

A brief introduction to mastery Learning

What is mastery learning? An overview

The underlying understanding of what educators refer to as “mastery learning” is that students should achieve a level of mastery of information before advancing and learning more information (Bloom, 1968). For example, in undergraduate studies, a student studying Biology may be required to meet certain prerequisite course requirements of the beginning and intermediate coursework at the 100 and 200 levels before moving to 300 and 400 level coursework in the area.

Mastery learning asserts that under appropriate instructional conditions, all students are capable of mastering most of what they are taught (Block & Burns, 1976). Key features of teaching for mastery learning include:

- Setting course objectives
- Breaking the course down into smaller units, which address a few of the course’s objectives at a time
- Students are tested on their mastery of each unit, before proceeding to the next unit
- Students are evaluated on their mastery of the course as a whole, on the basis of what the student has and has not achieved, rather than the level of achievement relative to the students’ other classmates.

Is mastery learning effective?

Mastery learning programs do have a positive effect on the examination performance of students at the end of primary schooling, in secondary school, and in their undergraduate years (Kulik, Kulik, & Bangert-Drowns, 1990). It is difficult to generalize this effect to all students, though, as mastery learning does not necessarily accelerate achievement (Slavin, 1990). Research also shows that students who experienced mastery learning are more likely to have positive attitudes to the content of their course. Mastery learning can also help teachers to focus on a given set of objectives during their teaching (Slavin, 1990).

When/ how should mastery learning be used in the classroom?

Mastery learning can be applied to all levels of education, from primary schooling, to secondary education, to postsecondary and graduate level education. Teachers in mastery learning classrooms will employ the following practices, according to Okey (1977):

- Teacher tells students at the beginning of the unit what they are supposed to learn
- Tests for the unit cover what the teacher told the students they needed to learn
- The teacher gives tests during a unit to check for students’ understanding, and the grades on those tests do not count
- Students study for varying amounts of time during the unit in order to do well
- Students receive feedback for how well they are doing throughout the unit
- The teacher provides students with special help during the unit if they need it
- Students are encouraged to help each other during the unit
- Students are allowed to repeat tests during the unit if needed

References

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