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An Approach to Teaching Organizational Skills to Adults

In English language teaching, it is not unusual to come across a student who seems to lack certain basic organizational skills. However, many of our language teaching techniques and materials require students to rely heavily on these skills. The use of textbooks and handouts, the assigning of tasks and homework, and the planning of a syllabus or curriculum all presuppose competent organizational skills in our students. Teaching students who lack these skills can be a frustrating experience for teachers and students alike because, without basic organizational skills, students cannot seem to learn—that is, to absorb, retain, and use—the information the teacher is trying to teach. When the teacher has to spend extra time on lessons and repeat information in order to help such students, the pace of the class slows, creating a situation that is not conducive to successful language learning. This article presents a rationale and approach for incorporating organizational skills development into the mainstream curriculum to help all students and especially to help those students with weak organizational skills, without setting them apart from the rest of the class. While students need much more than organizational skills to learn a language, mastery of this set of skills can foster student success in the language learning classroom.

Why teach organizational skills?

Have you ever asked students to take out a handout from a previous lesson and watched and waited while a student dug through a backpack filled with loose papers trying to find the one in question? Have you ever carefully built lesson plans based on activities covered earlier in the semester and had students view each assignment in isolation? Have you ever had a student tell you he ran out of time and could not finish his test? Teaching the organizational skills of paper management and time budgeting can reduce these problems by helping students locate papers easily, see the connections between different topics and assignments covered in the class, and use their in-class and out-of-class time more efficiently.

While few classroom instructors would disagree that good organizational skills are essential to academic success, there is less agreement about how students can acquire these skills. Perhaps the most common assumption is that students arrive in the classroom with these skills already established. In many cases, this is true. The students may have been taught these skills earlier in their educational careers and have successfully learned them, they may have inferred these skills on their own, or they may have learned similar skills in other walks of life and have been able to transfer them to the academic setting. However, many students do not possess organizational skills because they have never been taught the skills, they did not successfully learn them when they were taught, or they were unable to infer them. Joan Sedita, a teacher trainer and literacy specialist, reminds us that there are some students who "need direct, systematic instruction to develop these skills" (Sedita 1999). Moreover, organizational skills that students have mastered at lower rungs of the educational ladder may fail them in a more demanding program with more complex assignments, a larger number of papers to juggle, and more complicated daily schedules than they have faced before. Weak organizational skills can become especially problematic if a student enters an institution of higher education.

Organizational skills or language skills?

Needless to say, it is understandable that reading and writing teachers might feel it is their responsibility to teach reading and writing, grammar teachers might feel obliged to teach grammar, and conversation instructors might believe it is their job to teach conversation skills. They may be reticent to take time out from what they perceive as the real subjects of instruction to focus on organizational skills. However, the degree of a teacher's success in these teaching endeavors depends on a student's ability to organize. Teaching organizational skills and teaching language skills do not constitute an either-or choice. On the contrary, spending time teaching organizational skills "eventually saves time by facilitating the learning of content material and creating more effective techniques for test preparation" (Sedita 2006).

Cultural preparation

There are further grounds for teaching organizational skills. Most English as a foreign language (EFL) programs recognize that language goes hand-in-hand with culture, and they willingly accept the challenge to teach their students knowledge about the culture along with knowledge about the language. Since many EFL students may one day come to an American or western-style academic institution or may one day work for a multinational company, teaching organizational skills is an ideal instructional strategy to promote cultural adjustment. Some of these students may come from cultures that are more collectivistic than individualistic, that focus more on indirect than direct communication, and that give oral skills primacy over literacy (reading and writing skills). If the students are going to attend an institution of higher education or look for a job in a western-style company, they should be prepared to handle large quantities of paper. In cultures with an emphasis on reading and writing, or literacy, people are held accountable for information they have received in written form. For example, professors at universities in the United States might include test dates on the syllabus handed out at the beginning of the semester but not refer to those dates orally in class. If printed information is given to the students, the students are responsible for knowing that information. As Robert Kaplan, professor emeritus at the University of Southern California, explains, "we have come to believe that the written" language "is inherently (or can be made to be) more accurate than the spoken variety" (Kaplan 1986, 18).

