

LET'S TEACH ORGANIZATION

You will never "find time for anything. If you want time, you must make it."
—Charles Buxton

Finding Time and Getting Things Done

A veteran teacher said, "If we could just get Lindy to organize herself, I know she could do much better in my class. But I'm not sure how to get that to happen."

Lindy's mother lamented, "It's no better at home." With a sigh she continued, "Lindy can't find her things when it's time to go to school, and when she tries to begin her homework she's not sure what to do. There are days when she says she has no homework, and other days when she is racing to get major assignments done."

Students like Lindy need to get organized. Simply put, they must learn to put their materials, thinking, and actions together in ways that make sense to get the job done. Teachers must help them develop these skills. But developing organization skills requires more than incidental attention to helping students think and make decisions about organizational processes. This article will suggest ways that teachers can systematically teach and practice organization skills. It will also suggest specific ways to help students organize assignments, materials, time, and procedures.

Teachers should use a variety of methods

to help students learn organizational skills. These might include the following:

1. Begin with a procedure that offers maximum potential benefit with minimal intervention.¹ Present organizational skills as stand-alone lessons or integrate them with the content areas.

2. Develop a list of rules or criteria for assigned tasks. Help students understand the value of working with a study team when trying to develop new habits. Have students evaluate themselves on each rule, then have a student partner evaluate them. Finally, evaluate the students, allowing those who are weak in certain areas to improve the assignment. Re-evaluate as needed.

3. Take time to discuss goals and efforts; that is, discuss what works and why, go over questions about difficulties, and share frustrations or successes.

4. Hold meetings to probe feelings and to shape attitudes about organization. Provide a list of questions or areas for comment. Allow each student to choose one item from the list and share his or her ideas. Topics for sharing

might include problems, frustrations, goals, or success and growth. Some

BY LOUISE MOON

students will need to learn that it should not be a threat to their self-image to have to double-check some things. They need to gain insights into the ways different temperaments and mind styles affect organization. Students also need to realize that people have different peak times for study.

Help students see that using problem-solving approaches can produce great personal improvement. One reason people do poorly at organization is that they believe they cannot make changes or that it is useless to do so.

5. If students see themselves as good problem solvers, they are more likely to achieve academic success.² Therefore, it is important to help students become aware of steps in problem solving and apply them. First, identify concerns and their underlying causes.

Then brainstorm for possible solutions and discuss the likely consequences of each solution. Next, choose a solution and evaluate the results. If necessary, try another solution, and evaluate its results. Repeat until you find a satisfactory solution.

6. Remind students that goal setting leads to success. Successful people write goals regularly, making them both specific and positive. They assign time frames, keep score, and make their goals personal.³ Stress the usefulness of using both the right and left brain to accomplish goals. The left brain makes the lists. The right brain envisions accomplishing the goals and enjoying the rewards.

7. Teach categorization based on varied characteristics. For example, several categories may influence how and where to keep materials:

- Things that look good together,
- Things that are used together in a place or time,
- Frequency of use,
- Size,
- Shape,
- Need to be kept cool, dark, or dry,
- Access needed by self only or other persons.

Developing organizational skills requires more than incidental attention to helping students think and make decisions about organizational processes.

Picture
Removed

8. It is seldom possible to achieve the ideal in beauty, economy, ease, or efficiency all at once. Discuss the need to consider tradeoffs among these factors.

9. Evaluation can include portfolio items that show how students' organizational skills have progressed.

10. Besides their desks, students may need a box or crate that serves as a storage bin.⁴

11. Motivation might include creating an Organization Award given each day until all students have received it at least once.

Model Organization in the Classroom

Organization is not only a product, but also a process. The carefully arranged, timely results of your efforts in planning instruction, classroom layout, and storing materials is your product. The thought processes that created this product are less obvious to students. So describe aloud for them what you did to make these things work.

Better yet, have them share this thought journey with you. Donald Graves in his book, *Build a Literate Classroom*, tells about a teacher named Russell who began the school year with classroom furnishings piled in the middle of the room. He and the children worked together to decide how to arrange their room. He thus taught organization and gave his students ownership of their classroom.⁵

Be sure to plan ahead to prepare for storage and flow of papers and tools. Avoid handling things more than necessary. Here are some ideas to help you organize your classroom:

- Use matching labels for items kept together in various locations. The label A-2 on a folder means it belongs in the second drawer of File A. A book labeled F-3 belongs on the third shelf of Bookcase F. This system makes it easier for you and your student workers to refile important items.

