

Refocusing Assignments to Deal with Persistent Student Challenges

By Don Sutherland

Typically, students in my BBA 407 Strategic Management course have an easier time defining concepts and recognizing them than understanding the relationship between multiple concepts and applying those concepts. For example, companies develop and implement generic business-level strategies (including competitive and growth tactics), generic corporate-level strategies, and functional strategies. In general, the majority of students can define each of these strategies and provide an example or two. However, they have greater difficulty understanding how they relate to one another in the bigger picture of corporate management.

At the beginning of each semester, I assess incoming student knowledge with a diagnostic exam. Considering the focus of the course, one of the questions relates to the relationship between various levels of strategic management. The final exam assesses end-of-semester student knowledge, including student understanding of the relationship between the levels of strategic management. Student learning is measured through a standardized Realized Learning Potential measure.

Realized Learning Potential:

Overall Course Content	Relationship Among Levels of Strategic Management	Ratio of the Relationship Among Levels of Strategic Management to Overall Course Content
0.518	0.221	0.427

Briefly, this chart indicates that the past four classes have learned, on average, nearly 52% of the content with which they were unfamiliar at the start of the semester. However, when it comes to the relationship among levels of strategic management, they have learned less than a quarter of the content with which they were unfamiliar at the start of the semester. Put another way, their realized learning potential is barely over 40% of their overall realized learning potential when it comes to the relationship among levels of strategic management. In terms of their performance on the final exam, students were, on average, correct just 53% of the time when dealing with such content during the same period of time.

Assignments are often revised and refined to deal with emergent and persistent areas of student weakness. Nevertheless, when it comes to higher order skills, student learning gains have been modest.

In [*Critical Maths for Innovative Societies: The Role of Metacognitive Pedagogies*](#), Bar-Ilan University Professor Zemira Mevarech and Associate Professor Bracha Kramarski observed:

Studies highlight the relationship between metacognition and academic achievement. In the last decade, it has become widely accepted that metacognition plays a crucial role in school achievement and beyond (Boekaerts and Cascallar, 2006; Sangers-Jokie and Whitebread, 2011). Children and young people with higher levels of metacognitive skills are more likely to succeed academically than students showing low levels of metacognition (Duncan et al., 2007;

McClelland et al., 2000). Veenman et al. (2006) demonstrated that metacognition predicts school achievement in various academic areas and in different grade levels, even when intellectual ability is controlled. Reviewing what influences learning, Veenman et al. (2006) cited a review study by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1990) which “revealed metacognition to be a most powerful predictor of learning...”

Considering the growing body of empirical evidence related to the impact metacognition (“thinking about thinking”) has on student learning at all levels of education, I have revised the related assignment to include a metacognitive component or “wrapper.” The goal of that component is to shift student focus beyond understanding and recognizing concepts toward the higher order task of understanding relationships. Asking students to reflect on various aspects of the assignment and assess their own understanding related to the assignment’s goals has the potential to promote that goal.

At the end of the semester, student learning will be assessed. No further changes are planned in the teaching and instruction related to the area in which the metacognitive component was incorporated. Therefore, some insight into the value of this component should be available at the end of the semester. The initiative will be repeated during the following semester.

If the results are promising, metacognitive components will be incorporated more widely into the fabric of the course.