



ISSN -PRINT-2231-3613/DLNE2455-8729
International Educational Journal

UGC APPROVAL NO. - 42652

CHETANA

Received on 26th Oct 2017, Revised on 8th Nov 2017; Accepted 30th Nov 2017

ARTICLE

Mastery Learning: An Effective Teaching Strategy

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Key words: *learning, instructional methods, Education, effective teaching strategy etc.*

Abstract

Mastery learning is used in order to advance an individual's potential for learning. Compared to traditional learning models, sufficient time, attention and help are afforded to each student. This paper investigates the mastery learning model and the changes that have taken place in its use as an effective teaching strategy. By applying mastery learning as a teaching strategy, students may achieve higher learning and make better academic performances.

Introduction

Allowing students the opportunity to achieve mastery of content at different time intervals, has proven to be an effective method of increasing student learning. By definition, mastery learning is a method of instruction where the focus is on the role of feedback in learning. Furthermore, mastery learning refers to a category of instructional methods which establish a level of performance that all students must master before moving on to the next unit. (Slavin, 1987)

Mastery learning breaks subject matter and leaning contents into units with clearly specified objectives which are pursued until they are achieved. Learners work through each block of contents in a series of sequential steps. Mastery learning refers to the idea that teaching should organize learning through ordered steps. In order to move to the next step, students have to master the prerequisite step. Mastery learning engages the learner in multiple instructional methods, learning levels and multiple cognitive thinking types. Block (1971) states that students, with minimal prior knowledge of material, have higher achievement through mastery learning than what they do by the traditional methods of instruction.

Davis and Sorrel (1995) mastery learning is not a new method of instruction. It is based on the concept that all students can learn when provided with conditions appropriate to their situation. A student must reach a predetermined level of mastery on one unit before he/she is allowed to progress

to the next. In a mastery learning setting, students are given specific feedbacks about their learning progress at regular intervals throughout the instructional period. This feedback helps students identify what they have learned well and what they haven't learned. Areas that are not learned well, are allotted more time to achieve mastery. Only grades of "A" & "AB" are permitted because these are the accepted standards of mastery.

Effectiveness

Mastery learning appears to be a promising strategy for narrowing learning gaps. Mastery learning appears to be particularly effective when pupils work in groups or teams and take responsibility for supporting each other's progress. It also appears to be important that a high level of success is set. When pupils work at their own pace, as opposed to working as a part of group or whole class, it appears to be much less effective. Mastery learning may also be more effective when used as an occasional or additional teaching strategy as the impact decreases for longer programmes of over 12 weeks or so. Schools may wish to consider using mastery learning for particularly challenging topics or concepts, rather than for all lessons. Lower attaining pupils may gain more from this strategy than high attaining students, by as much as one or two months' progress. So mastery learning appears to be a promising strategy for narrowing the gap in learning. However, it should be noted that teachers also need to plan carefully for how to manage the time of pupils who make progress more quickly.

Steps in Mastery Learning

(a) Defining to Mastery

The teacher who wishes to use learning for mastery approach begins by formulating what is meant by 'Mastery' of the subject. Ideally the teacher may decide that scoring at least 80% to 90% in the final examination would indicate mastery of the subject. Students who perform better than this, predetermined standard would be graded 'masters', those who do not would be graded 'non-masters'.

(b) Orienting for Mastery

After planning for mastery, the teacher is now ready to teach. But students are usually not accustomed to learning for mastery. The teacher must therefore, spend some time at the beginning of the course, orientating them to the procedures to be used what they are expected to learn and how they are generally expected to learn.

(c) Teaching for Mastery

Following the orientation period, the teacher teaches the first learning units using his customary group based teaching methods. When this instruction has been completed before moving to the next unit, the teacher administers the unit's formative test to the entire class. Each student usually corrects his own test. Basing on the test scores the teacher certifies those students who have achieved the unit mastery standard and identifies those who have not. The

'masters' are free to engage in enrichment activities or to serve as tutors for their 'slower' classmates. The 'non masters' are asked to use the appropriate correctives to complete their unit learning. After all the students have mastered the unit, the teacher announces when the instruction for the next unit will commence.

Grading for Mastery

After teaching all the units, the teacher finally administer the summative evaluation test and awards A's or their equivalents to all the students whose test scores are at above the predetermined mastery performance standard. Those students, who score below this level, are awarded grades appropriate to the level they have achieved.

Design of a Learning Unit

1. Definition of clear objectives of what has to be taught.
2. "Subject is divided onto relatively small learning units. Each unit will have:
 - a) Objectives (i.e. a clear definition of what has to be mastered).
 - b) a brief diagnostic test to be administered before the unit (they may lead to supplementary instruction);
 - c) Learning material and instructional strategies;
 - d) Formative evaluation (that in turn should lead to remediation) and summative evaluation.
3. Time to learn is adjusted for each student in order to master at least 80% of the material.
4. Assessment whether global objectives have been met.

Successful Operation of Mastery Learning

The following conditions are necessary for the successful operations of Mastery learning.

Entering Behaviour

Entering behaviour or readiness to learn implies that the learner must have mastered the tasks or the subtasks which are essential for mastering subsequent tasks. For example, a student must have mastery the tasks on additions in order to have mastery over multiplication.

Proper Sequence of Sub-tasks

The material to be learned must be divided into units or sub-tasks logically and psychologically. The difficulty level of the sub-tasks or units must be raised gradually in hierarchical order. In other words the units must be arranged from simple to complex orders.

Self – Pacing

The students must be given the opportunity of learning at their own pace and time. The element of competition should be avoided as far as possible, as it will amount to discouragement and may create inferiority feelings.

Periodical Test

Periodical test or what is otherwise known as progress test should be conducted at the end of each unit. Knowledge of results must be made available to the learner immediately after learning and testing. If the learner is found to have mastered the material he/she must be allowed to master the next unit. If one is found slow or lacking the mastery he/she must be encouraged to learn the same material from a different angle.

Taking one's own responsibility

Mastery learning depends on the learner's taking his/her own responsibility of mastering the materials. But this does not rule out the necessity of teacher's guidance for the learner.

Learning Materials

Mastery learning necessitates the use of learning materials like textbooks and audio-visual aids like films, television, radio, pictures, charts, maps etc. Such materials must be readily available to the learner.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is evident that mastery learning is an effective method of instruction which enhances student learning, achievement, attitude and expectations. There is also evidence that students enjoy this method of learning and they can reach individually to the doors of success. Mastery teaching and learning is a very simplistic way of teaching and learning in the sense that the instructors assume all students can learn the same material. The only difference among students is the amount of time needed to learn the material.

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