A student can learn alone, but only after explicit instruction!

LATEST SCIENCE

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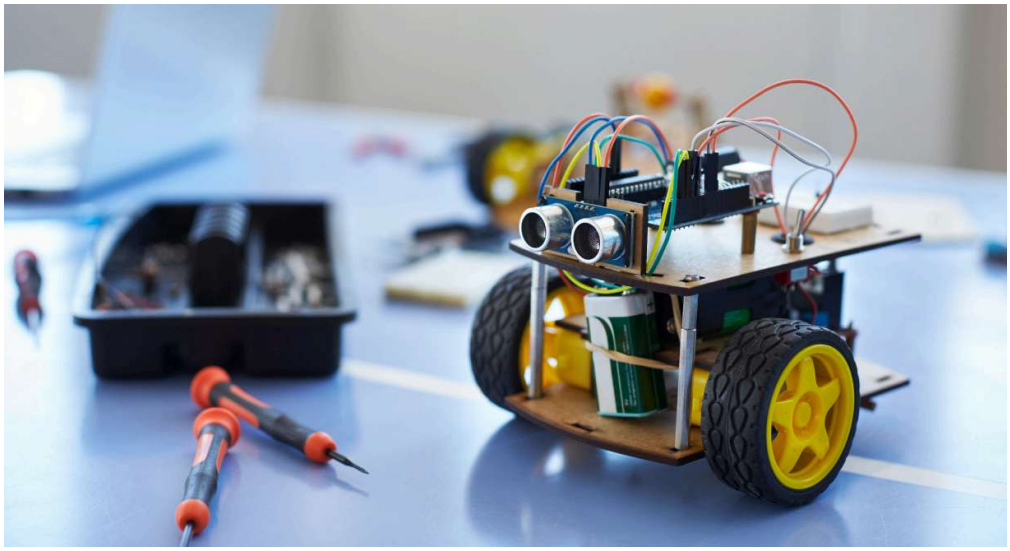

Can students truly teach themselves? Evidence suggests that for independent learning to succeed, it must be built upon a rigorous foundation of explicit teaching. By automating fundamental operations and providing targeted feedback, educators can free up the cognitive space necessary for advanced problem-solving. This article contends that self-regulated learning must be the endpoint of a pedagogical journey rather than its origin.

the student already possesses a solid foundation, built primarily through **explicit instruction**. Explicit instruction structures, clarifies, guides, and facilitates understanding. The paradox is that for independent learning to flourish, the teacher must carefully prepare the ground rather than leaving the student to chance. A well-planned pedagogical sequence supported by explicit instruction represents the divide between unproductive confusion and real understanding. The case of **Morningside Academy** provides compelling evidence that self-directed learning is most effective when it is the culmination point of a meticulously planned explicit instruction process.

When self-directed learning is introduced too early, multiple concurrent obstacles arise, creating a level of confusion that makes learning improbable, if not impossible (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). In the absence of a clear structure, students are forced to simultaneously analyse the situation, formulate hypothesis, test ideas and memorise new concepts. This accumulation of demands leads to **cognitive overload**. In contrast, explicit instruction provides students, gradually and from the outset, with the necessary frameworks they still lack to direct their attention, achieve goals, clarify all the different steps to follow, and adopt the best strategies. By reducing cognitive overload through progressive guided instruction, explicit teaching significantly decreases the high risk of failure. Without it, students fall back on flawed intuitions, construct erroneous conceptions, and, lacking immediate feedback, allow misconceptions to take root and crystalise.

Explicit instruction is a powerful lever for fostering enduring skills. Presenting concepts clearly, designing the most suitable approaches, providing a variety of examples (and counter-examples), and offering guided practice in conjunction with constant feedback, do not equate to mechanical or stereotypical teaching. On the contrary, it is a truly responsive pedagogical approach, as it allows for the tailoring and structuring of student learning (Gauthier & Bissonnette, 2024). This approach begins by giving students the necessary cognitive instruments to subsequently tackle more complex tasks. In fact, by automating fundamental operations, explicit instruction frees up the student's cognitive space for more advanced reasoning and problem-solving. Any feedback provided in this context corrects misunderstandings

Creating the preliminary conditions for the student to be able to learn independently requires careful planning from the teacher (Johnson & Street, 2020). The first stage involves **establishing a strong foundation**: clarifying vocabulary, rules, essential concepts, and expected approaches. This foundation stems from explicit instruction. This is followed by guided practice, a core feature of explicit teaching, during which cumulative exercises and feedback lead to the stabilisation of knowledge and the internalisation of practice. A variety of examples and counter-examples is also a fundamental principle of explicit instruction, because it avoids false generalisations. As the student demonstrates mastery of each topic, the teacher can gradually reduce the support provided. This release process—phasing out the teacher's guidance—associated with explicit instruction facilitates the student's entry into a successful process of independent learning. Review and consolidation allow previously acquired knowledge to become automated. Subsequent review tasks, slightly different from the previous, then enable the student to start learning alone. This moment of self-directed learning flourishes the most when it is rooted in **meticulously prepared and pre-planned explicit instruction**.

In mathematics, explicit instruction occurs when the necessary operations are taught first, followed by guided practice coupled with feedback, and, finally, the presentation of several structured examples, thus fostering the student's ability to detect regularities in problem-solving. In the sciences, guided experiments, structured discussions, and the clarification of methods with targeted feedback are defining features of explicit instruction, before presenting the students with novel situations of equal difficulty. In languages, the guided teaching of vocabulary and grammatical structures is a clear example of explicit instruction, enabling the student to discover how to combine these elements in new ways within a written production exercise.

Consequently, self-directed learning is not to be dismissed. It is attainable as long as it serves as **the culmination of a roadmap anchored on explicit instruction, rather than its starting point** (Johnson & Street, 2020). When grounded in meticulous planning, self-directed learning reinforces memory, boosts motivation, and transforms a simple activity into consolidated and stimulating

enable the student to eventually achieve profound and lasting comprehension independently.

References

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