ABC of learning and teaching

Educational environment

Linda Hutchinson

A student might find a particular question threatening and intimidating in one context yet stimulating and challenging in a different context. What makes one learning context unpleasant and another pleasant?

Learning depends on several factors, but a crucial step is the engagement of the learner. This is affected by their motivation and perception of relevance. These, in turn, can be affected by learners' previous experiences and preferred learning styles and by the context and environment in which the learning is taking place. In adult learning theories, teaching is as much about setting the context or climate for learning as it is about imparting knowledge or sharing expertise.

Motivation

Motivation can be intrinsic (from the student) and extrinsic (from external factors). Assessments are usually a strong extrinsic motivator for learners. Individual learners' intrinsic motivation can be affected by previous experiences, by their desire to achieve, and the relevance of the learning to their future.

A teacher's role in motivation should not be underestimated. Enthusiasm for the subject, interest in the students' experiences, and clear direction (among other things) all help to keep students' attention and improve assimilation of information and understanding.

Even with good intrinsic motivation, however, external factors can demotivate and disillusion. Distractions, unhelpful attitudes of teachers, and physical discomfort will prompt learners to disengage. Maslow described a model to illustrate the building blocks of motivation. Each layer needs to be in place before the pinnacle of "self actualisation" is reached.

Physiological needs

Although the need to be fed, watered, and comfortable seems trite, many teachers will have experienced, for example, the difficulties of running sessions in cold or overheated rooms, in long sessions without refreshments, in noisy rooms, in facilities with uncomfortable seating.

Physical factors can make it difficult for learners and teachers to relax and pay attention. Ensuring adequate breaks and being mindful of the physical environment are part of the teacher's role.

Safety

A teacher should aim to provide an environment in which learners feel safe to experiment, voice their concerns, identify their lack of knowledge, and stretch their limits. Safety can be compromised, for example, through humiliation, harassment, and threat of forced disclosure of personal details.

Teachers can create an atmosphere of respect by endorsing the learners' level of knowledge and gaps in knowledge as essential triggers to learning rather than reasons for ridicule.

Remembering names and involving the learners in setting ground rules are other examples of building mutual trust. Feedback on performance, a vital part of teaching, should be done constructively and with respect for the learner.


Case history: safe environment

Dr Holden claims to use interactive teaching techniques. She introduces the topic then points to a student in the audience and says, "tell me five causes of cyanosis." Each student will get asked questions in the session, and most spend their time worrying about when it is their turn to be "exposed."

After a course on teaching skills, she runs the same session. After the introduction, she tells the students to turn to their neighbour and together come up with some possible causes of cyanosis. After a couple of minutes of this "buzz group" activity, she asks for one suggestion from each group until no new suggestions are made. The suggestions are then discussed with reference to the aims of the session.
Belonging
Many factors help to give a student a sense of belonging in a group or team—for example, being a respected member, having one's voice heard and attended to, being given a useful role, and having colleagues with similar backgrounds, experiences, and goals.

Learners are motivated through inclusion and consultation. Their input to a course's objectives and structure should be sought, valued, and acted on. On clinical placements, staff should help to prevent medical students from feeling ignored, marginalised, or "in the way." Students should instead be valued as assets to a clinical unit or team.

Self esteem
Several of the points mentioned above feed directly into self-esteem through making the learner feel valued. Praise, words of appreciation, and constructive rather than destructive criticism are important. It can take many positive moments to build self-esteem, but just one unkind and thoughtless comment to destroy it.

Doctors are well used to their role in the doctor-patient relationship. Some find it hard to translate the same skills and attitudes to the teacher-student relationship. Their own experience of education or their own distractions, time pressures, and other stresses may be factors.

Self actualisation
If a teacher has attended to the above motivational factors, then they have sought to provide the ideal environment in which a learner can flourish.

An ethos that encourages intrinsic motivation without anxiety is conducive to a "deep" learning approach. However, there may be some who remain unable to respond to the education on offer. Teachers may need to consider whether the course (or that particular piece of study) is suitable for that student.

Relevance
The relevance of learning is closely linked to motivation: relevance for immediate needs, for future work, of getting a certificate or degree regardless of content. Learning for learning's sake is back in vogue in higher education after a move towards vocational or industrial preparation.

Certain courses in medical degrees have been notoriously poorly received by students. Faculty members need to explain to students why these courses are necessary and how they link to future practice. Allowing them to see for themselves, through early clinical exposure and experience, is likely to be helpful.

Similarly, learning the basic medical sciences in the context of clinical situations is the basis for problem-based learning. Similarly, learning the basic medical sciences in the context of clinical situations is the basis for problem-based learning.

A challenging problem is the trainee who is in a post because he or she needs to do it for certification, although it is of no perceived value to the trainee's future career direction. A balance needs to be negotiated between respect for the individual's needs and the expectation of a level of professional conduct.

Teacher as role model
The teacher or facilitator is one of the most powerful variables in the educational environment. The teacher's actions, attitudes (as evidenced by tone of voice, comments made), enthusiasm, and interest in the subject will affect learners indirectly. The capacity for subliminal messages is enormous. Inappropriate behaviour or expression by a staff member will be noticed; at
worst the learners will want to emulate that behaviour, at best they will have been given tacit permission to do so.

Maximising educational environment

Classroom, tutorials, seminars, lectures
Room temperature, comfort of seating, background noise, and visual distractions are all factors of the environment that can affect concentration and motivation. Some are within the teacher’s control, others not.

- Respect for the learners and their needs, praise, encouragement of participation can all lead to a positive learning experience. Lack of threat to personal integrity and self-esteem is essential, although challenges can be rewarding and enjoyable.

- Small group teaching facilitates individual feedback, but the seating arrangement used will have an important effect on student participation. If, for example, students sit in traditional classroom rows, those on the edges will feel excluded. A circular format encourages interaction. It allows the teacher to sit alongside a talkative person, thus keeping them out of eye contact and reducing their input. A quiet student can be placed opposite to encourage participation through non-verbal means.

- Students can also work in unfacilitated groups on a topic, enabling them to work in teams and share the learning tasks.

Clinical settings
In real life settings, the dual role of teacher and clinician can be complicated. The students will be closely observing the clinician, picking up hidden messages about clinical practice. They need to feel that there is no danger that they will unnecessarily distress or harm patients or their families. They also need to feel safe from humiliation. Making them feel welcomed and of value when they arrive at a new placement or post will aid their learning throughout.

Course and curriculum design
The designers of short and long courses should consider the relevance of the learning environment to the potential learners. Student representation on curriculum committees is one means of ensuring a more student centred course.

- The aims, objectives, and assessments should be signposted well in advance of a course and should be demonstrably fair. The teaching methods should build on learners’ experience, creating a collaborative environment.

- Disseminating the findings of course evaluations, followed by staff training, helps to identify and correct undesirable behaviour among faculty members. Evaluations should also include a means for reviewing the course’s aims and objectives with the students.

- In longer courses, student support systems and informal activities that build collective identity must be considered. Students who are having difficulties need to be identified early and given additional support.

Further reading