ENHANCING YOUR TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS

Accurately assessing your students' developmental state can direct your planning and impel your teaching. For instance, recognizing a 16-year-old's concern about his appearance and his standing among his peers may promote your rapport with him and eliminate learning barriers.

Keep in mind that chronologic age and developmental stage are not always related. Throughout life, people move sequentially through developmental stages, but most people also fluctuate somewhat among stages, often in response to outside stressors. These stressors can cause a person to regress temporarily to an earlier stage. Sometimes a person may not achieve the task expected of his chronologic age. So you will need to address your students at their current developmental stages, not at the stages at which you would expect them to be because of their chronological ages.

In some situations, hopefully most, you will have time to sit down and develop a formal teaching plan. In others, you will be confronted with a "teachable moment" when the student is ready to learn and is asking pointed questions. Invariably, these moments seem to come at the most inopportune times. At times like these, you face the dilemma: to teach or not to teach. Having a knowledge of basic learning principles will help you take best advantage of these moments. Here are some principles proven to enhance teaching and learning.

Seize the moment

Teaching is most effective when it occurs in quick response to a need the learner feels. So even though you are elbow deep in something else, you should make every effort to teach the student when he or she asks. The student is ready to learn. Satisfy that immediate need for information now, and augment your teaching with more information later.

Involve the student in planning

Just presenting information to the student does not ensure learning. For learning to occur, you will need to get the student involved in identifying his learning needs and outcomes. Help him to develop attainable objectives. As the teaching process continues, you can further engage him or her by selecting teaching strategies and materials that require the student's direct involvement, such as role playing and return demonstration. Regardless of the teaching strategy you choose, giving the student the chance to test his or her ideas, to take risks, and to be creative will promote learning.

Begin with what the student knows

You will find that learning moves faster when it builds on what the student already knows. Teaching that begins by comparing the old, known information or process and the new, unknown one allows the student to grasp new information more quickly.

Move from simple to complex

The student will find learning more rewarding if he has the opportunity to master simple concepts first and then apply these concepts to more complex ones. Remember, however, that what one student finds simple, another may find complex. A careful assessment takes these differences into account and helps you plan the teaching starting point.

Accommodate the student's preferred learning style

How quickly and well a student learns depends not only on his or her intelligence and prior education, but also on the student's learning style preference. *Visual* learners gain knowledge best by *seeing* or *reading* what you are trying to teach; *auditory* learners, by *listening;*and *tactile or psychomotor* learners, by *doing.*

You can improve your chances for teaching success if you assess your patient's preferred learning style, then plan teaching activities and use teaching tools appropriate to that style. To assess a student's learning style, observe the student, administer a learning style inventory, or simply ask the student how he or she learns best.

You can also experiment with different teaching tools, such as printed material, illustrations, videotapes, and actual equipment, to assess learning style. Never assume, though, that your student can read well -- or even read at all.

Sort goals by learning domain

You can combine your knowledge of the student's preferred learning style with your knowledge of learning domains. Categorizing what the students need to learn into proper domains helps identify and evaluate the behaviours you expect them to show.

Learning behaviours fall in three domains: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective. The *cognitive* domain deals with intellectual abilities. The *psychomotor* domain includes physical or motor skills. The *affective* domain involves expression of feeling about attitudes, interests, and values. Most learning involves all three domains.

Make material meaningful

Another way to facilitate learning is to relate material to the student's lifestyle -- and to recognize incompatibilities. The more meaningful material is to a student, the quicker and easier it will be learned.

Allow immediate application of knowledge

Giving the student the opportunity to apply his or her new knowledge and skills reinforces learning and builds confidence. This immediate application translates learning to the "real world" and provides an opportunity for problem solving, feedback, and emotional support.

Plan for periodic rests

While you may want the students to push ahead until they have learned everything on the teaching plan, remember that periodic plateaus occur normally in learning. When your instructions are especially complex or lengthy, your students may feel overwhelmed and appear unreceptive to your teaching. Be sure to recognize these signs of mental fatigue and let the students relax. (You too can use these periods - to review your teaching plan and make any necessary adjustments.)

Tell your students how they are progressing

Learning is made easier when the students are aware of their progress. Positive feedback can motivate them to greater effort because it makes their goal seem attainable. Also, ask your students how they feel they are doing. They probably want to take part in assessing their own progress toward learning goals, and their input can guide your feedback. You will find their reactions are usually based on what "feels right."

Reward desired learning with praise

Praising desired learning outcomes or behaviour improves the chances that the students will retain the material or repeat the behaviour. Praising your students' successes associates the desired learning goal with a sense of growing and accepted competence. Reassuring them that they have learned the desired material or technique can help them retain and refine it.

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