

Unit 7 : Providing study advice

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Introduction

A course unit may be well-written, but can the reader perceive the writer's intention? Is the material at the right level for students? Have they the necessary skills to extract the meaning?

Skills of this nature are often called study skills. In this unit we shall consider a range of study skills, ask how far we can expect students to have these skills, and consider how we can help them to acquire them.

At the end of this unit you should be able to:

- * decide if a unit contains sufficient guidance on study skills;
- * advise a writer of cases where training in such skills is needed;
- * suggest ways in which such training might be provided;
- * suggest alternative ways of presenting material to allow for different approaches to study.

The unit starts with the need to teach study skills. We then consider their development, first by direct training and then by matching the level of the text to the expected competence of students. This leads us to consider using techniques such as pictures and stories to make materials more accessible to students with various approaches to study.

The unit will take about one hour. You may find it helpful first to look through Assignment B about your own students. The assignment will take one or two hours, and you will need a sample course unit to work on. You can use the same one that you used for the last assignment.

1. The need to teach study skills

A competent student will be able to read a text and select from it important points, classify them, develop arguments, formulate concepts, draw conclusions. An inexperienced student may need help with all these tasks. Experienced students, too, may have difficulty in coping with certain subjects. When students are in class, adjustments can be made to teaching and individual assistance given to help with study problems. With distant students, no such assistance is possible. We must therefore try to present our teaching in a way that helps students develop new approaches to study and new study skills.

As you work on a text, ask yourself what skills the student will require to handle the material. Is the writer giving the students enough help with developing those skills? A class teacher instructs people in study methods as a matter of course. Teachers tend to forget to do this when they start writing. You have to remind them.

No group of students will be homogeneous in their approach to study. We cannot assume that all pre-university students need help with making notes, and we cannot assume that all university students will already know how to do this. Anyone studying at a very basic level will obviously have limited experience of study and will need a great deal of assistance in learning how to learn. On more advanced courses, some students will need more help than others, and the writer must provide enough help for the weaker students so that they gradually accumulate more skills.

How can this be done? One solution is to provide special courses in study skills. These can be general or relate to particular subjects. For example, the National Extension College has a general course, How To Study Effectively, and a number of short ones on such topics as writing essays for social sciences. A general study skills course usually includes advice on making a study timetable, organising a place for study, reading techniques, note taking and memorising, revision and exam preparation, and so on. The disadvantage of such courses is that they are studied in separation from the main subject of study, so that students may fail to apply the techniques to that subject.

A second method is to teach study skills at relevant points in another course. This can be done directly or indirectly. We look at each in turn.

