Getting To Know The Learner

The learner refers to all your students in the diverse forms in which they appear in your classroom. Effective teaching begins with an understanding of learners as individuals, students and future leaders who have their own understandings of their role within the university which might not be consistent with your teaching intentions and purposes. This is complicated by their varying levels of preparedness, learning styles, motivation and background, all of which influence how they learn in your course(s). The more you know about your students, the better prepared you will be to meet their learning needs.

Learning Styles

Learning styles describe the learners’ preferred methods of engaging with material to facilitate the learning process. It is an excellent tool for students to use to help themselves learn. Have your students take the VARK learning style inventory at: http://www.vark-learning.com/english/page.asp?p=questionnaire. The VARK website also provides students with learning techniques that are appropriate to their learning styles and which would help them to take charge of their own learning. Encourage your students to use the suggestions to help themselves.

Multiple Intelligences

Quite apart from differences already mentioned, students have different capabilities and potentials because of their differing intelligence strengths (Box 3: Multiple Intelligences). For example, while some students are verbally able (linguistic, after Howard Gardener, 1970), others are mathematically inclined (logico-mathematical) or have spatial intelligence that impacts learning in your course. Knowledge of these intelligences will help you to know your students and more ably prepare to help them to achieve learning goals.

How Do You Come to Know Your Learners/Students?

Here are a few tips:

1. Talk to students. This goes beyond discussing the course content to reasons why the students feel pursuing your course is important or not, and beyond.
2. Carry out simple evaluations (two to four open-ended questions at a time) so that you can obtain feedback on what is happening to your students during your course. One-minute papers at the end of your class session can be a useful strategy in this regard.

Refer to the text by Cross and Angelo (1993) on Classroom Assessment Techniques to get further insight and examples of evaluation techniques that help you to quickly find out more about your students and their progress. Several copies of the text can be found in the main Library in the section dedicated to Tertiary Level Teaching and Learning.

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How Do You Teach Large Classes?

It becomes an imperative to make concerted efforts to know your students when teaching larger-sized classes, because these tend to be more impersonal. Students are easily ‘lost’, physically and psychologically, in such environments. Getting to know your students under such circumstances requires more planning.

Try:

1. Creating groups. Communicate with your students through group representatives. This helps you to know the students and build communities within your class.
2. Talking to colleagues about your students. This should not only be to complain about students as much as to share what works and what does not.
3. Having your students complete a learning style inventory and report on the different learning styles in their groups. They can use this information to help themselves through your course (and others), since there are guidelines as to the kinds of strategies appropriate to different learning styles.

How You Can Cater for Diverse Learners in Your Classroom?

1. Recognise that students are individuals even in large classes.
2. Anticipate and respect the diversity of your students.
3. Explore and use a variety of teaching and learning strategies in your course as far as reasonable and practical.
4. Use assessment strategies consistent with your teaching/learning strategies.
5. Accept that students have competencies that can be brought to bear in your course. Use their competencies and experiences to help them grow.
6. Accept the validity of different responses.
7. Give students meaningful tasks.
8. Use groups to brainstorm, hold discussions, and solve problems.
9. Monitor the progress of your students.
Box 3: *Multiple Intelligences*

1. **Linguistic** intelligence is the capacity to use language, your native language and perhaps other languages, to express what's on your mind and to understand other people. Poets specialize in linguistic intelligence but any kind of writer, orator, speaker, lawyer, or a person for whom language is an important stock in trade highlights linguistic intelligence.

2. **Logical-mathematical** intelligence people with a highly developed logical-mathematical intelligence understand the underlying principles of some kind of a casual system, the way a scientist or a logician does; or can manipulate numbers, quantities and operations, the way a mathematician does.

3. **Spatial** intelligence refers to the ability to represent the spatial world internally in your mind—the way a sailor or airplane pilot navigates the large spatial world, or the way a chess player or sculptor represents a more circumscribed spatial world. Spatial intelligence can be used in the arts or in the sciences. If you are spatially intelligent and oriented towards the arts, you are more likely to become a painter or a sculptor or an architect than, say, a musician or a writer. Similarly, certain sciences like anatomy or topology emphasise spatial intelligence.

4. **Bodily kinesthetic** intelligence is the capacity to use your whole body or parts of your body—your hand, your fingers, your arms—to solve a problem, make something, or put on some kind of a production. The most evident examples are people in athletics or the performing arts, particularly dance or acting.

5. **Musical** intelligence is the capacity to think in music, to hear patterns, recognize them, remember them, and perhaps manipulate them. People who have musical intelligence don’t just remember music easily, they can’t get it out of their minds, it’s so omnipresent. Some people will say, “Yes, music is important, but it’s a talent, not an intelligence.” I say, “Fine, let’s call it a talent.” But, then we have to leave the word intelligent out of all discussions of human abilities. You know, Mozart was damned smart!

6. **Interpersonal** intelligence is understanding other people. It’s an ability we all need, but is at a premium if you are a teacher, clinician, salesperson or politician. Anybody who deals with other people has to be skilled in the interpersonal sphere.

7. **Intrapersonal** intelligence refers to having an understanding of yourself, of knowing who you are, what you can do, what you want to do, how you react to things, which things to avoid and which things to gravitate toward. We are drawn to people who have a good understanding of themselves because those people tend not to screw up. They tend to know what they can do. They tend to know what they can’t do. And they tend to know where to go if they need help.

8. **Naturalist** intelligence designates the human ability to discriminate among living things (plants, animals) as well as sensitivity to other features of the natural world (clouds, rock configurations). This ability was clearly of value in our evolutionary past as hunters, gathers and framers; it continues to be central in such roles as botanist or chef. I also speculate that much of our consumer society exploits the naturalist intelligences, which can be mobilized in the discrimination among cars, sneakers, kinds of makeup and the like. The kind
References