At a most basic level, this means that students may be unfamiliar with having to sort through the copious amounts of printed material that abound in heavily literate cultures. As Marianne Teräs, a researcher at the University of Helsinki, explains in discussing immigrants' experiences in Finland, the great prevalence of paper "causes concern among immigrant students from countries where it is a scarce resource and thus uncommon in schools, or where learning practices involve textbooks and notebooks, not papers as such. Thereby, questions arise concerning how to read papers, how to write them, how to take

care of them, and how to organize them" (Teräs 2007, 142). Even those of us acculturated into heavily literate societies struggle at times to organize and prioritize the reams of papers that surround us daily. For those who have not needed to learn and hone skills for such tasks, managing papers can by itself become an overwhelming and confusing chore.

Presenting vs. teaching

Teaching organizational skills is an active and on-going exercise. As with teaching any skill, it includes (1) explaining the purpose of the skill (e.g., explaining what mastery of the skill will do for a student), (2) presenting the steps involved in the skill, (3) giving students ample opportunities to practice the skill, (4) creating and using multiple opportunities for reinforcing the skill, (5) periodically assessing the degree of mastery of the skill, and (6) following up with skill maintenance activities.

At this point, one devilishly persistent argument crops up. The teacher thinks: "Okay, I understand that some students might not have organizational skills, and I understand how useful they can be. I don't mind *presenting* some organizational skills during class time, but *teaching* organizational skills by applying the above six components is something else. First of all, I don't want to take too much class time to do it, and secondly, these students are adults—if I present the concept, they should be able to implement it on their own."

This is when we remind ourselves what it means to teach a content subject as opposed to a skill subject. Let us examine a basketball analogy. You can hand a student a book with all of the rules of the game. You can even have that student watch hours of basketball on television or at the gym. However, even if the student dutifully learns the rules and studies the game, there is little chance that he or she will play the game successfully the first time he or she steps onto the court. Performing a skill is as much about application of rules, movements, and patterns as it is about memorizing them. Moving the analogy closer to home, we must also teach skills when we teach language. Only a poor teacher believes that providing grammar rules fulfills his or her obligation to students. Teachers know that students must see many examples, must be given many opportunities for practice, and must be caught making mistakes before they can approach mastery of the rules. It is the same with teaching organizational skills. Telling students to organize their class papers and explaining the importance of this may work as a reminder for those students who already have sound organizational skills, but chances are it will have a negligible effect on students with weak organizational skills. Telling is not the same as teaching, and hearing is not the equivalent of learning.

Effective teaching of organizational skills

A common approach to helping students whose needs might be labeled by some as "out of the mainstream" is the *accommodation approach* often used in adult education as a way to meet the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which gives equal access to postsecondary education to qualifying students with disabilities. With this approach, students identify themselves to their instructor and provide documentation of their disability to professionals on campus who then, along with the student, determine what accommodations the students need. These accommodations are presented to the instructor, who must then either incorporate these accommodations into the curriculum or provide them separately to the individual student.

Of course, I am not suggesting that our students have any disabilities. My point is that instructors, when faced with students who are making insufficient progress, often try to implement stopgap measures to remedy the situation in much the same way that an instructor, when faced with a list of accommodations, must scramble to fulfill these accommodations. This approach is tenable, to a certain extent, when an instructor is dealing with a single student. Even so, such an approach singles out that student, which can put him or her under a certain amount of stress. In a situation when multiple students need special accommodations, the result can be a haphazard curriculum that has lost its vision and continuity. Instead, it is a "putting out fires" approach to classroom instruction.

