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In This Issue

◆ Addressing Diverse Learners in the Classroom Today

Outcome Assessment Related Links

- ◆ Writing Student Learning Outcomes
- ◆ Major Categories in the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives

Other Useful Links

- ◆ Association of American Colleges and Universities

In the Next Issue

- ◆ Student Engagement and Learning with Technology

Addressing Diverse Learners in the Classroom Today

By Lillie Calloway

In today's college classroom, we find students of such varying abilities, levels of preparation, interests and learning styles that require many different teaching strategies in order to meet their need. We may find traditional (young, first time college attendees) and non-traditional (older, working full time, part time students) as well. As instructors, our task is to deliver instruction in such a manner that we reach the majority of these students. Our classrooms are learning laboratories and each day we have an opportunity and an implied mandate to learn more about how our students learn and what we can do to maximize their learning. Let's look at some ways to do this.

The Lecture-Only Method

The lecture method where professor stands in front of the class, delivers the same material in the same way at the same time to all the students is one method that is widely used. The teacher is viewed as the "sage on the stage" who possesses all knowledge. The students sit in neat rows taking notes from the authority- the professor and they may ask or answer questions when given permission. There may be limited interaction between students and teacher or students and students. It is usually the faculty member who talks for the majority of the time while the students are expected to listen. With this model the faculty member may not know until test time that a significant number of students did not master the material. This behavior, while appropriate at some time in certain situations, would be laughable in others. A music student does not learn by observing his instructor playing the instrument of choice, the quarterback can't learn how to pass the ball by only watching tapes or listening to his coach talk about passing the ball, and we certainly would not want to receive anesthesia from an anesthesiologist who has been involved in the procedure under the watchful eye of a veteran anesthesiologist. Although the lecture method is still widely used, it should not be the only teaching strategy of choice. The students of today, with all of the technology available to them, are less likely to learn by assuming a passive, uninvolved role. They have been exposed to interactive environments from birth and often need more than a lecture and notes on the board to motivate them. Our pedagogical toolkit must contain a variety of strategies and must shift the focus from teacher to learner in order to enhance student learning. Let's examine some other techniques that we could use.

Cooperative Learning Methods

Cooperative learning approaches are forms of active learning which engage students in working and learning together in small groups. These strategies

are carefully planned to actively involve students in the learning process by interacting with their classmates. They must be designed for the participation and learning of all participants in a shared venture. Individual accountability is stressed and collaborative learning must be the goal for all. Some examples follow.

Jigsaw as the title suggests consists of segmenting a task into parts which are assigned to individual group members and then reassembled. The class is divided into groups and from these groups expert groups are formed which contain exactly one member from each of the original groups. They are called expert groups they will only discuss the piece assigned to them and become experts on that material. After the expert groups have completed their work, each student goes back to their original group and teaches what they have learned to their original group members. The instructor must carefully monitor these groups to see that desired level of participation and learning takes place.

The **Roundtable** strategy works well when trying to assess students' prior knowledge before introducing a topic or when preparing for some type of assessment. When using this method, the instructor may pose a question having multiple answers or review a procedure that has several steps such as solving an equation. Each group will have only one worksheet. One student begins by writing an answer or writing a step in the solution and then passes the paper to the next person. The process continues until everyone in the group feels that all possible answers have been given, the solution is complete or the instructor calls for a break. A student may pass on one round but should be given the opportunity to respond on the next time around.

In **Pairs Check**, students work in pairs within groups of four. One student does the work while the other serves as coach. A set of questions/problems related to a particular topic is provided to each group. The worker solves the problem/answers the questions while the coach watches, giving suggestions or giving positive feedback. They should switch roles to do the next problem/question. Within the group the pairs check with each other to see if they agree. Then they move on.

With the **Think – Pair - Share** strategy, information is given to students in the desired format (a question to be answered after a lecture, problems to be done after the instructor has lectured and demonstrated the process). They think about it or work individually and silently and then pair with another student to discuss their results and reach consensus. Pairs may then share the results in whatever manner the instructor decides.

An additional strategy is the use of **“Quick Thinks.”** Quick Thinks are brief active learning tasks which can be inserted into lectures or other instructional forms and which require students to process information alone or with a group. Examples of Quick Thinks could be as follows. When solving an application problem ask the students “What’s the next step in the process?” In the middle of a lecture about the Civil War, pose the question “Can you see any similarities between the war in Iraq and the Civil War in this country? Any differences? Quick Thinks can be used to determine if students are grasping the material presently being discussed, if they can apply previously learned material to new situations or to review. Quick Thinks allow students to think about important content as the lesson develops. Research has shown that both faculty and students get immediate feedback when quick thinks are used.

These are just a few suggestions to enhance student learning and they may not be appropriate for all disciplines. Please share with our readers any strategy that you have used successfully.