

The Teacher and Building a Positive Learning Culture

Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson the students will be able to:

1. Design and implement cooperative, collaborative, and peer learning strategies.
2. Define and describe a positive learning culture.
3. Identify the aspects of a positive learning culture.
4. List ten results or benefits of peer learning.
5. Outline the four elements of the basics of instructional design.
6. Recognize the various roles of instructors in a positive learning environment.
7. Differentiate between field-dependent and field-independent learning styles.

Introduction

Adult learners, and effective, efficient instructors, working together in every cultural setting, desire a positive, progressive, practical, prized learning culture or community and comparable, compatible, competent, capable instructional delivery approaches. Both are inseparable. This lesson aims at discerning, discovering, presenting, and practicing such a plan.

Creating a Constructive Learning Culture and Community

Jane S. Halonen credits Plutarch with saying, “the mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled.” She asserts that “filling vessels” has “been the dominant strategy that most college students

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experience” (McKeachie and Svinicki 2006, 318). Many times “information passes from the notes of the professor to the notes of the student without passing through the mind of either” (Johnson, 4). A positive learning environment in a Bible school setting, in any course, moves from being an instructor-centered approach to one that is student-centered. It is made up of a “community in which people are joined together by mutual interest to intensively examine a particular theme, are able to learn together and exchange existing knowledge and work on aspects of problem solving together” (Paloff and Pratt 1999).

Beyond caring for proper lighting, and appropriate seating, a positive learning environment is (a) interactive, (b) dynamic (engaging), (c) objective-based, (d) value-centered, (e) promotes active learning, (f) creative, (g) respectful, (h) active not passive, (i) values diversity of cultures and learning styles, and (j) promotes respect for all cultures and models such behavior.

Such environments are sensitive and respectful of their cultural surroundings, beliefs and values, but also create a culture of their own. It is their way of saying, “This is our way of doing things around here. It is intentional. It is planned. It is deliberate!” They search for a ‘culture of learning’ in which people are constantly encircled by, engrossed with, and engaged in learning experiences (Palloff and Pratt 2001, 5).

African culture, as well as many others in the developing world, promotes such community. They place great emphasis on face-to-face interaction. Great respect is shown to the elders, since they have gained wisdom through their years. They see the community as educator. Older men or women are frequently compared to a library full of knowledge, waiting to be shared. Questioning the teacher, in such a context, could imply that one is challenging him and his expertise. This is one of the reasons peer learning is so effective. Peers have little problem effectively and respectfully challenging one another to promote mutual understanding and to discover learning. Questions are directed primarily from student to student, rather than from student to instructor, or vice versa.

Creating a Constructive Delivery Strategy

An instructional delivery strategy refers to how an instructor delivers the message to learners. The basics of instructional design are included in the following chart.

Objectives	Where are we going? Why am I going to teach this? Who will be coming on the trip?
Content	What am I going to teach?
Methods	How am I going to teach? What instructional

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	strategies will be used?
Evaluation	How will I know I succeeded at teaching this?

After understanding what is to be taught, and why it is taught, special care must be given to instructional strategies. Cooperative and collaborative learning are two of the varieties of active learning or peer learning available. Both are used in creating a positive learning environment and in designing an effective instructional delivery strategy. Peer learning (a) encourages a sense of community, (b) goes beyond merely transferring knowledge to allowing students to discover it, (c) actively involves or engages students in the learning process, (d) creates a group culture, (e) fosters positive relationships, (f) elevates student achievement, (g) deeply processes knowledge increasing the chances of recall, (h) simulates real-life experiences where people work together for survival and success, (i) creates an environment where encouragement comes from peers rather than just the instructor, (j) enhances cross-cultural, inter-ethnic relationships, where students appreciate diversity and differences, (k) makes it easier to change a person's action, behavior, and attitudinal pattern; (l) sharpens a student's cognitive structure, faculties and constructive development; (m) builds teamwork, (n) increases student's ability to solve problems, (o) provides greater evidence and likelihood that students will gain a greater understanding of the material covered, (p) develops sensitive ears in hearing and understanding others, (q) leads to better understanding, (r) produces intellectual synergy, (s) promotes mutual exploration and discovery of a topic, (t) develops interpersonal skills, (u) causes students to invest in their own learning, (v) forms partnerships in achieving learning objectives, (w) reduces dependence on instructor so that students become empowered, (x) forces students to think about the subject matter, (y) allows students to promote each other's learning, and (z) assists students in developing skills in oral and written communications.