One of my colleagues uses stacked office trays to hold handouts. Students pick up one handout from each tray as they come into class.

Students who missed class can get handouts easily when they return.

Another colleague uses pocket folders for assignments. Students place completed assignments in one side of the folder. The instructor moves them to the other side after he checks and records them.

- Plan early to organize your grade book or computerized grading system. This makes it much easier to keep track of materials when recording begins.

I have course resource packets that must be updated each year, so I add items to a master folder as I find something new and useful. I number materials as follows: I-1, I-2, II-1, II-2, and so on. Rather than renumbering all pages, I can add new pages with decimal numbers such as "I-1.1" or place them at the end of a section.

- Organizing student portfolios can be a big job. Until you know what you need for the portfolio, it may be well to keep everything. Most students will not have room to keep these materials in their desks or lockers. Use crates or boxes with folders for each person's papers and projects. Later, have a class meeting to decide what to keep for the portfolio. Discard unneeded items.

Interruptions

Teach students to plan ahead so they do not have to interrupt their work to get needed materials. They can also prevent interruptions if they learn to tell others when they need quiet study time.⁶ Encourage students to discover ways to solve their own problems and answer their own questions before interrupting another student or the teacher. Balance this practice by providing help when it is really needed.

Next, some specific suggestions for assignments, time management, care and keeping of materials, and study procedures.

What Was That Assignment?

College students should make sure they get a syllabus for each class and then put all assignments on a calendar for easy refer-

ence.⁷ Students at all levels can write down assignments in a convenient place.

Some students use a special folder for assignments. The folder has pockets, and holds notebook paper fastened with brads. Column headings on the paper can designate Subject, Date Assigned, Pages, Problem/Exercise

Picture
Removed

Numbers, Notes/What to Do, Date Due, Parent Initials, and Teacher Initials. The student should write the assignments for each subject in this folder. He or she can list all assignments on one sheet or use a separate page for each subject. The teacher or a helper should initial the work before the student leaves school, and the parent can initial it at home. Another way to check the accuracy of the assignment record is to have student buddies check with each other after school by phone. Students should take the assignment book back and forth to school daily to ensure that they have it when needed.

The assignment folder's pockets can store related papers. The front pocket can hold work to do; the back one, work ready to hand in.

Disabilities in writing and spelling may make it difficult for students to write their assignments. If so, have a student partner help, or give the student a written copy of the assignment to tape into his or her folder. It is helpful to provide a marked assignment calendar at the beginning of the term.

Stick-ons can mark the location of the next assignment in textbooks or workbooks. Bright stick-ons can remind students to take certain books home. This will make it easy for them to gather the items to put in their book bags. If special monitoring is needed, the student can place items on top of his or her desk at the end of the day, and the monitor can check to see that all items indicated in the assignment list are ready to go home.

Stick-ons can also allow students to make notes in books in which they are not allowed to write.

These can provide information about how to do certain assigned tasks. At first, you may need to write on the chalkboard what the students should write on stick-ons, or privately help some students write necessary information on the note.

Keeping Track of School Material

Suggest that students color code items by subjects. Book covers, removable stickers, or tape can identify items that go together. Keep extra color-coding materials handy to make it easy to maintain the system.

Backpacks are great organizers. However, they can become rats' nests. Suggest that students select a pack with pockets or use

zippered plastic holders for pens, pencils, and erasers. To jog their memory, they can attach a small card listing their needs; for example: blue pen for geography, colored pencils or markers for color coding parts of speech, erasable pen for science. The list might also include: textbooks, workbooks, notebook, assignment folder, lunch money, permission slips, library books, show and tell items, or assignments to hand in. Taping such a card onto the bag can remind students to put everything necessary in the bag each night and again at time to go home. Offer students a reclosable plastic bag or two for odds and ends that accumulate, and one for litter. A periodic check at home and at school can help to maintain this system.

Post a wall chart with pictures or lists of items that need to be in students' desks, and those that need to go home. Or tailor individual lists and tape them to each desk.

Suggest that students use a loose-leaf notebook with colored dividers to organize course materials.⁸ Within each subject they should make a place for notes, assignments returned (to use in reviewing, or for insurance if the teacher's record is not correct), and miscellaneous. They can attach a colored tab to special reference materials that will be used frequently. If assignments no longer fit at the front of the assignment folder, they can start a place in each subject section for them. They can also include a checklist of needed items at the front of the notebook.

At first, hold sessions frequently to help students place materials in the proper section: In progress, Ready to hand in, or Save for review. The parents, student, and teacher will need to cooperate to make the system

Picture
Removed

work. In some cases, it is appropriate to give a grade for organization.

