

Review of *Teach Yourself How to Learn: Strategies You Can Use to Ace a Course at Any Level*, by Sandra Yancy McGuire (Sterling: Stylus Publishing, 2018). 176 pages, \$19.95.

Jason M. Wester, Middle Georgia State University

McGuire's *Teach Yourself How to Learn* serves as an extension of her well-received *Teach Students How to Learn: Strategies You Can Incorporate into Any Course to Improve Student Metacognition, Study Skills and Motivation*, which was published in 2015. While the latter's target audience is teachers, the former aims at students, taking much of the same material and repackaging it in an easygoing and accessible style well-suited to college freshmen who are making the transition from high school to college. McGuire emphasizes strategies that students can use to improve their academic performance, employing theory (especially ideas about metacognition and Bloom's taxonomy) only insofar as it can help freshmen understand why these strategies work.

The dominant theme of the book is that of changing mindsets, the idea that students must change the way they think about school. If most students approach their studies like Aesop's Hare, McGuire argues they ought to emulate the tortoise; slow and steady wins the race. She opens the

book with the statistic that 72% of high school students estimate their intelligence and academic skills are higher than those of their peers, a perception which, of course, doesn't reflect reality, but, she argues, shows that high school is less-than-challenging for many students. She insists that most high school students don't have to try very hard to earn As and Bs; they can succeed by cramming for their exams and regurgitating facts on their multiple-choice tests. She calls this mindset "study mode." For students adept at cramming in their approach to academic study, college can be a rude awakening when their As and Bs turn into Fs and Ds. In college, students often find that professors are more concerned with students' ability to apply the material, which McGuire calls "learning mode." This distinction between studying and learning is key to the entirety of the book. While students come out of high school able to *cram*, very little in their high school experience has prepared them to *learn*.

In study mode, students cram so that they can earn a good grade on a test, and once that test has been taken, engagement with that material is over. The shift in mindset students must make to improve their college performance begins with one question: Could you teach this material to someone? The answer to this question reveals McGuire's overarching recommendation to students, the strategy that she claims will shift the mindset from studying to learning: Students ought to approach course materials like a teacher. With this strategy established, McGuire then goes into specifics about how teachers prepare to teach their courses, which includes note-taking, active reading and paraphrasing. And in a particularly deft turn, she cites anecdotes from students who shifted to the learning mindset, making the case that this slow-and-steady approach to course materials is more efficient than the often chaotic bursts of cramming that are done the night before the test. Don't focus on the grade, she advises. Focus on teaching the material to someone, and good grades will follow.

One of the book's weaknesses lies in its oversimplifications and over-reliance on dichotomies. Though the target audience is students and a certain amount of simplification is certainly warranted to approach that audience, at more than one point I expected her to at least give a nod to the complexity of these ideas. For instance, in addition to the mindset change from studying to learning, McGuire discusses a mindset change with regard to how students envision intelligence, moving from a "fixed intelligence mindset" to a "growth mindset." She claims that, from their earliest educational experiences in primary school, students believe that intelligence is fixed and unchangeable, which she claims is an erroneous belief that leads to fatalism. In other words, students learn early on that they are either smart or they aren't. She pleads with students to expel that all-or-nothing mentality and embrace the idea that intelligence can be expanded, but currently the data about that is far from clear. Intelligence researchers are engaged in ongoing dialogues about how much of human intelligence is inherited and how much is influenced by environment.

Certainly, while I agree with her that students would do well to embrace the idea that they can grow, McGuire would have done well to clarify and define what she means by intelligence, or perhaps instead discuss growth in ability, knowledge, or skill. Her declaration that "all students are capable of excelling," reveals that she places a great deal of weight on environment, yet, while I read, I thought to myself, "I could study calculus using all of her strategies, prepare like a teacher, and yet the chances of my being an effective math teacher or of earning an A in a calculus course are somewhere between slim and none." There's a reason I am an English

Letters and Reviews

professor instead of a computer engineer. My highest intelligence is linguistic in nature. Put simply, intelligence is much more complicated than McGuire demonstrates.

Nevertheless, McGuire's question ("can you teach the material?") strikes me as a powerful tool for helping students recognize that the "cramming" approach to their courses limits their ability to excel. As a professor of English who specializes in composition and who teaches composition courses with regularity, I focus a large portion of the content of those composition courses on writing as a practice and a process. To write well takes time, planning and the writing of multiple drafts. Certainly I would love to see more of my students employing the slow-and-steady approach to their essays instead of writing them the night before the day of the deadline.

Long have I argued that freshman composition is a unique site at the university because almost all students take those courses, and for me they are spaces in which life and literacy intersect. In my courses, I often use journal writing to expand the scope of my composition courses into realms of personal growth for students, and I am always looking for journal prompts that speak to students' needs and concerns. McGuire's advice that students ought to go to their professor's office hours, read the syllabus, buy their textbooks and understand that criticism is intended not as an insult, but as a prompt toward improvement, can to professors seem like common sense, but McGuire is clear that freshmen coming from high school are often unaware of these basics. If I want students to be good college students, I have to teach them what good college students do, and I could use journal writing to teach these ideas. Certainly, I'd recommend this book to any student looking to improve his or her performance, and I'd recommend it to my colleagues looking to reconnect with the needs and concerns of their students. This is for me where McGuire's book really shines. It served as a reminder that we are all people playing the roles of teachers and students, struggling to manage our time, to get plenty of sleep, to eat right and to just generally manage ourselves more effectively, and that compassion and understanding ought to form the foundation of our interactions.

~ ~ ~