and then asking the students to complete the questions at the back of the module; sometimes setting chunks as a goal for a given time period then asking the students to talk about aspects of what they had learned.

He also began to do more formative assessment along the way as a check for himself and the students that they were learning from the modules. To do this, he introduced a system of taking random questions from the modules that students had already done and giving spot revision checks. As well as giving him an idea of

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how well the students were coping and whether they were learning as they went, he said

'the students have an understanding of how much work they have to do
-they are putting in more now.'

Using small study groups or pairs

Use peer learning

Other possible strategies involve clusters of students working as study groups / pairs so that a teacher can introduce peer learning tasks along the way. For example, asking them to explain processes or concepts to each other, or to ask someone else how they would tackle a particular job, or together, decide on appropriate procedures, regulations or strategies for particular situations.

One computer programming teacher has found it particularly successful to pair international students with able local students who are willing to assist with language complexities. For example they might put difficult terminology into more simple language, explain colloquialisms or express ideas more simply. These students are given an incentive of bonus marks for their peer tutoring efforts. However, even if that were not the case, research into group and pair work indicates that students who explain their understandings to others tend to have improved learning and obtain better results.

Structuring teacher interaction with individual learners

Stop frequently
→ explain

If study groups are not possible, the teacher can act as the audience, stopping frequently to speak to individuals and encouraging them to discuss what they are learning. For example, asking them to explain the last part of their learning or talk about the most interesting fact they have read in the last half hour. In this way the students can explain their understanding to the teacher.

Making links to the workplace

If teachers can encourage conversations about students' workplace in relation to what is being learned in the modules, it would encourage students to 'own' their learning and make helpful learning connections. For example, ask them when they think this procedure, regulation or concept might be applied in their current work situations. This type of discussion would be useful no matter whether it is with the whole class, small groups or with individuals.

VET learners are not as self directed as writers assume

A recent national research study indicates that self-directed learning materials are a very common feature of VET course delivery. Unfortunately, the study also found that VET students tend not to be very self-directed. They prefer to work in groups and under the direction and guidance of their teacher. This preference for teacher guidance is particularly important for learning the 'theory' (underpinning knowledge) associated with a course 'It's pretty easy to achieve self direction with practical work, but much more difficult with theory' (p. 27).

Combine theory and practice as much as possible

Integrate theory
with pratice

Of interest was the fact that students preferred sessions where theory and practice were integrated into the delivery. Alternatively, if that was not possible, they valued opportunities to put theory into practice soon after a theory lesson.

This suggests that it would also be useful for better learning if theoretical input was organised into smaller time blocks and interspersed between practical segments wherever possible.

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