

Whether mastery learning can continue as a viable approach despite a hostile surrounding remains to be determined.

Taking the mystery out of mastery

by John R. Champlin

Educators often persist in their tendency to seek quick and simple answers to problems which are complicated and complex. Emerging programs offer special attraction. They are often quickly embraced as the long-sought-after mythical panacea. The results have always been both predictable and quite consistent. The innovation is discredited. It is clearly unfair and improper to expect that any program, particularly any innovative effort requiring appreciable attitudinal and behavioral change, to survive under those conditions. Unfortunately, there is little in our record of innovative efforts to lead one to believe that the next time will be different from the last time. This is the environment in which mastery learning seeks to survive today. Whether mastery learning can continue as a viable approach despite these hostile surroundings remains to be determined.

More and more educators are being attracted to the mystique of mastery. They are lured by the compelling learning statistics emerging nationwide as more districts successfully implement mastery learning. The combination of newness and the promise of better achievement scores offer an intoxicating combination. Such quick adoptions create a scenario which is quite predictable. The cast is the same and the script never changing. Is there some hope for intervention or must mastery learning go the route of its promising predecessors?

It is good news that mastery learning is gaining solid recognition and credibility as the core around which comprehensive instructional improvements can be effected. There are important success stories, one of which is the Johnson City (N.Y.) experience where mastery was the basis for total K-12 instructional redesign. The achievement results in that district are remarkable evidence of mastery learning's potency given careful management and nurture. Other districts report similar types of supportive evidence. While this is good news, it is at the same time bad news, for there are the ever-present quick fixers who leap to mastery with little concern for district readiness, the presence of an effective management system and, even more

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critical, a clearcut vision of what mastery learning is, what it is not, and what makes it go.

It seems logical that as a first step in mastery's defense that we remove the mystique. We need to urge a potential adapter to pause to acquire a much broader understanding of what mastery learning entails and what types of conditions and levels of support are required. It would prevent a multitude of misunderstanding and misrepresentations if we could legislate a halt to the use of the term "mastery" as an attractive catch word. Name dropping and random association serve the mastery learning cause no useful purpose. Mastery learning has similarly become the magic sales term in the textbook publishing world. Buy a series which promises mastery learning and your problems are well on their way to solution.

Demystifying Mastery

The process of demystifying can best begin by giving clear definition and substance to the term mastery learning. The most widely accepted view of mastery learning represents it as a theory of instruction which contends that most pupils (90-95 percent) can learn what schools offer given sufficient time and the presence of an instructional process which recognizes and manages the alterable variables associated with individual learning. The definition can be restated in a somewhat different form. As a theory of instruction, mastery learning is dependent upon being implemented thoughtfully, with skill and with integrity. Under these conditions the greater percentage of our students can learn. Mastery is clearly dependent upon what the user does or does not do. The only mystery lies with the users and their behaviors.

Mastery provides clear direction in identifying three critical variables which must be altered and managed: (1) time, (2) the creation of a responsive and alterable instructional delivery system and (3) an overall examination of the current belief system which encases school practices so firmly. Those who accept the challenge to critically address the belief system soon discover that much of current school practice is outmoded, particularly when compared with emerging research on more effective schools. It is impossible to avoid the realization that we are governed by outmoded, unproductive generalizations about such things as what pupils are likely to learn and what pupils will probably not learn; the sanctity of the traditional teacher role and lastly insistence on using time as a constraining and limiting condition. It is critical to embrace time as a variable to be managed and altered and not something to be regulated unnecessarily by. Mastery learning creates the necessity to address and resolve the prohibition of an outmoded belief system.

I submit that it is critical to emphasize repeatedly that mastery learning's chance of success is totally dependent upon the prospective users' motivations, openness and professional integrity in confronting critical issues. Changes made under the mastery learning banner which are half-hearted and without critical professional integrity will eventually fail and in doing so bring disrepute to mastery. Few observers take the time to thoughtfully assess why a program didn't work. If postmortems were possible on the myriad of innovations in the 1960s and 1970s, the author contends that it was rarely the program that failed. Rather, I maintain that critical assessment would support the contention that it was "user failure." The profession must be prepared to consider mastery learning from a similar perspective if it is to survive what can be predicted

as poorly managed, abortive implementation efforts of the hurry-up/quick fix group.

Some interpret mastery as a rigid process through which the learner keeps "doing it until the task is finally achieved." Viewed from this erroneous perspective, mastery becomes mechanistic and repressive. Benjamin Bloom's view of what he terms the quality of instruction gives clear form and substance to an instructional model, one which dictates a constant alteration of strategies and process to appropriately satisfy the students' learning needs at the time. One of the stimulating qualities of mastery learning is its challenge to teachers to continuously alter and adapt. Such is the essence of the professional behaviors we lay claim to under the label of diagnosis and prescription. Mastery learning can only be viewed as prohibiting and mechanistic when those who would employ it take comfort and find security in total structure and complete rigidity.

Mastery learning requires that its user go considerably beyond the instructional process. Inherent in mastery learning is its total commitment to learner success. Success becomes more probable when teachers accept the challenge to first identify and then eliminate practices and relationships which are bound to reduce failure for a considerable number of pupils. Mastery learning further mandates careful attention to curriculum—what is it that is to be learned? It is not possible to teach precisely if there is not clarity about what is to be learned.

Mastery Is Not Mysterious

Mastery learning is clear and precise as to what must be managed if one is to achieve the results desired. The dependence on the user is both a delight and a plague; the latter when one fails to reflect the required understanding, integrity and patience.

Mastery learning holds great promise for all educators and pupils. The profession cannot afford to blunt mastery learning's power because of the absence of understanding and the reluctance to change behaviors to make it work. An observer of the emerging literature on more effective schools cannot help but conclude that mastery learning offers an attractive implementation vehicle to incorporate those critical understandings in a workable program. It is almost too simple to state that we could be on the edge of a major breakthrough in school programming. If we take the mystery out of mastery learning and then use it with integrity and dedication, the opportunities for successes beyond anything we have been able to do previously are unlimited.

References

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