Today, people are exposed to vast amounts of information. With the touch of a button, a person can access online information to address any need. Comprehending the information may be a different matter. Comprehending complex information, analyzing it, and incorporating it into a specific purpose can be a challenge. What can schools do to assist students in developing effective learning strategies to address their current and future needs for learning? When teachers take on the mindset of a learning coach, they can help students develop effective Personal Learning Strategies (PLS). Students will then be better able to face their individual learning needs as workers and community members of the future.

With a learning coach mindset, teachers can inspire students to take ownership of their personal learning. Learning coaches can foster this ownership by identifying people who have overcome adversities to develop their learning skills and to achieve successfully their goals. Learning coaches must establish an emotionally safe classroom environment for students to try different learning strategies and to share their knowledge with others. By giving students appropriate feedback on specific strategies, learning coaches can inspire a student to practice the ones that are effective.

The ability to interact with new information is one key to personal learning. When confronting complex information, people need to connect the new information to what they already know. Making this connection enables people to reduce their anxiety about the complexity of the new information. Learning coaches can train students to interact with the new information with the strategies of question starters and sentence starters. Here are two examples: What do I need to do to learn this new information? What do I already know about this topic? If this fact is true, I wonder…. Having practiced these strategies in school, students will automatically use appropriate ones to help them learn effectively in the future for their job.
Workers confront complex information all the time. This information may be in such forms as informational texts, assembly directions, data, project designs, or demonstrations. Learning coaches can prepare students to better comprehend such tasks by engaging them in effective comprehension strategies and to identify important supporting evidence. For example, when a student reads a scientific report, a student could practice the question starter: What data supports the conclusion made in the report? Students can take ownership of their learning by actively engaging in the process by marking key points in a written text or by taking notes during a demonstration. When students use appropriate strategies in every classroom, they will know to use them to comprehend any complex information outside of the classroom.

In the real world, workers must interact with others to analyze information and to take appropriate action. Accurate and complete analysis of the information is most important. Based upon this analysis, workers often discuss their findings with co-workers. Learning coaches can help students learn how to accurately analyze new information and to discuss it effectively with other students in small groups or the large class setting by practicing specific question and sentence starters. Some examples include: Why do I support this proposal? I agree/disagree with this idea because…. In these discussions, students are also improving their listening and speaking skills, which are two skills in much demand for many jobs.

All workers are evaluated on their job performance. No matter what the job, workers must perform their job well. If a supervisor gives the worker suggestions for improvement, then the worker must listen, reflect, and implement the suggestions in order to keep the job. Learning coaches can observe individual students practice different strategies and give them important feedback on specific ones that appear to be effective for them. Without such feedback, students won’t know for sure what strategies are individually effective.

Workers must perform their jobs using appropriate skills to communicate to others about their knowledge or about their solution to a specific issue. Learning coaches can create real-world performance activities to enable students to demonstrate their learning. Many instructional objectives contain real-world actions. These actions will involve a variety of writing, speaking, or performance skills.

Reflection is another key to developing Personal Learning Strategies. Workers must personally reflect upon a supervisor’s job performance comments to stay on the job or to move up to another position. Learning coaches can help students learn how to reflect upon personal learning strategies by providing different means of reflection. Keeping notes in record books, completing charts, and discussing their reflection with other students can enable students to learn how they can use their reflections to improve their learning.

When students enter the workforce of the future, they will confront many new learning situations. By taking ownership of their learning, students can develop today in classrooms their own effective strategies. By developing their Personal Learning Strategies (PLS), students will be more adaptive and successful in their learning for the unknown demands of their future.

About the author — Dr. Virginia Magnus is currently a presenter for NJASCD on the topics of reading skills, the learning process, oral communication skills, and whole child programs for secondary students. She also conducts In-District programs. Contact NJASCD to schedule an In-District presentation.