Now, let's turn to the field of architecture. This sounds a bit strange, but we will go there via the field of adult education. Over the past decade, the field of adult education has taken the principle of *universal design* (UD) from the field of architecture and has created a new paradigm for education. UD is based on the principle that diversity in the human population is the norm. Rather than letting diversity catch us off-guard, we should plan for it. Scott, McGuire, and Shaw (2003), pioneers in the application of UD to instruction, explain that when environments are designed with maximum accessibility for everyone involved, few, if any, need special accommodations. This is true for both the design of physical environments and the design of learning environments. Whereas adapting to diverse instructional circumstances on an after-the-fact basis can be difficult and time-consuming, planning for diversity from the start has the potential to increase the effectiveness of instruction (Scott, McGuire, and Shaw 2003). In other words, building basic organizational skills into our curriculum from the start can result in a more cohesive, sequential curriculum for all students.

Teaching organizational skills

To successfully teach organizational skills to your students, you must ensure that they have the necessary supplies, you must prepare materials, and you must train the students in the skills of verbalization and classification. Of course, there will be great variation in the supplies and materials that are available in different parts of the world. Remember, it is the *system* that is important, not the specific supplies. Use what is at hand, and do not be afraid to improvise!

Recommended supplies

At the beginning of the semester, require students to have the following supplies:

- *Notebook paper and a zipper pouch for pens and pencils*.
- *A daily planner or calendar*. This item will help students manage their time and schedules, which is essential to getting organized. A planner can be as simple as a piece of paper with dates written on every other line.
- *A three-ring binder, an accordion file, or a box*. The three-ring binder is for in-class materials and will hold all of the papers that come back and forth from home to class. If a binder is not available, try an accordion file or even a box that is the appropriate size to lay papers in while leaving enough room to allow a hand to reach around the papers to lift them out.
- *A second three-ring binder, accordion file, or box*. This second binder, file, or box is for all of the papers that students no longer need to bring to class, and it remains at home to lighten the load the students carry to class every day.
- *Dividers with tabs*. The dividers can be regular pieces of paper, card stock, or cardboard; sticky notes or folded over pieces of tape make useful tabs. If you are using a box and the sections are stacked on top of each other, it works best to have a thicker divider, like cardboard, between the sections so students can find materials easily.

Later in the semester, if students are using a three-ring binder, they should also be required to purchase a three-hole punch to keep at home and a smaller hole-punch that they can bring to school. This serves a two-fold purpose. First of all, it shifts a bit of the responsibility onto the students, which, of course, is an essential step in helping them to develop organizational skills. Secondly, it gives them the tools for applying the organizational principles they are learning to other parts of their lives. For example, adult learners may be receiving papers from their children's school. These papers will not necessarily arrive already hole punched; by having a hole punch on hand, the students can create other binders for these and other important papers.

Materials preparation

Prepare materials for the class as indicated below.

- *Color code papers*. Find a system that makes sense for your class. For example, you could color-code according to sections of the textbook by using blue papers for handouts related to the first unit, yellow paper for the second unit, and green paper for the third. Alterna-

tively, you could color-code according to topic: all quizzes on pink, all verb exercises on cream, all noun exercises on lavender. If it is not feasible for you to print on colored paper, have students color the edges of handouts with markers in the designated colors.

- *Hole punch handouts*. If you are asking students to keep their papers in a binder, make sure that all of the handouts that you distribute in class have been three-hole punched. This means that the students can immediately insert the papers into their binders.
- *Provide descriptive headings*. Make sure that all handouts contain a clear and descriptive heading at the top. That will help students decide where to file the papers.

Verbalizing thought processes

In several of the following activities, students are asked to verbalize their thought processes to the teacher or to other students either during or immediately after an activity. For example, when they write their homework assignments in their daily planner, students should explain aloud to the class how they will budget their time during the remainder of the week. Verbalizing the thought process used to carry out a task is crucial for the student who is performing the verbalization, for the students who are listening, and for the teacher. Kenneth Gattis, Director of North Carolina State University's Undergraduate Tutorial Center, explains that speaking makes students clarify any fuzzy ideas that are expressed in English, and "speaking then becomes a way of learning. In the process of verbalizing, students often become aware of the specific point on which they are confused. Also, they may realize what they need to do to overcome the problem" (Gattis 1998). In addition, "students gain confidence when they realize they understand concepts well enough to express them verbally. The verbal expression of the ideas also gives the teacher the opportunity to provide positive reinforcement, which further enhances the student's confidence" (Gattis 1998). In addition, verbalization gives the teacher insight into what the student does and does not understand. With this information, the teacher will better know how to help the student.

