5. Teaching Students to Self-Monitor Their Academic & Behavioral Performance

The ability of a student to self-monitor his or her performance is a natural step toward becoming independent, which can only happen when students take responsibility for their own behavior and essentially become “agents of change” (Hanson, 1996; Porter, 2002; Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 1996). Self-monitoring is defined as the practice of observing and recording one’s own academic and social behaviors (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2000; Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 1996; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2000). Being able to self-monitor reflects a shift from reinforcement by others to self-reinforcement of appropriate behavior (Hanson, 1996). There are a number of systems of self-recording and self-monitoring procedures that stem from social skills and behavior management programs; however, self-monitoring can also be used effectively with academics (Hanson, 1996; Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 1996). Furthermore, self-monitoring can be used both to assess where students are functioning academically and behaviorally and to improve academic or behavioral performance (Carr & Punzo, 1993; Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 1996).

Self-monitoring is a strategy that can be used with students of all ages and disabilities (DiGangi, Maag, & Rutherford, 1991), is relatively unobtrusive, appeals to students, and is inexpensive and relatively quick to implement (Carr & Punzo, 1993). Self-monitoring has been shown to be effective in increasing more appropriate behaviors, increasing on-task behavior in the classroom, boosting completion of homework assignments, improving both academic performance and social skills, and reducing disruptive behaviors (Blick, & Test, 1987; Carr & Punzo, 1993; Hallahan & Kauffman, 2000; Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 1996; Schunk, 1997; Smith, 2002; Trammel, Schloss, & Alper, 1994). In addition, self-monitoring actively engages the student as a participant in improving his or her behavior (Blick & Test, 1987), thereby
increasing his or her investment in the process. Finally, self-monitoring techniques is an effective tool for generalizing and maintaining skills over time, because students can perform them any time and in any setting without needing an adult to help them (Blick & Test, 1987; Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 1996). However, students first need to be taught how to self-monitor their academic and social behaviors.

To be successful self-monitors, students need to learn to keep track of what they are doing and how they are thinking so they can adjust their behaviors and thoughts in order to meet goals or complete tasks (Porter, 2002; Smith, 2002). The first step in teaching students to monitor themselves is to select and clearly define a target behavior (Carr & Punzo, 1993; Stainback & Stainback, 1980; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2000). Next, a student or observer records instances of the behavior to provide evidence of the problem and its frequency (Carr & Punzo, 1993; Schunk, 1997; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2000). The next step is to set learning and performance goals and identify consequences for meeting or failing to meet their goals (Schunk, 1997; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2000). There is then a cognitive component to self-monitoring behavior that requires students to talk themselves through a set of instructions (self-talk) for completing a task or to ask themselves a question or series of questions about their feelings or behaviors (Brophy, 1996; Kamps & Kay, 2002; Porter, 2002; Smith, 2002). If a student is monitoring his or her on-task behavior, for example, he or she may ask “Am I on task?” when a timer goes off and tally the answer on a recording sheet. As the student learns to monitor his or her performance on a regular basis, the timer is phased out (Blick & Test, 1987). Students can also be taught to ask themselves questions about their academic learning and performance, such as asking, “How many math problems have I completed in the last 10 minutes? How many are correct?” (Carr & Punzo, 1993). If the goal is to monitor reading
comprehension, a student might be taught to ask, “What am I studying this passage for? What is the main idea of this paragraph?” (Wong, 1986). Students will need to practice repeatedly each of these steps and then implement them in actual social or academic situations. These steps can either be taught by a teacher (Schunk, 1997; Smith, 2002) or with the assistance of peers (Gilberts, 2000). Students must be taught to self-evaluate their success each day (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2000). The probability of the internalization of these skills increases if the student participates in a structured and predictable school environment. Finally, the teacher should be prepared to periodically introduce a scaled-down version of the original instruction, if there is a decline in these skills.

To make self-monitoring most effective, strategies should be used constantly and overtly at first and then faded to less frequent use and more subtle use across time (Stainback & Stainback, 1980). It is also important to ensure that students have learned the skills and behaviors that teachers want them to perform as they are using the self-monitoring strategies. To help maintain and generalize positive behavioral changes, self-monitoring should be combined with methods that allow students to evaluate themselves against their earlier performance and to reinforce themselves for their successes (Goldstein, Harootunian, & Conoley, 1994; Hallahan & Kauffman, 2000; Porter, 2002; Schunk, 1997; Smith, 2002; Stainback & Stainback, 1980; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2000). Cognitive strategies such as “self-talk” (e.g. “hey—good job” or “I knew I could do it”) are especially useful.

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References and Additional Sources of Information


