



KRIDEL

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Encyclopedia of CURRICULUM STUDIES

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**CURRICULUM  
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Craig Kridel, *Editor*



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2455 Teller Road  
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E-mail: [order@sagepub.com](mailto:order@sagepub.com)

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# Contributors

- Catherine A. Adams  
*University of Alberta*
- Meredith Adams  
*North Carolina State University*
- L. W. Anderson  
*University of South Carolina*
- Louise Anderson Allen  
*South Carolina State University*
- Peter Appelbaum  
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*Sam Houston State University*
- Kara D. Brown  
*University of South Carolina*
- Pamela U. Brown  
*Oklahoma State University*
- Jamie Buffington  
*Indiana University-Indianapolis*
- Robert V. Bullough, Jr.  
*Brigham Young University*
- Jake Burdick  
*Arizona State University*
- Lynn M. Burlbaw  
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*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education*
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*La Trobe University*
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*Teachers College, Columbia University*

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## MASTERY LEARNING

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Mastery learning is a philosophy about learning and teaching that essentially asserts that under appropriate instructional conditions virtually all students can learn well. It places on teachers the responsibility of student learning proposing that they can teach so that all students master most of what they are taught. The goal is to enable students to acquire some basic intellectual competencies ensuring that they can undertake the subsequent learning demanded of them by their schools and eventually their vocations and avocations and which will potentially lead to satisfaction increasing the chances for the development of positive feelings toward learning. Mastery learning strategy is an important development in the field of curriculum studies, which, although criticized for its mechanistic nature, many of its tenets include lesson plans and emphasize instructional techniques, planning and competency assessment, and particular knowledge and skills that are thought of as important for students to live and work in the society. This strategy is influenced by social behaviorism with emphasis given on the formulation of specific instructional objectives attained through instruction sequenced into small steps. The career reward for teachers who use this approach is that their teaching consistently results in high levels of learning for most of their students rather than for just a few.

Mastery learning is typically a group-based, teacher-paced approach to instruction in which students learn, for the most part, in cooperation with their classmates. It is designed for use in typical classroom situations where instructional time and curriculum are relatively fixed and the teacher has charge of a big group of students, and thus, although excessive amount of instructional time cannot be spent in diagnostic-progress testing, student learning must be graded. Students progress through a systematically approached instructional sequence as a group and at a pace determined primarily by the teacher who is the instructional leader and learning facilitator directing a variety of group-based instructional methods together with accompanying feedback and corrective procedures. Particularly, courses or subjects are broken into small units of learning at the end of which students

are tested and receive feedback on particular errors and difficulties. Also, students are provided the needed time to learn and the alternative learning opportunities in order to master the predefined intellectual and behavioral competencies. What constitutes mastery is set based on some clear criterion, and successful learning relies primarily on teachers and students rather than on technological devices. Although it can be also implemented in an individual based, self-paced format, it differs from the vast majority of such individualized instructional programs where the teacher primarily gives individual assistance when needed rather than being a principal source of new information. Also, in the latter programs, students generally work at their own pace, independently of their classmates, using carefully designed, self-instructional materials and move onto new material only after they have mastered perfectly each unit.

Many elements of mastery learning were observed via empirical research as integral parts of successful teaching and learning. Some of these observations included the conviction that many students lack the needed sophistication and motivation to be effective self-managers of their own learning; mastery learning's consistently positive effects, although it did not yield the large effects on student learning proposed as possible by its advocates; and the quality of instruction, the strikingly improved student learning outcomes, and the effectiveness of schools evidenced worldwide.

The idea of mastery learning was found by Benjamin Bloom in 1974. Yet the basic tenets of mastery learning were described in the early years of the 20th century by Carleton Washburne and Henry Morrison who discussed in their writings the idea that all can learn and learn well. Current applications of mastery learning are generally based on Bloom's learning for mastery model developed in 1968, based on John Carroll's conceptual model of school learning, which provided the theoretical basis for the strategy of learning for mastery that viewed student aptitude for a given subject as an index of the amount of time the student would require to learn the subject to a given level. Bloom's approach to mastery, the basic features of which have been summarized by John McNeil in 1969, requires that learning objectives are well defined and appropriately sequenced that student learning is regularly

checked and immediate feedback is given, and it stresses that student learning is evaluated in terms of criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced standards. In the subsequent decade through the mid-1980s Bloom's ideas were refined by James Block, Lorin Anderson, and Thomas Guskey providing a more systematic and practical model focusing on defining, planning, teaching, and grading for mastery. Block and Robert Burns have written extensively on mastery learning and have elaborated on four types of mastery learning research, focusing on whether mastery approaches to instruction work, what might follow, why, and how and their practical, theoretical, and ideological implications.

In the mid-1970s, proponents and opponents of mastery learning argued about the pros and cons of the strategy. Critics of mastery learning assert that mastery approaches to instruction are rigid, mechanistic, training strategies; that they can only give students the simple skills required to survive in a closed society; and that they do not appreciate the complexities of school learning. Adherents of mastery approaches to instruction maintain that they are flexible, humanistic, educational strategies; that they can provide students with the complex skills needed to prosper in an increasingly open society; and that they do take into account the realities of classroom life. Nevertheless, the elements of mastery learning as proposed by Bloom and refined by others constitute a general foundation for educators at all educational levels to plan lessons.

*Nikoletta Christodoulou*

*See also* Achievement Tests; Competency-Based Curriculum; Taxonomies of Objectives and Learning; *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*; Vocational Education Curriculum

#### Further Readings

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