Perhaps most importantly, verbalization can help a student to learn because describing an activity is a means of encoding that activity. In other words, the thought processes used to carry out the activity are put into the confines of words. Once an activity is encoded into words, there is a much better chance that it will be retained in memory. Andrea Zakin, professor at City University of New York, cites various studies that show verbalization leads to better retention of meaning. She explains how verbalization, or "self-directed speech," can help "learners to plan and coordinate thoughts and actions, which, aided by self-regulation, enhances learning and cognitive development" (Zakin 2007, 2).

Finally, the other students in the class benefit from verbalization because a thought process that was opaque to them is made transparent through words. Do not make the mistake of assuming that one student's thought process is obvious to other students. For some students it may be, but those are the students who already have strong organizational skills. If a process is not verbalized, weaker students may remain clueless, wondering how other students managed to get all of their homework done for the week or were able to find a certain paper in a binder. By verbalizing your own thought processes or by asking stronger students to do this, you can help the weaker students gain some insights into successful thinking strategies.

There are many ways to incorporate verbalization into class time. If a teacher gives an assignment and wants students to verbalize the steps they must take to complete the assignment, that teacher may ask a student to verbalize his or her plan of action to the class. The teacher or members of the class may then ask the student such questions as "Do you think you allowed enough time for the second step?" or "Why does step three come before step four?" Alternatively, students could be paired or put in groups and take turns verbalizing their plans of action to each other while the teacher moves from group to group, listening and questioning the students.

Classifying materials

Organization is all about the ability to classify. According to historian and literary

theorist Hayden White, "the beginning of all understanding is classification" (White 1978, 22). In our search to find meaning, classification is our primary tool, and the tendency to classify is natural to humans. Since the dawn of time, we have divided the world into dichotomies of good and evil, us and them, and useful and useless. Knowing whether someone is "one of us" or "one of them" directs our interactions with that person; people in the in-group get preferential treatment. Making finer distinctions takes some practice; however, the idea is still the same. Classification leads to prioritization. Students must be able to decide which papers to keep, which to throw away, and which project to tackle first. Teaching students organizational skills is dependent on teaching them classification skills.

Implementing organizational skills in the classroom

As noted previously, teaching a skill is an active and ongoing exercise, and students must have frequent opportunities to practice, reinforce, maintain, and assess the skill. Teaching organizational skills to students is a two-stage process. During the first stage, the teacher sets up an organizational system and requires the students to follow it. Then, in the second stage, the students take on more responsibility for their own organization.

Stage one: Initiating organizational skills

The first stage of the process will likely last throughout the first half of the course. The teacher closely supervises this stage and includes procedures to set up, maintain, and practice the organizational system.

Set up the organizational system

Take class time to set up the binders or other organizational system. Do not give this as a homework assignment because students with weak organizational skills will not be successful. Tell the students what divisions they should have in their binders, and have them label the divider tabs in class. Make sure they write the descriptors on the tabs in English. You may need to do this periodically as the semester progresses if you decide to add additional sections.

Maintain the organizational system

- *Date papers*. Make sure students put the day's date at the top of their class notes each day and on any handouts they receive. You can write the correct date on the board at the beginning of every class so students will not have to ask the date each time you hand out a paper.
- *File papers*. Allow class time to file papers in their correct location. Do not expect that students will do this after class. Whenever you give out a paper, ask the students where the paper belongs. Have the stronger students verbalize the thought process they went through to arrive at their answer. It is very helpful to model this for the students frequently at the beginning of the semester. For example, you might say, "Well, this handout refers to information in Chapter 2. We have a section in our binder for Chapter 2, so we could put the paper there. However, the handout is specifically about the vocabulary in Chapter 2, and we have a separate vocabulary section in our binders. I think it would be best to put it in the vocabulary section because when we study vocabulary, it's useful to have all the words together that we have learned so far in the semester. That way, we can refer back to words from earlier chapters and look for similarities."
- *Use a planner*. Make sure students write their homework in their daily planners or on their calendar pages. In addition to writing down the homework assignments, they should write an estimate of how much time the homework will take and when it is due. Ask them to explain aloud how they will need to budget their time, taking into account homework for other classes as well as other commitments. Again, model this verbalization process for them. If a student suggests that he or she will complete an extensive assignment in 20 minutes, question the student's reasoning. Ask him or her to think about how long it took to complete a similar assignment. Encourage the student to reassess how much time to