Instructors in a positive learning environment that utilizes peer teaching and learning become: (a) facilitators, (b) coaches, (c) midwives, (d) co-learners, and (e) guides. Teachers are no longer solo-directors or the only dispensers of knowledge or expertise.

John Dewey once said, "There is an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education." Memory is impacted by how deeply one processes the information. The adult attention span is between twelve and fifteen minutes. Thus, it is important to have an instructional delivery strategy that reflects this. Learners need time to process what they are being taught. Breaking up instructional time into cooperative learning exercises, interspersed between lecture segments enhances education.

Active, discovery, cooperative, collaborative, and peer learning strategies are used to supplement rather than replace lectures. People believe more in knowledge discovered themselves than in knowledge

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presented by others. Learning becomes more effective when it is active rather than a passive process (Sherman Revised 1996, 3). Students learn more effectively by doing. Wilbert J. McKeachie (2006) advocates that, “students teaching other students” may very well be one of the most effective methods of teaching (214). In small group settings, students learn more of what is taught, and retain it longer. In general, active learning is anything students do in the classroom beyond inactively listening (hopefully) to an instructor’s lecture. It is important to combine experience and theory.

As we determine objectives, design the text, develop the message, find the best instructional methods, and know how, what, and when to evaluate, we will secure our success as an instructor and our student’s success as learners.

Characterizing the Prevailing Learning Context and Culture

Dorothy and Earle Bowen (1988) found that many African students, as well as others in relationship-oriented societies; have field-dependent learning styles. They prefer strategies that have social orientation, and look at things in a global way; at the whole and not merely the part. The opposite, field-independent approach looks at tasks analytically and has a non-social orientation. Their study showed that 91% of Africans are field-dependent (100% of West Africans, and 84% of East Africans). African students do their best work in a group context, rather than on an individual basis. They prefer guidance and structure from the teacher. At the same time, they learn best from group discussion and small group interaction. They dislike a totally lecture method approach (although this is the technique predominantly found in their classrooms). They learn well through hands-on experiences. An effective instructional strategy is to provide a course outline so students can see the planning of the entire course. Clearly stated educational objectives are encouraged so students will know what they are expected to learn and why. Despite being considered an oral culture, the African student is more a visual, read/write type of learner. The instructor needs to identify the key points in the classroom session, since students are not typically analytical. Cooperative and collaborative learning strategies should be employed providing a break or variety interspersed with the lecture material or course content. This helps since students need things broken down into smaller chunks of work. Along with the peer learning strategies, students need feedback, reinforcement, and praise. Criticism needs to be constructive and creative. African students work well in groups: group projects, group study, and group discussions. Working in pairs should be encouraged. Student learning can be strengthened through studying together. A basic text and visual aids are helpful, as students have a difficult time analyzing what should be written down and remembered from a speech. The total lecture method is the weakest instructional strategy employed in the African context. Students will learn best, material which is socially-oriented, or people or event centered, rather than time or task oriented (1-13).

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Considering a Constructive Learning Culture and Community

“Think, Pair, Share” serves as a powerful instructional strategy. In this cooperative learning exercise, a problem or question is posed. Students think alone, about the question, for a period of time, and then work in pairs to discuss the question and their findings. During the “share” time, students are asked to share their answers with the rest of the class. Sometimes, they are asked to share the answer they heard from their partner. This increases sensitivity to listening, deepens understanding, and accountability (Lie, 6-7). One interesting addition to such a strategy is the “Paraphrase Passport.” Before the speaker can give his own ideas, he must summarize the views of the previous speaker (Bell, 1998, 4).

In an introductory Acts of the Apostles course the following “Think, Pair, Share” assignment could be given: Show, explain or defend that Acts has a didactic (instructional, teaching) purpose rather than being merely a historical record of the early church. Allow fifteen minutes for the students to think individually, and then fifteen minutes for them to work in pairs. Ask each partnership group to give a report to the class. Make it interesting, by requiring “Paraphrase Passport” to be implemented. An easier assignment could have been to ask the pairs to verify or explain Luke’s intent in writing Luke-Acts.

