The Three Cs of Academic Work

Far too many students needlessly struggle their way through college. They study to the best of their abilities, but their grades simply don't improve. Why does this happen? Students who can't find their groove in college have never learned the basics about academic work. Here's a quick crash course on a foundational component of academic work.

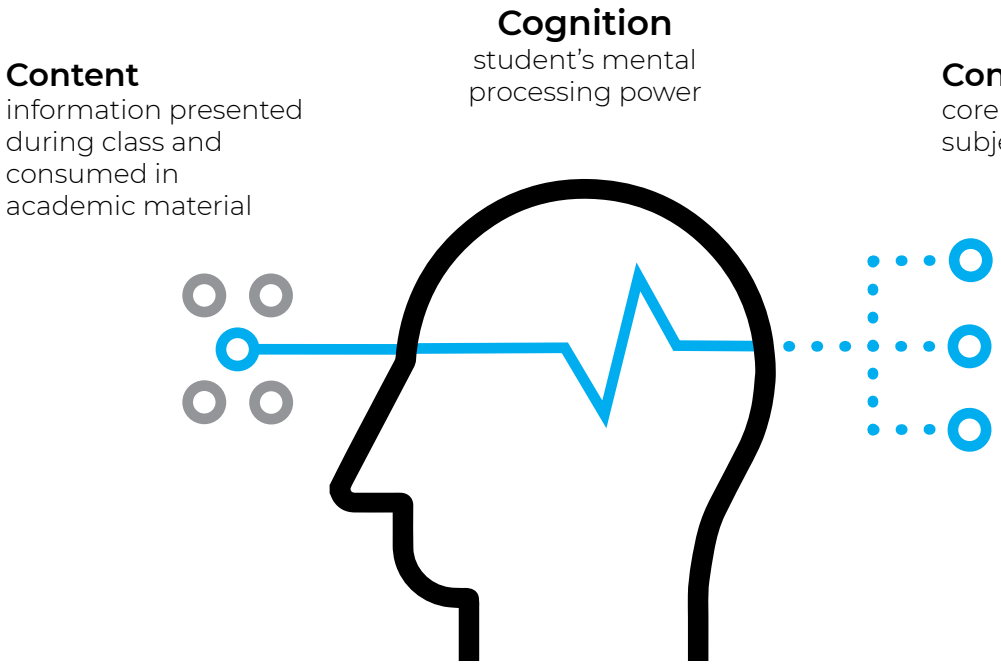
Step 1: Teach students the elements of academic work.

Academic work consists of three elements: content, cognition, and concepts. The first step is simply to make students aware of each of these elements. They need to store this as declarative knowledge in their minds because much of their academic success hinges on their ability to properly coordinate these three elements.

Step 2: Separate the elements.

The next step beyond knowing that these elements exist is knowing the distinct contribution that each adds to academic work. The following list shows each element's role in academic work.

- **Content** consists of the information presented during classes and consumed as students read academic material. Content comprises the building blocks of academic work.
- **Cognition** is the mental processing power students use to transform content into conceptual knowledge. Cognition provides direction to students' academic work.
- **Concepts** are the core ideas of a subject or discipline. They are the abstract notions that the content is expressing. Concepts are the destination for academic work.



Step 3: Integrate the elements.

Once students know how each element works in isolation, they must then be able to fuse them together into actionable work statements. For example, related rates, velocity, and derivatives are concepts that students will encounter in a calculus course. Educators will use content, such as words, numbers, symbols, formulas, and so forth to communicate the ideas. Unsuccessful students will spend lots of time working through individual problems and checking their notes for accuracy. While such tactics may ensure students can solve individual problems, they do nothing to ensure students learn the more meaningful concepts. If students are to develop the conceptual understanding that their educators seek, then they must know how to use their cognitive skills to convert the content into conceptual knowledge. Thus, they better know how to integrate the three C elements.

Step 4: Teach students to use their metacognitive powers.

College students have a superpower at their disposal: metacognition, which they can use to coordinate the three C elements. Metacognition involves knowledge and awareness of our internal processes, states, and conditions as we process information and navigate tasks throughout learning environments[1]

Students and educators should know how to manage the three C elements as you interact with them during and away from class. Those who use their metacognitive powers well will enjoy a huge academic advantage. Those who don't may find themselves working hard but not producing good results.

Follow these four steps to ensure students have the proper perspective on academic work.

Student Assignment

Here are few questions you can ask students to get their minds right for academic work:

- Which of the three elements do you typically focus on?
- Which of the three elements pose the greatest challenge to you?
- How will you account for each of the three elements moving forward?

In my next article, I'll share the one indispensable academic work skill that every student needs but that practically every student lacks.

1 Hennessey, M. (1999). Probing the Dimensions of Metacognition: Implications for Conceptual Change in Teaching-Learning. *National Association for Research in Science Teaching*. Boston; Kuhn, D. &. (2004). A Bridge Between Cognitive Psychology and Educational Practice. *Theory into Practice*, 268-273; Martinez, M. E. (2006). What Is Metacognition? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 696-699.

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