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Studies Show Why Students Study is as Important as What

By [Debra Viadero](#) on August 16, 2010 11:33 AM | [2 Comments](#) | [1 Recommendation](#)

From guest blogger Sarah D. Sparks:

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As American educators **ponder** what and how students will learn via "next-generation" standards and tests, a new British analysis suggests differences in why students study can have as great an impact on their college and career readiness.

"Learning, Performance and Improvement," in the latest issue of the London-based **Institute of Education** journal *Research Matters* finds students learn and behave differently if they—and their teachers—focus on improving their knowledge and competence rather than proving it. Yet simply talking about learning won't overcome a classroom atmosphere focused on meeting test benchmarks.

In a review of more than 100 studies from the U.S. and across the globe, **Chris Watkins**, Institute reader in education at the University of London, ties the current discussion over how to teach modern critical thinking and problem-solving skills back to the decades-old discussion of students' motivation in the classroom.

The research suggests two parallel motivations drive student achievement: "learning orientation," the drive to improve your knowledge and competency; and "performance orientation," the drive to prove that competency to others. Watkins found the highest-achieving students had a healthy dose of both types of motivation, but students who focused too heavily on performance ironically performed less well academically, thought less critically, and had a harder time overcoming failure.

Two guesses which orientation develops under a U.S.-style assessment accountability system, and the first doesn't count.

"When teachers are told to improve performance, they talk more, they judge more and they control more," Watkins said. Students of all grade spans proved highly attuned to their teacher's motivation in the classroom, even if she or he did not explicitly state a desire to improve test scores. One included study showed 10-year-olds mirrored their teacher's performance orientation even in unrelated tasks outside the classroom—and performed poorer on those tasks as a result.

The pressure to perform can hamstring teachers' attempts to deepen students' understanding through meta-cognitive exercises like journaling or class discussions, the studies showed. "Sometimes what happens is [teachers] become aware of the importance of meta-cognition and just try to layer it on a teacher-centered classroom," Watkins said. "That way doesn't work. That's why one of the things that we find is students in classrooms have to see themselves as learners before the focus on meta-cognition really takes off."

Of course the likelihood of U.S. or British schools moving away from high-stakes accountability is low, and the *Research Matters* review suggests educators should stop thinking of learning and performance as diametrically opposed.

"If you're working in a competitive-style environment, yes, you need to have a good learning orientation—yet at the same time, if you're in a competitive environment, you need to be bothered to compete," Watkins said.

"That's a double-edged sword for schools. ... but I say to schools, don't be worried about competition. If superintendents and principals are open and talk about these pressures, people can learn about their response to pressure. Teachers can definitely become aware of it; they are amazingly relieved when someone helps them become aware of it."

Copies of the study are available for a fee from the Institute of Education.