budget for the new assignment. Ask other students how long they think the assignment will take. You could come up with a time range instead of a specific amount of time. If one student says the assignment will take 20 minutes and another student says an hour, write "20–60 minutes" on the board. Most importantly, follow up on this the next day. Ask students how successfully they predicted the amount of time needed for the assignment. If their predictions were far off target, remind them to take this into account for the next time.

- *Assess organizational skills*. Build time into the syllabus to check the organizational system. You could do this on a weekly or semi-weekly basis. The best way to do this is through *random checks*. During a random check, you can ask the students to take out a specific paper from several weeks ago. If their binder or other organizational system is well maintained, they should know exactly where to find that paper. Have a competition to see who can find the paper the fastest. Alternatively, the students can take turns doing their own random checks and choosing what papers to locate. At the end of the activity, remember to have the students verbalize their thought processes. Ask them how they knew where to look for the paper. A student might reply: "You said to find our notes from last Tuesday, so I went to the note-taking section of my binder. It's easy to find that section because there is a tab that says 'class notes,' and all of my notes are on lined notebook paper, so I can just look for the section with the lined paper. Then, in that section, I always add notes to the back, so my most recent notes are at the end of the section."

Provide additional practice in organizational skills

Special activities should be part of the weekly lesson plan to hone students' classification skills. Here are a few ideas for activities.

- *Group words or other items*. Give students words on index cards or slips of paper and allow them a certain amount of time to group the words into given categories. Students must then explain their classification system aloud. No system is right or wrong if it can be explained in a logical way. The real point of the exercise is to hear the students verbalize the thinking behind their systems. Variations of this exercise include grouping objects or pictures cut from magazines.
- *Sort papers or forms*. Put students in small groups and give them a big, messy stack of papers. These could be papers from another class, or papers you have gathered from elsewhere. They do not have to pertain to English language study. Consider what papers you have access to in your community and be creative. If you can find an office that has lots of forms to fill out that you can take for free, that is ideal. For example, at the post office, you could gather some insurance forms, some shipping labels, some commercial invoice forms, and some envelopes. Fill out these forms with some fake information. Then add to your growing stack of papers some shipping rate lists and several letters to the postmaster (that you have written yourself) with various types of inquiries. Give the students a set number of minutes to organize these papers and then a few more minutes to explain their organization to the rest of the class.

As the semester progresses, these classification activities should require the students to make finer and finer distinctions. Start by having the students group items into two or three categories. Progress to six or seven categories. Introduce the idea of subcategories. Have students make categories, explain their reasoning for choosing these categories, and then have them explore other possible classifications that are based on different reasoning. Work with papers, cards, pictures, and objects to vary the activity and hold the students' interest. One suggested activity is to have students write the following words on slips of paper: *bird, leather, oak, rose, elephant, iron, tulip, mountain, river, dog, horse, willow, mouse,* and *wood*. Then ask students to group

