

THE LEARNING PROCESS

On first meeting, an experienced tutor can usually identify a student's immediate problem. What is not easy to detect, however, is why the student is having difficulty. Determining and eliminating the underlying source of the problem may be a key factor in eventually terminating the student's need for tutoring assistance with that particular topic.

In order for a tutor to detect more effectively the cause of a learning problem, she or he should have a basic understanding of the learning process. A learning theory model can help provide this understanding.

Preparation

This first phase in the learning process includes those learning elements that are prerequisites to the actual input of information. In general, it deals with the uniqueness of the individual who has both physical and mental needs that must be met before learning can begin, such as sufficient sleep, nutritious food, and peaceful surroundings.

Input

This second phase involves methods of reading and studying, including listening, note taking, viewing, and strategies for dealing with difficult material and ensuring concentration. These skills facilitate the input of content.

Processing

This third phase in the learning process addresses the depth to which the student wants or needs to comprehend the material. It involved organizing the learning material effectively, understanding the different reading requirements of specific subject areas, applying techniques of active involvement in learning, and reading at the most efficient rate for the immediate purpose.

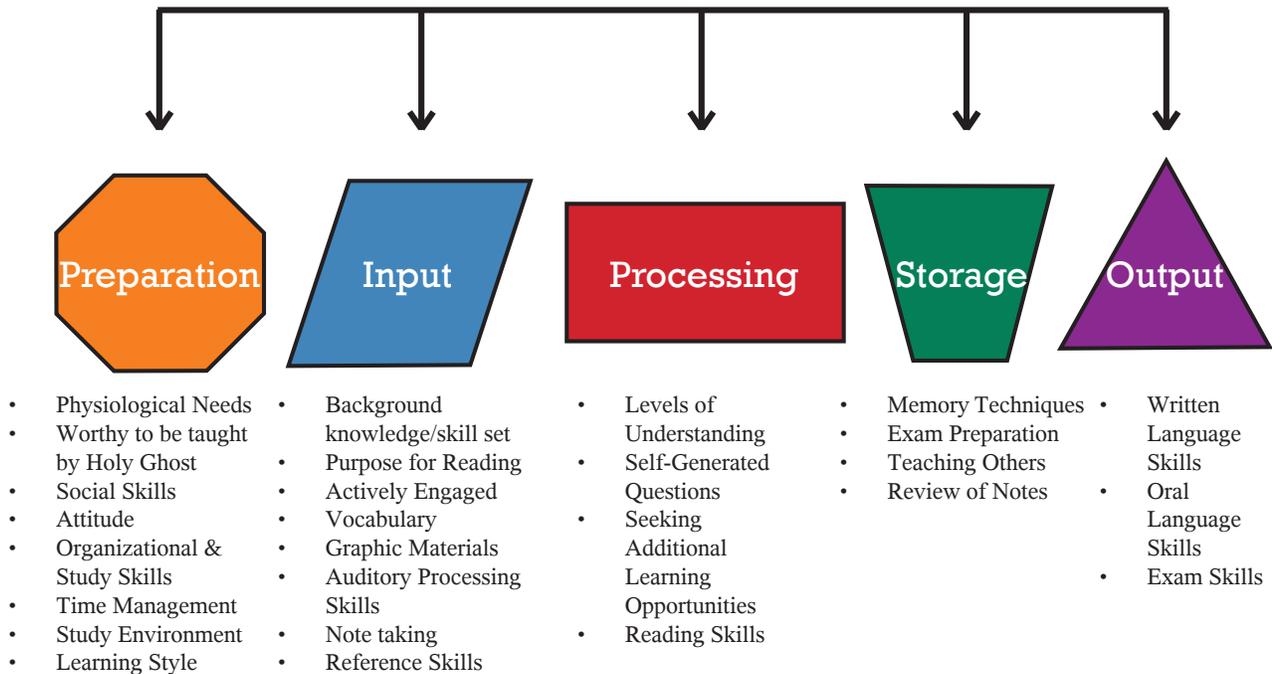
Storage

The Storage phase involves remembering the information that has been processed. It deals with techniques for improving memory and retrieval.