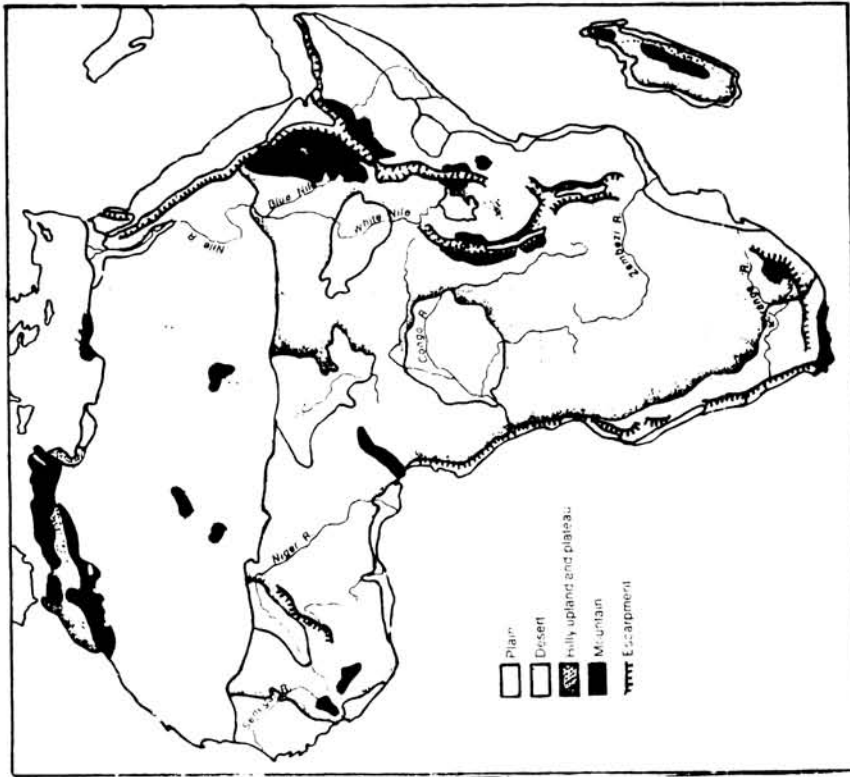
2. Direct teaching of study skills

As a course is planned, it is possible to list a range of study skills a student requires to complete it. If our knowledge of typical students suggests that many do not have these skills, we can teach them explicitly in the course. Example 19 shows map-reading skills taught alongside information about physical features of Africa. (The size of the pages has been reduced so that you can see both together.)

LESSON TWO - LAND AND WATER FORMS

LAND FORMS

In Lesson One you learned that Africa's large size means that there are many different environments and resources. It also means that there are many different land forms. The map below shows the main land forms of Africa.



On the left hand side you will find the key to the map. The key tells us that there are five different land forms shown on the map.

The top box of the key is white. It is labelled "plain". A plain is a large stretch of flat land. Look at the map. Find the areas that are white. These are the plains of Africa.

Now look at the next box. It has many dots inside it. This box shows you the areas of Africa that are desert. Can you find the dotted areas on the map? Now you know where the deserts are found. The northern part of Africa is mostly desert. This desert is called the Sahara Desert. Because the Sahara Desert is so difficult to cross it forms a dividing point between northern Africa and the rest of the continent. That is why the rest of Africa is often called Africa south of the Sahara.

The third box is lightly shaded and shows the hilly upland and plateau area. A plateau is a large stretch of level land much higher than the land around it. This land form covers most of the continent south of the Sahara. Because most of Africa is made up of plateau land Africa is called the "Plateau Continent". No other continent has so much plateau land.

The last box is black. This shows the mountain areas of Africa. There are not many of them, so they should be easy to find on the map. Look first at the southern area of Africa. You can see the black area at the very bottom of the map. These are the mountains of South Africa. Put your finger on these mountains. Now move your finger a few centimetres up and to the right. Do you see the next mountain area? This is Lesotho. There are other large mountain areas in northern and eastern Africa.

Fill in the missing words:

The largest land form in northern Africa is 1. _____
 Africa has more 2. _____ land than any other type of land.
 The 3. _____ Desert forms the dividing line between northern Africa and Africa 4. _____ of the Sahara.

The last land form shown on the map is the escarpment. It is shown by the symbol . An escarpment is a long cliff on the side of the mountain. Find the mountain area that is Lesotho. There is an escarpment which runs from South Africa along the Lesotho border and back into South Africa. This is the Drakensberg Escarpment.

EXAMPLE 19: From 'Social Studies II: 1 Africa: the land and the people', Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre/National Teacher Training College, Maseru, Lesotho, pp.12-13

EXERCISE 1

Pick out the following features in Example 19. Notice how they are introduced.

1. The explanation of the key
2. The identification of the students own country
3. Explanations of technical terms
4. A comprehension exercise

(5 minutes)

Comment

The introduction to map reading is done extremely well in this example. Help is given efficiently but unobtrusively. The style is quite different from a normal textbook, where the teacher would be expected to provide the explanations.

Sometimes major study skills such as map reading are covered in an appendix to a course book or a special short booklet.

Example 20 shows further direct guidance on approaches to a text. This time, it is from an introductory course in social science. It helps students with technical vocabulary. What study skills does it assume students have?

The other two sources of difficulty are:

- abstract language generally;
- words used only in social science or with specific 'social science' meanings.

What can you do about these two sources of difficulty?



The first thing you can do is to get into the habit of substituting your own meaning for any difficult phrases you meet. Otherwise you'll tie yourself up in knots looking up every other word! To take an example from Halsey. The sense of the passage should help you to work out that 'matrilocal matriarchies' means something like 'mother-centred homes' or 'communities in which the mother is the main focus'. So first try to work out for yourself what the difficult words mean.

The next think you can do with difficult language is to use a dictionary. But use it selectively and only after the first strategy fails. I had a friend who used to look up every word about which he was slightly unsure; this meant that he never did much reading. A good dictionary, such as the *Concise Oxford* or *Chambers Twentieth Century*, will help with many words you will meet – words you will meet not only in social science but in abstract writing generally (e.g. in the editorials of 'quality' newspapers).