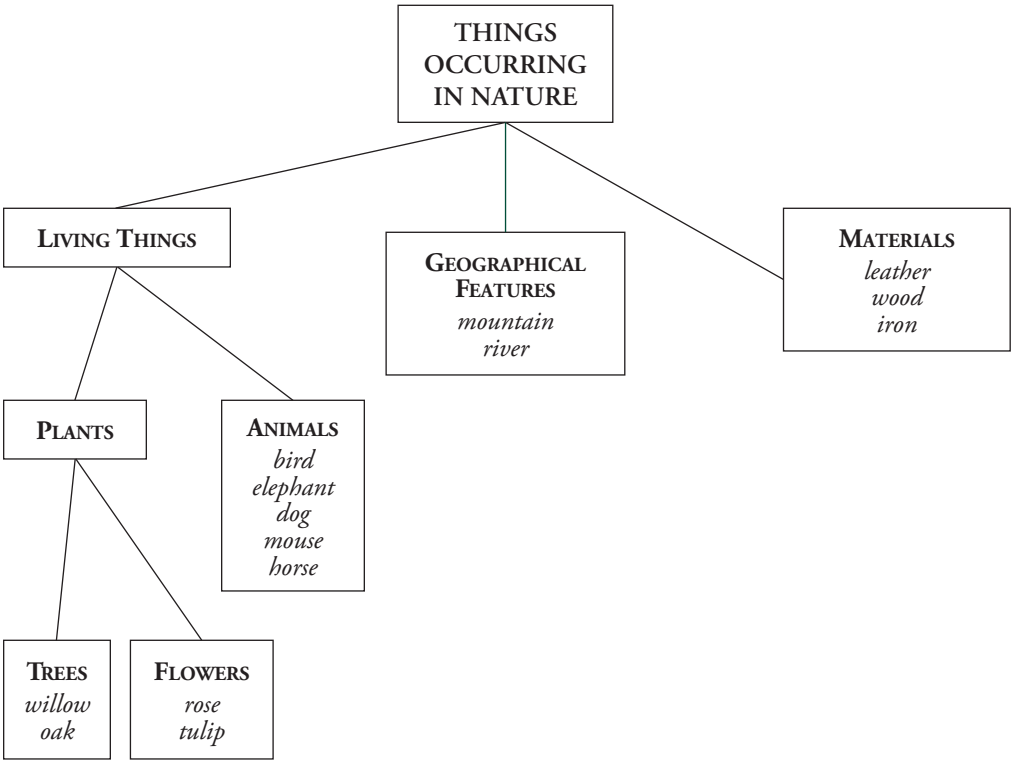

Figure 1: Classifying words into categories

the words in appropriate categories and subcategories, such as the ones in the semantic web in Figure 1.

Of course, you might develop other groupings and other category headings. For example, students might group *elephant, willow, oak,* and *mountain* as "Big Things" and *rose, tulip, bird,* and *mouse* as "Small Things." Alternatively, they might put *leather* with "Animals" because it is an animal product, they might put *wood* with "Trees" because it comes from trees, and they might put *iron* with "Geographical Features" because it can be found in mountains. Discuss how well these categories work. If students use these categories, will there be any leftover items? The important idea here is how well the items fit into chosen categories. Can the students come up with category headings that will easily subsume all the items?

In addition to practicing classification skills, students should also receive lots of practice in distinguishing steps for tasks, such as the steps needed to complete an assignment on time. When you make assignments, remember to ask students to write and then explain aloud their plans of action for projects and homework schedules.

Stage two: Students increase their ownership of the organizational system

Depending on how the students are doing, sometime around the middle of the semester, the teacher should begin moving into stage two of teaching organizational skills. This is the bridge stage that moves the students toward independence. While you impose an organizational system on the students in the first stage and require that they follow it, in the second stage the students have to work harder to establish and maintain an organizational system on their own.

One way to progress through this stage is to change the way you prepare materials for the students. For example, if you have been using the binder method and have been hole punching the handouts so the students can easily organize them into their binders, you should stop doing this and have the students do their own hole punching. At first, allow

students some class time to do their own hole punching, and make sure that the handouts get placed into their binders.

Another way to increase student responsibility for maintaining the organizational system is to discontinue color-coding papers for students. From this point on, the students will have to look at the headings at the top of the paper to see what it is about and where it should go in their binder. The students are still following the organizational system established earlier in the semester, but they are now performing the mechanical aspects of maintaining this system on their own. By the end of the semester, you should spend some time brainstorming organizational systems with your students, which increases their ability to organize independently.