Output

This last phase deals with the skills necessary for demonstrating that learning has taken place.

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Using the Model

The purpose of this model is to help the tutor discover in what phase the learning process is breaking down. Suppose a student seeks help from a tutor because he or she is failing a course. After diagnostic questioning, the tutor might find that the student appears strong in all phases of the learning process except Output. Perhaps inordinate test anxiety or lack of test-wiseness skills is contributing to the student's failure. Or perhaps the lack of success is tied to problems he or she is having with a host of learning elements at every other phase of the learning process: studying in a noisy/busy environment, taking poor lecture notes, possessing limited vocabulary, reading textbooks without a study method, or cramming for tests. Or perhaps the student is not pre-writing, outlining, revising the first draft, or editing term papers efficiently. The tutor's sensitivity to the integrated nature of learning can translate into treatments that are more effective than tutorial patchwork. Endowed with an arsenal of good study skills, the student may not only succeed in that course, but also go on to improve in and pass other courses.

Diagnostic questions associated with each phase of the learning process are essential in the use of this model. Below are sample questions that tutors might be able to use to establish which of the phases is weak when a student is experiencing difficulties. The tutor should NOT bombard any student with all these questions at a single session. They are simply examples of the types of topics which might arise as the tutor and the tutee discuss problems.

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Preparation

1. Are you getting enough sleep?
2. Do you have good eating habits?
3. Do you get enough physical exercise?
4. Do you have any physical impairments (poor vision, hearing, etc.)?
5. Do you know how you learn best (learning style)?
6. What kind of study environment do you have?
7. Do you find that you do not have enough time to complete assignments?

Input

1. Do you determine your purpose before reading?
2. Do you come across words that you do not understand or cannot pronounce?
3. Do you have a difficult time understanding graphs or charts?
4. Do you have difficulty with reference materials in the library?
5. Does your mind tend to wander while listening to a lecture?
6. What kind of note taking system do you have?

Processing

1. Can you detect main points in a lecture and main ideas in textbook reading?
2. Can you put things in your own words after reading or after hearing a lecture?
3. Do you use a study reading technique (PREP, SQ3R) when reading textbooks?
4. Do you adjust your reading style and speed to match your purpose?

Storage

1. Do you review regularly rather than just before tests?
2. Do you have trouble remembering important dates, names, or concepts?
3. Do you have a system for preparing for exams?
4. Do you use mnemonics and other memory devices when appropriate?

Output

1. Are you familiar with basic test-wiseness clues?
2. Do you get extremely nervous and tense during exams?
3. Do you make a point beforehand of finding out what type of exam you will be taking?
4. Do you pace yourself when taking an exam?
5. Do you have trouble with written expression?

All the above are “close-ended” questions, which can be answered with a “yes/no” response or with a few words. “Open-ended” questions are generally more productive in most tutoring situations because they can foster discussion and an exchange of ideas. For example, the question “Do you pace yourself when taking an exam?” can become “Tell me about how you time yourself on an exam.” “Do you use a study reading technique?” can become “How would you go about reading this chapter?”

Also keep in mind that these sample questions are very general. As a tutor, you will want to be far more specific as you ask individuals students about their study and writing habits.

Above all, remember that the phases model described above is an extremely simplified version of the complex process that occurs when people learn. The interactions among the various aspects of it are sometimes difficult, if not impossible, for the nonprofessional to discern. For example, it is not unusual for a tutor to deduce that a student is not good at taking notes, yet the tutor might totally miss the fact that the student is a poor reader, is learning disabled, or is failing because of emotional problems. Therefore, the model can be deceptive in its simplicity, which the tutor must keep in mind. It is, nonetheless, a useful tool for tutors to take their “best shot” at diagnosing a student’s difficulties. Tutors certainly have no reason to blame themselves if they miss some of the complex factors that contribute to the student’s difficulties. Tutors are not expected to be professional educators, just successful students doing their best to help others.