A variation of “Think, Pair, Share” is called “Cooperative Learning Pairs.” Here, students work in pairs with the specified material. Both read and study it. One partner verbally summarizes what was studied while the other partner checks the material to make sure there are no errors. “Cooperative Teaching” also works well. Students work in pairs going over the specified material. One reads one-half of the material; the other, the remaining portion. Each partner then teaches the material he read to the other (Bell 1998, 2-4).

Buzz groups provide small group interaction of four to eight students. Each group is given a designated period of time to discuss a problem and come up with one or two ideas to bring back to the rest of the class (Bell, 1998, 2). One variation is called “Roving Reporter.” Here one student from each team may, for a certain amount of time, wander around the room gathering useful information and discoveries from other teams. He returns to his original group and shares the information (Lie, 6). Either of these variations could have easily been done with the “Think, Pair, Share” assignment above. Another cooperative learning assignment is: Prove, using Scriptures from Acts, that speaking in other tongues, as the Spirit gives the utterance is the initial, physical evidence of receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Verify this is normative (expected, will happen) in every instance of someone being baptized in the Spirit. Here, incorporate the buzz groups and the “Roving Reporter.”

Conclusion

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David Thornberg claims learning communities have existed for thousands of years and presents ancient, essential metaphors for learning in the twenty-first century. In early times, people would gather nightly around the **campfire** and hear wisdom and culture being passed down through storytellers. Such people were considered experts in society; the wisest of the wisest. In many cultures storytelling was the traditional medium of education. Proverbs were shared to the budding generation. Later, people often met around the **watering-hole** to informally share information with those from within the village and beyond. They learned from their peers and the news of the day was circulated. Just as water is necessary for survival, the information aspect of peer teaching and learning is also essential for cultural endurance. It is still alive today, as people are brought into contact with each other. The **cave**, climbing a mountain, sitting on the waterside, or today, going to a library, brought people in contact with themselves. They had time to reflect and gain insight. This is also another important element of a positive learning culture and instructional design strategy. In order for both to be balanced, there needs to be instruction from an expert, interaction with other learners, and a time to reflect and deeply process what is being learned (2007, 1-12).

Discussion Topics

1. This lesson provides substantial information on research gained in a study of African students. Go through this material and ascertain which of the same findings would be indicative of students in your cultural setting.
2. Profile and determine the best instructional design strategies for students in your cultural setting.
3. There are many cooperative, collaborative, and active learning strategies that can be employed in your classroom. Only a few are mentioned in this lesson. Break the class into small buzz groups and brainstorm on other learning strategy possibilities that can be used. If necessary, consult the library or the Internet. Allow for a roving reporter from each group, to move to other groups, collecting valuable information, to bring back to his home group.
4. Using the “Think, Pair, Share” approach provided in this lesson, take the ancient metaphors of campfire, watering-hole, and cave and relate them to the twenty-first century. What would be typical of the campfire today? Where would you find the watering-hole atmosphere today? Where can one go to reflect in the theological education setting today?

5. Jane S. Halonen credits Plutarch with saying, “the mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled.” Discuss how it is possible, or in which ways it is possible, to kindle a fire in a student’s mind rather than merely treating it like a vessel to be filled.

Other Easily Accessible, Free Resources

Bell, James. 1998. *Improving Student Learning and College Teaching*. : Howard Community College, Psychology. HCC. http://classweb.howardcc.edu/jbell/learning/cooperative_learning.htm.

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Lesson in Review

1. What is a positive learning environment? _____

2. What are three aspects that comprise a positive learning environment? _____

3. What is meant by a culture of learning in connection with a peer learning environment? _____

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4. Why is peer learning so effective? _____

5. What are the four components of an instructional design strategy? _____

6. List ten results or benefits of peer learning. _____

7. What is the role of the instructor in an environment that utilizes peer teaching and learning? _____

8. Why is it good to break up instructional time to include cooperative learning exercises? _____

9. Why are students teaching other students considered to be one of the most effective teaching methods? _____

10. What are some of the indicators or characteristics of a field-dependent learner? _____

11. What is the “Paraphrase Passport” learning exercise? _____

12. What is the difference between field-dependent and field-independent learning styles? _____

13. What are buzz groups? _____

14. Explain how the campfire, watering-hole, and cave metaphors can be interpreted today? _____

15. What cooperative learning exercises did the instructor use in teaching this lesson? _____

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