SAQ 6: Find a reasonable dictionary. Look up

- matrilocal
- matriarchy
- homogeneous.

These are relatively straightforward to find in my dictionary (*Chambers's*) though 'homogeneous' took a bit of uncovering (one of many entries under 'homo').

Intelligent, purposeful use of a dictionary can help with words like this.

EXAMPLE 20: From 'Preparing for Social Science', National Extension College, Cambridge, UK, 1981, p.37

Comment

The writer assumes that the students have access to a dictionary and can make 'intelligent, purposeful use' of it. The short exercise is in fact a reminder that dictionaries are a useful aid to developing vocabulary, but it assumes that the students already have some skill in using dictionaries. The students are treated as more independent than those in the previous example.

In both these examples, the course writers were trying to make sure students understood material presented to them; one taught them to read a map, the other was concerned with understanding a text. In both cases the writers drew attention to difficulties.

3. Indirect approaches

You can encourage students to develop study skills without making the students aware that you are doing this. If you think they need help picking out main points, you can make sure such points are underlined or summarised separately. If they need to develop expertise in drawing diagrams, you can make sure diagrams in the text provide suitable models for them to copy, even if this means that the printed drawings lack polish. Example 21 presents a further idea. Read it carefully, before going through the comments.

3.8 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FORCE AND PRESSURE

Most people do not really distinguish between the terms force and pressure, but, for the scientist, these words have very different meanings and are not interchangeable. When you sit down your weight causes a force to be exerted on the object you sit on and in order to support you the object pushes back. The total 'push-back' force is always the same, whatever you sit on, but it is more comfortable sitting on a cushion than on a hard, flat seat, or maybe on the top rail of a fence. The difference in the general effect of the force is due to the way in which it is spread or concentrated. A cushion moulds to your shape and the total force is spread over a large area – so you change shape very little. On a hard seat you have to change shape to spread the load and still don't spread it as much as the cushion does. The result is a greater pressure and less comfort. Most people sleep on a mattress so that their weight spreads over a large area, but the Indian fakir is reputed to sleep on the points of a bed of nails which concentrate the weight on a small total area and produce high pressures.

A simple little device like a drawing-pin involves this difference between force and pressure in a straightforward way. Whatever force is needed to make the pin penetrate has to be supplied by your thumb. But you do need a large pressure at the other end to ensure that the surface is penetrated easily. So the two ends of the drawing-pin are made to have very different areas. The thumb end has a large area so that the force is well spread out; not much force to any particular bit of the area. The penetrating end has a very small area so that all the force is concentrated on the very small piece.

These examples should be sufficient to indicate that pressure involves an area as well as the size of a force. Low pressure is produced by spreading a force over a large area, high pressure by concentrating a force on a very small area.

Pressure is measured by finding how much force is being exerted on each unit of area. If the area is measured in square centimetres (cm²), then pressure is force on each cm² (Assuming that the force is spread evenly over the whole area.)

$$\text{Pressure} = \frac{\text{force}}{\text{area on which force acts}}$$

EXAMPLE 21: From 'The World of Science', National Extension College, Cambridge, UK, 1978, Volume 1, p.80

Comment

This writer assumes that students will find the distinction between force

and pressure difficult. He has therefore presented an explanation which leads very gently to the formula, and leaves no room for misunderstanding. The passage is deceptively simple. It is worth examining what the writer has done to ensure that readers can pick out the main points:

- * there is a clear heading and an explicit first sentence
- * there are many examples
- * all the examples are easy to understand
- * all the examples are relevant, and connect well with each other
- * the third paragraph presents an explicit statement of what the examples show. It is also short so that it stands out
- * the formula, when it comes, is not forbidding

The passage deliberately helps the student to learn the new concept. The writer has selected and ordered material so that the concept is not only clear but also easy to remember.

4. Alternative ways of presenting material

This unit so far has argued that, since students approach studying in different ways and with different skills, we should include in our texts training in study skills. In addition, we can vary the way we present material, to suit the experience or taste of different student groups.

EXERCISE 2

The last example explained the difference between force and pressure in a prose description. Can you think of any other ways of presenting the topic in print, using the same examples? Note down some ideas.