As you help students understand how to create an organizational system, ask them to consider the following: What materials do you have at hand that could be used to help you set up and maintain this system? For example, are binders available? Are hole punches available? What about boxes, files, colored pens, and paper clips? Discuss what resources are available and how they could be used.

Secondly, have students consider what things they might need to organize. Will they be dealing with papers, emails, electronic files, or objects? What are some ways these items can be sorted? Discuss some categories that might be pertinent in most situations (e.g., work to be done, work in progress, work finished). If time allows, you might create some scenarios and have the students create an organizational system that helps them accomplish the task at hand. For example, if applicable, you could give them this scenario:

> You are a student in a freshman level geography class at a university in the United States. You will have lots of readings from your textbook and will be required to take notes on the readings. You will have weekly quizzes on keywords that you have learned from your readings. You will have chapter tests. You will attend a lecture three times a week. The teacher may give you handouts to accompany the lecture.

Then ask students: In this situation, what items do you expect to receive or create that will need to be organized? What system of organization can you create to help yourself in this situation? Of course you will want to tailor scenarios so that they will be valuable to your students in their current life situations or in situations they anticipate encountering in the near future.

Using explicit teaching to reinforce organizational skills

As mentioned before, part of teaching a skill is explaining to students why this skill is important. This is a tenet of *explicit* or *direct teaching*, an approach to teaching found to be effective with adult learners. As described by Susan McShane, reading specialist at the National Center for Family Literacy, explicit teaching can clarify "the objectives and purpose of each learning activity and explain how each activity relates to broader learning goals"; for example, you tell the students, 'You need this so you can. . . This is the first step in learning to. . .'" (McShane 2005, 128). This is a topic teachers should repeatedly revisit during the semester. Make the purpose of your activities explicit and transparent. What is the purpose of activities designed to improve organizational skills? It is twofold: easy retrieval of information and understanding the relationships between pieces of information.

Easy retrieval of information

The random check activity described in stage one can help students see how a paper can be retrieved quickly. In a similar but less random activity, ask students a question such as, "How many verbs were on our vocabulary list for Chapter 8?" To answer this, students will have to be able to locate their Chapter 8 vocabulary list. Ask students to retrieve information as often as possible so they understand that they are responsible for being able to locate that information, even though they are not responsible for memorizing all of the information given out in class.

Understanding the relationships between pieces of information

Organizing inherently involves reviewing to a certain extent. By thumbing through a section of a binder to locate a paper or by flipping through a section to insert a new handout, a student will be re-visiting earlier mate-

rials. Of course, this is a fairly haphazard way to conduct a review session. Instead, by asking students to think of ways to reorganize their papers or by giving students 10 or 15 minutes to look through one section of a binder, you can help students see how different pieces of information fit together. For example, if they have divided their papers by chapters in their book, they could instead organize their papers by type of activity. Instead of having all papers pertaining to Chapter 1 together, and all papers pertaining to Chapter 2 together, they could group the papers according to these divisions: in-class activities, homework assignments, quizzes, tests, and lecture notes. By reviewing materials, students can discover what they have learned and see how far they have come. By considering different classification systems, they can discover new relationships between the things that they have learned.

Conclusion

We can never fully ensure the academic success of our students. However, it is our job to prepare them to be successful. We cannot send them forth and hope for their success if they are missing a crucial skill. Building a focus on organizational skills into your curriculum provides a scaffolding to support the other information you are teaching during the semester. If students have the skills to organize the information that you give to them, that is, if they can retrieve that information and look for relationships between the pieces of information, they stand a better chance of learning and retaining that information.

Ultimately, our goal is to make students into independent learners. The work you do with the students during the first stage of teaching organizational skills helps prepare them for the second stage that comes when they enter a university or the workforce and must establish and maintain their own organizational systems to cope with the information given to them. Take some time before the next semester begins to see how teaching organizational skills can fit into your daily and weekly lesson plans. Teaching and learning is all about organization, so the framework is already there. Teaching organizational skills is mainly about finding ways to make the implicit explicit.

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