Help for Content Subjects

Use graph paper to help students line up columns of figures for math.⁹ If students are reluctant to use this aid, remind them that professional bookkeepers and accountants use paper with ruling to aid in aligning columns.

Teachers can help college and secondary students make their own all-purpose study guide for subjects where none is provided.¹⁰

Include components: vocabulary, key concepts, dates, people, places, events. Identify critical vocabulary and record the page where the word is located. Write a definition that includes the term, category in

which the term occurs, and descriptive information about the function and characteristics that distinguish that term from others in its category.

Making Time Count

There are several ways to help students develop time-management skills. The time-honored practice of posting a daily schedule is one of these. It also can be placed on student's desks.¹¹ But there are other alternatives. If you give students a choice of when to do certain things, then help them plan how to schedule those activities. A series of cards for various activities or subjects can be arranged in the preferred order. The student moves a card to the back of the pack as each item is completed. To increase motivation, include a card that gives a short break.

Have students break down long projects, chart steps, and finally write in time estimates to be checked off as steps are completed.¹²

Help them see the value in "nibbling away" at a project that seems formidable. Getting started often builds momentum that carries a person along toward completion. This is advisable for teachers, also, as we attempt to add to our repertoire of methods for teaching organizational processes.

Students need to develop a sense of the time needed for tasks and learn how best to use study time. Help them learn to plan time for tasks by comparing estimated time with the actual time. Encourage them to learn the value of studying in short bursts when they are well rested. They will thus learn more in a shorter time with less effort.¹³

Making Procedures Work for You

To help students remember steps in a

process and practice making them automatic, use a procedure chart. Post it in the classroom or on students' desks for easy reference. For quick recognition, use pictures or symbols to indicate the steps. This can be helpful for a number of processes: steps in a math algorithm, proofing and correcting written work, preparing an assignment in a required format, studying spelling words, preparing a science experiment, or reading an assignment.

Final Words

Teach students to avoid the tyranny of things or processes and to be flexible. Suggest that they use all-purpose tools and organizational skills as much as possible. Work with other teachers at your school to establish a shared format and required items for several classes. Experiment to find what works! Remember, it takes time to rearrange or relabel, so if a system works reasonably well, it may be worth retaining, even if it isn't ideal.

In all of this, retain your sense of humor. If students point to your desk when you are lecturing about organization, just grin and bear it. Tell them, "If a cluttered desk is the sign of a cluttered mind, what is an empty desk the sign of?" ☞

Louise Moon is Assistant Professor of Education, and Director of the University Reading Center at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. In 1991 she served as coordinator of the JOURNAL's dyslexia issue.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. David K. Slade, "Developing Foundations for Organizational Skills," *Academic Therapy* 21:3 (January 1986), p. 262.

2. Timothy R. Elliott, Frank Godshall, John R. Shrout, and Thomas E. Witty, "Problem-Solving Appraisal, Self-Reported Study Habits, and Performance of Academically At-Risk College Students," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 37:2 (April 1990), p. 203.

3. Claude W. Olney, *Where There's a Will, There's an...A! How to Get Better Grades in Grade School* (Paoli, Penna.: Chesterbrook Educational Publishers, Inc., 1988).

4. Theresa A. Haman and Douglas K. Isaacson, "Sharpening Organizational Skills," *Academic Therapy* 21:1 (September 1985), pp. 45-50.

5. Donald H. Graves, *Build a Literate Classroom* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1991), pp. 4-6.

6. Julia Gamon, "Making Time: Time Management Should Be Part of Every Vocational Educational Curriculum," *Vocational Education Journal* 64:6 (September 1989), pp. 52, 53.

7. Roger Grooters, *Game Plan for College Success* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Prime Partners, 1991)

(video/ recording).

8. *Effective Study Strategies* (Acton, Mass.: Academic Resources Corporation, 1987) (video/ recording).

9. Olney.

10. C. Wilson Anderson, "Helping Your Learning Disabled Youngster With School Work at Home," Unpublished paper (1990). Presented to a meeting of Learning Disabilities Assn., Berrien

Picture
Removed

Springs, Mich. Mr. Anderson trains L.D. teachers. He is employed by the Meninger Clinic of Topeka, Kansas.

11. Haman and Isaacson.

12. John M. Shields and Timothy E. Heron, "Teaching Organizational Skills to Students With Learning Disabilities," *Teaching Exceptional Children* 21:2 (Winter 1989), pp. 8-13.

13. Olney.