(5 minutes)

Comment


You could use pictures or diagrams, or you could have a story about a fakir. These light approaches might be suitable for less advanced students or for children. You could present a series of problems - why do we sleep on mattresses and not beds of nails? - so that students work out the differences for themselves. That approach might suit more advanced, independent students.

There are always several possible ways of presenting the same information. Remind writers of this, suggest possibilities, and choose between them, bearing in mind the kind of students you are aiming to teach.

Example 22 shows how a lively presentation can lighten a potentially dull topic. It is from a lower secondary-level correspondence course in Commerce for young adults from Papua New Guinea. The meaning of value is presented through a story and with comments by a cartoon character.

COMMERCE 32 UNIT 1


LESSON 10



Do you remember our village on the Sepik River? Here is another story.

One day Doby's family came to see Kano's family. Doby's family wanted food, so they brought some clay pots to trade (barter). Doby's wife, Mel, asked Heni how much food she would give her for one of the pots.


It was a very big pot and Heni liked it very much. However, Heni did not want to give Mel too much of her produce. This made them argue for a long time - Heni wanted to give 3 hands of bananas and 2 bags of sago, but Mel wanted another bag of sago as well. They just could not agree on the VALUE of the goods to be bartered.



WAIT !! What does "VALUE" mean?


VALUE means the worth of something;
how much a person will give to get something.

To Heni, the VALUE of the pot was about 3 hands of bananas and 2 bags of sago, but Mel thought that the pot was worth more.



I see. So the VALUE of the coconut I produced is the 2 fish that I got in EXCHANGE.

Right! Very good! Now can you tell me what the difficulty was that made Heni and Mel argue?



They could not agree on the VALUE of the pot.

That's right! This is one of the problems of BARTER.

EXAMPLE 22: From 'Commerce Grade 7', College of External Studies, Konedobu, Papua New Guinea, 1979, Unit 1, p.32

5. Some problems

How do you decide what help students need with study skills? The best guidance comes from reports from students themselves concerning their problems. You can, however, help writers to identify potential difficulties by referring them to their experience of teaching the subject in a class. They may remember incidents when students asked for help. You can also assist by imagining yourself as a student and picking out points where you might have difficulty interpreting the material.

Another difficulty is to decide on the starting point for teaching study skills. It would be unrealistic to design every course as if all students had no experience of study. Writers must decide what competencies they expect the average student at a particular level to have, must teach new skills, and must include revision of some of the more basic skills, to compensate for students' insecurity and rustiness. Adult distant students tend to lack confidence in their abilities, and this can lead to a cautious, restricted approach to study.

What about the below-average student? Writers ought to provide sufficient guidance for those who can struggle through. Perhaps you can encourage writers to recall one particular slow but steady student they have taught, and incorporate in their units the study advice they gave that person. There will always be a few students who are unable to cope, and the writer should not be expected to allow for them. A course is set at a particular level, and those who cannot manage have to be identified by tutors or counsellors, and directed to courses at a more suitable level.

Some courses, in areas like community education, are open to those with very mixed educational backgrounds. Such courses often have a strong emphasis on group study and discussion, so that dependence on print is much reduced.

Summary

In this unit we have considered problems students may have in studying printed material. They may fail to make full use of a course if the text gives insufficient advice or no help with study skills, or the material is presented in a way which is of restricted appeal.

I have suggested that you should:

1. Alert writers to the need for guidance on studying.
2. Help identify the difficulties students might have, using the writer's teaching experience, reports from students and your own ideas.
3. Help identify particular points in the unit where students might have problems.
4. Suggest to the writer ways in which he or she might offer guidance, including the direct and indirect teaching of study skills, and alternative teaching approaches.

ASSIGNMENT F

For this assignment you will again need a course unit. You can use the one you chose for the last assignment, or, if you prefer, you can choose a different unit.

Read through the unit and complete the following tasks:

1. Make a list of the skills students will need to develop to make good use of the material.
2. Pick out any points in the unit where advice is given on study skills.
3. Pick out points where advice is lacking.
4. Suggest how that advice might be given.

You may find it helpful to work on your unit with a colleague, another editor or a course writer. You should in any case consult a writer or a teacher of the subject you have chosen when you have completed the exercise. Explain what you have done, and discuss your ideas together.

If possible, you could discuss your suggestions with a student on the course.

The whole assignment will probably take you about two hours. If the unit you have chosen is lengthy, limit yourself to studying part of it.