

Chapter 4

Assessing and Teaching Primary Students About Self-Directed Learning

ABSTRACT

Chapter 4 describes the development of the second part of the assessment that assesses primary students' SDL. Following this there is an outline of the way the assessment was administered in six schools before and after 150 students participated in an intervention study in which the author taught Year 5 classes about SDL in four lessons based on the framework for classroom development of SDL. The chapter ends with a summary of the analysis of the aggregated scores of 150 students across four assessments of their SDL knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

In this book, it is being argued that primary students' competence in SDL can be developed through teaching students about learning processes and strategies. In this way students are assisted to increase their capacity to engage in inquiry where they need to be self-directed. Such a view could be seen as the antithesis of constructivism, which has an emphasis on students learning through constructing ideas rather than teaching actions carried out by the teacher. Indeed, a principal claim of constructivism is that knowledge is made rather than found (Phillips, 2000). As Phillips described it, constructivist

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pedagogy takes students' knowledge, attitudes and interests as the starting point in learning situations. Instruction is then designed to provide experiences that effectively interact with the students' characteristics so they can construct their own understanding.

It could also be argued that teachers using a constructivist approach could observe students' current levels of knowledge, understanding and behaviors, and then provide them with strategies that support their on-going concept construction and learning. In this way, constructivism does not take interactions between teachers and students out of the process, but allows learners to be autonomous in how they use information shared by the teacher to support their understanding.

Student engagement is likely to be high if they have opportunities to work on real problems that engage their attention. This would be the case in a classroom that focusses on learner-centered instruction (Shuh, 2003) because there would be an emphasis on fostering opportunities for learners to draw on their own experiences and interpretations as they learn. Constructivist approaches to learning stress that teachers need to understand students' perspectives and support their capacities as they work to achieve learning outcomes.

ASSESSING LEARNING PROCESSES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

There has been little attention to discussions of teaching or evaluating primary students' SDL, although Treffinger's (1975) descriptions of ways to assist gifted elementary (primary) students to become self-directing (Treffinger, 1975) provides an outline of SDL processes. However, it has been noted previously that he did not discuss knowledge of SDL as the basis for students' SDL behavior.

Students' dispositional beliefs influence their orientation to learning and the learning behaviors they choose. These beliefs are the tendency students have to act and think in positive ways, and are evident in the ways they approach tasks and reflect on their own thinking (Tittle, 1994). Importantly, dispositional beliefs influence self-regulation strategies chosen by students to set goals as they work on inquiry tasks, and the effort they make to use their skills as they direct their learning activities. Students' dispositional beliefs can be positive or negative and are directly related to motivation. This is particularly relevant

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