

Prioritizing: A Critical Executive Function. *Edutopia* Staff Blog March 7, 2016
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Prioritizing: A Critical Executive Function.

The executive function of prioritizing guides two types of tasks. Prioritizing is what takes place when the brain distinguishes main ideas from low-relevance details. It is also at work when students plan how to invest their time and effort.

In my previous post, [Brain Development and Adolescent Growth Spurts](#), I suggested ways to build students' organizational skills. This time, I look at helping them build prioritizing, time management, and goal-directed planning skills. My focus is still on the early adolescent years (ages 10-12), but the strategies can be tweaked to help students of all ages become more competent at recognizing higher-priority information and self-directed in planning their time.

First, let's review why teachers are critically positioned to provide students' brains with guided experiences that activate neural networks of executive functions. During children's school years, their brains become more streamlined and efficient. Neuroplasticity, the process that rapidly prunes disused circuits and strengthens most-used circuits, means that when you give students ways to activate their executive functions, these highest control networks become stronger.

Activities to Support Developing Circuits for Prioritizing

Students should be explicitly taught and given opportunities to practice the executive function skill sets of prioritizing. In planning instruction, use the following guidelines to help students develop their awareness of what prioritizing is, and the practices that build their prioritizing power.

Prioritizing Relevance

1. Recognize skills that they already have.

Prioritizing is essential for students in all subjects. They use it when planning an essay, selecting which information to include in notes, or evaluating word problems in math for the relevant data. Start by having them reflect on which of these they already do successfully, and have a class discussion for sharing strategies and making students aware of the skills they already possess. Prompts include:

- How do you select what to write down as you take class or textbook notes?
- When you were successful on a test for which you studied, how did you decide which information was the most important to learn and study?

2. Experience prioritizing without fear of being "wrong."

Show students a variety of photos, paintings, or video clips and invite their opinions about what they found to be the most important detail or big idea. Remind them that, with most art, the viewer is encouraged to relate and take away ideas that are personal and not necessarily those of the creator.

3. Prioritize the "best."

Show students the systems that they already use for prioritizing quality. This helps them become conscious of the

criteria by which they can prioritize relevance, validity, and quality throughout the curriculum and beyond. Here is a sample task:

- Students select three print advertisements that they think are "good."
- They put the ads in order of best, second best, and third best.
- After this ranking, ask them to think about and list the qualities that they used to prioritize the "best."

4. Work with redacted notes.

This is a great scaffolding to guide students in prioritizing which information from lectures or texts they should be writing down and later reviewing.

- Create an exemplary outline, or use inclusive student notes from previous years that clearly designate prioritized main topics and lesser subtopics.
- Create three different versions of this outline.
- Block out only a small amount of the content for students beginning to build note-taking skills. For more advanced students, remove more text. For example, if the outline is about types of clouds and the scaffolded outline lists three different types, block out one type of clouds for the student who is just building her note-taking skills.

Prioritizing Goals in Planning

Prioritizing for planning is what guides students to evaluate the order in which they'll approach parts of a larger task, and which parts should get the most time and planning.

Give students opportunities to make their own prioritizing choices and experience the consequences of not meeting goals by the deadlines they set. Follow this with guidance through metacognition and an opportunity for revision to learn from their miscalculations. Scaffold their construction of prioritizing networks by having them estimate, keep records of their progress, and revise their plans when they're not meeting their interval goalposts.

Here's a sample of scaffolded prioritizing in planning:

- Give an assignment with clear expectations of the outcome and an analytic rubric of requirements, each with a point value.
- Students make individual lists of what they see as the separate tasks and a sequence for following them to completion.
- Provide a template that students will use for planning, setting dates for each steps en route to the goal.
- Students give a percentage of value to each task. For example, if the rubric indicates that the concluding paragraph is valued at 15% and the cover page at 5% of the book report grade, they should use that as a guide to prioritize the amount of time allotted to each task.
- As they progress through their plan, students record actual time spent (and later the outcome in points received for each aspect of the project).
- Set aside class time for students to evaluate progress and revise plans as needed.
- When the assignment is completed, offer a metacognition opportunity for students to record which tasks need to be reprioritized to add more time, and to reflect on the strategies that they found most useful to their successful plans.

Time Well Spent

Planning instruction and teaching units that activate executive function processing takes teacher and student time -- and it's time that's already severely taxed. However, that time is a powerful investment as students build their executive functions to become self-directed learners who can prioritize, plan, and persevere with foresight as they achieve long-term goals.

