Practice activities match students’ *Stages of Learning*

*Laissez-faire practice produces laissez-faire learning.*

Becoming proficient at using a new strategy involves four basic levels of learning: Awareness, Acquisition, Proficiency, and Generalization. Most teachers address the initial levels, but for various reasons tend not to address the last two levels. Unfortunately, this partial approach to instruction rarely has much of an impact on most students.

Most teachers “teach and hope” – that is, they teach a skill and provide the intensity of instruction needed to enable students to perform the skill correctly and quickly, and then hope students will generalize its use to contexts outside of their classrooms. Unfortunately, a considerable body of research shows that students typically do not generalize skill instruction unless they are explicitly taught how to generalize and unless steps are taken to ensure that generalization occurs and is reinforced.

If instruction in a skill or strategy does not result in students independently using it to be successful at tasks or solving problems, the attempt at teaching is largely a waste of teachers’ and students’ time and energy. In other words, if nothing changes in the students’ lives as a result of instruction, what was accomplished? Such a question is disconcerting, but nonetheless it is one that we cannot ignore if the goal is to change students in ways that lead to independence.

A concrete example of levels of learning you have likely experienced was what happened when you learned to drive an automobile. During the initial **Awareness** stage, you were learning the basics, such as how to start the engine, basic rules of the road, how to steer and brake the vehicle, and so forth. Someone, perhaps your parent, told you what to do (and what not to do), and modeled critical behaviors.

During the **Acquisition** stage, you were mastering the basics of driving. This was the period when it seemed to you that there were a thousand things you had to think about, all at once. Although you managed to learn to parallel park, it probably took you several tries to do it well. You probably had a slightly frightened, slightly amused parent sitting next to you, coaching and providing feedback as you practiced various maneuvers.
Gradually, your learning shifted to the **Proficiency** stage. Here, you practiced driving at every opportunity, gradually moving from very controlled situations (e.g., driving in parking lots or down dirt roads) to driving on highways, and eventually, fast-moving freeways. The more you drove, the easier it seemed to get, and the ready you were to take on more challenging driving conditions. Eventually, it got to the point where much of what was involved in driving an automobile was automatic – that is, you just did it without thinking about it.

You reached the **Generalization** stage of learning when you got your driver’s licensee and no longer needed coaching to help you master the basics of driving, although you probably welcomed a bit of advice from an expert when driving conditions were particularly unusual. During this stage, you used all of the generic driving techniques you had developed to this point as a basis for independently developing specialized driving skills, such as how to drive in bad weather, how to drive in fast-moving heavy traffic, how to drive different kinds of vehicles, and so forth.

Learning to use a strategy reflects these same levels in much the same ways.

### Effective Alternative

Begin instruction of a strategy by focusing on generalization as the goal. All subsequent instruction should be designed so that whatever you do leads, in some way, to students independently using the skill to increase their success at tasks or to solve problems.

Maintain your awareness that instruction in the strategy is not complete until students are generalize the skill.

Differentiate your instruction to correspond to the level of learning students have attained.

### Specific Tips

The road to mastering a skill is marked by four basic stages of learning.

During the first phase, **Awareness**, students develop an understanding of what the skill is, what the steps are to performing the skill, why the skill will be a useful tool to them, and when it can be used. When introducing the skill during this phase, one of the best tactics is to provide a very clear explanation of the skill with particular attention to the specific steps involved when performing it. At this stage of learning, instruction from you regarding how to perform the skill should be direct and explicit – that is, tell students how to perform the skill and model what it looks like. Think out loud to show students the covert processes that are involved when performing the strategy. As you model the skill, be sure to explicitly label each step as you perform it.
During the **Acquisition** phase, students acquire the ability to learn how to do the skill accurately. It is critical to remember that the goal is to enable students to perform the skill correctly, making few or no errors as they are practicing it. Thus, providing assisted practice is critical at this point (see Scaffolded Assistance).

The nature of practice materials and tasks should reflect a simple-to-complex continuum of difficulty (see Scaffolded Practice).

Instruction gradually shifts from the acquisition phase of learning to the **Proficiency** stage. Here, the goal is for students to not only perform the skill correctly, but also to perform it fluidly, relatively quickly and with ease. At this point, students already know how to use the strategy and can perform it relatively well. The difference is that now the emphasis is on developing automaticity.

**Generalization** is the fourth, and ultimate, goal of skill instruction. At this point, students should have already mastered independent use of the skill on tasks associated with your class.

Generalization occurs when students begin to spontaneously use a skill to solve problems or complete tasks in contexts other than the one in which they learned the skill. Here, the skill becomes a tool that students personally value and use.

To promote generalization of a skill, some of the tactics you can use include:

- Informing students that you expect them to generalize the skill.

- Exploring with students the contexts and setting outside of your classroom in which the skill can be used.

- Discussing possible adaptations that might be needed in different contexts and settings.

- Making generalization assignments (i.e., "Your assignment is to identify a situation or task that is not related to my classroom where you can use this skill to increase your success and then apply the skill. Bring me evidence that shows how your applied the skill and the product that resulted.").

- Providing feedback on students’ attempts to generalize the skill.
• Reinforcing students’ generalization attempts.

• Assign generalization grades. Base part of the grade students receive in your class on how well students apply the skill to meet the demands of other classes.

• “Priming” the target environments so that cues to generalize occur (i.e., ask other teachers to cue your students to use the skill at opportune times).

• Coordinating generalization assignments (ask other teachers to require students to use the skill in their classes).

This program includes a variety of “Instructional Tips” that provide suggestions for how to use scaffolded practice with specific tools and think sheets.