

What Makes Good Teaching?

Learning is most effective when the following conditions are met:

- A clear structure, framework, scaffolding surrounds, supports and informs learning.
- High standards are expected of learners and are made explicit.
- Learners acknowledge and use their prior learning and their approaches to learning.
- Learners spend lots of time on task, that is, doing relevant things and practising.
- Learning is undertaken at least in part as a collaborative activity, both among students and between students and staff.
- Learners receive and use feedback on their work

Structure and Standards

It's important to know where you want to get to – and how you will get there. Basically the “learning outcomes” tell learners where they will end up, the structure of the course and the activities they will participate in (be these reading, discussion, practical work, presentation...) tells learners how these outcomes will be achieved.

Acknowledging Prior Learning

It's been a long while since anyone who would read this article has started from the perspective of knowing absolutely nothing. A good learning experience will deliver new understanding and new knowledge, but it will likely build on (or improve on) what you already know – there's nothing more frustrating than repeating learning.

Learning is active

Our brains are not “buckets waiting to be filled”. Rather than just collecting knowledge, we need to work in order to learn. This can involve, for example, fitting new ideas into categories we already understand – or developing new categories to hold new ideas (the jargon is “assimilation” and “adoption”. Or it can involve physical activity – performing an experiment rather than hearing about one, or performing part of a play rather than reading it. If we're just sitting there listening – without even thinking about what we are hearing – no learning is happening.

On Task

The stuff that we do while learning (a task) has to be directly relevant (at least most of the time) to what we are trying to learn. We don't have to deal with the history of typography to read an article about psychology – we do need to deal with the history of psychology to put it into context. Tasks need to be combined with the sharing of information in a sensible way – ideally so we get the information we need at a point we are able to use it and incorporate it into our way of understanding the world.

Collaboration for all

Although an individual enrolls on a course, an individual takes an exam, and an individual gets a qualification – we need other people for learning to happen. This can be a teacher (or even a recording of a teacher as a video or text), or our learner peers. We need others to design and scaffold our learning, and to help us understand how new information fits in with what we already know – Baume and Scanlon talk about “good, open, honest, critical and constructive conversations” as a basis for learning and that’s as good a model as any.

Feedback

Above all, other people can offer us feedback on our learning progress, and the assumptions that we make about new information – comparing what we are doing with our goals and with established ideas about the world. Though we usually expect that teachers provide this feedback, it can in practice come from anywhere – our peers, the written word, a computer programme. As long as we are all trying to do the same things – improving our understanding, developing new skills, gaining confidence with what we do know – collaboration is essential for learning.

Kernohan, D. (2021) 'What makes teaching good – the answers that student reps need to know', *Wonkhe*, 28 June.
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