The 7 Fundamental Conditions of Learning
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Last month I wrote about the attributes of the very best teachers, with the goal of identifying for young faculty members, in particular, the qualities they ought to emulate and cultivate. Several readers complained that my focus was too much on the teacher and not enough on students.
Fair enough. This month I'll try to answer two questions: What do students need in order to learn? And how can we as teachers provide those things?

For the record, my aim here is not to rewrite Bloom's Taxonomy, (mis)appropriate portions of it, or step on its toes. For its purpose — identifying the different ways in which students learn — the taxonomy cannot really be improved upon. I'm trying to do something different: Establish the fundamental conditions that must exist if people are to learn, drawing on my five decades as a student, teacher, and parent. I've come up with seven conditions.

1. Awareness. I'm sure it sounds self-evident to say that students, in order to learn, need some awareness of the subject matter at hand. That is, they must recognize that there is something they need to learn before they can hope to learn it. It's always sobering to realize just how many students not only don't know anything about the subject but don't even recognize how much they have to learn. They don't know what they don't know.

I've always believed that my first job, as a teacher, is to open students' eyes to the fact that there's a lot they don't know — a whole world of information out there in general, and about my subject in particular — that might ultimately be of use to them.

2. Interest. After establishing that there is much to learn, teachers must then answer the question of why students should care. That's a hard one, especially for those of us who teach general education or "core" courses, because most of our students are not naturally interested in what we're

talking about. They're taking our class only because it's required for graduation or transfer and, frankly, would not darken our door otherwise.

That's why it's up to us, early on and often, to help them understand why the information we're sharing is meaningful to them personally. Otherwise, they're unlikely to feel very motivated and almost certainly will not learn as much as they could.

3. Motivation. Although experience suggests that students are more likely to learn if they have some interest in the subject matter, there are plenty of other reasons for them to pursue mastery — even if they don't care about the material or envision using it in the future. One good reason is grades and everything that goes with them: good academic standing; approbation from parents, peers, and others; and admission to an academic major or graduate program. I spent hours struggling with precalculus, not because I cared about math but because it was required and I didn't want to ruin my GPA.

Besides grades, one of the best forms of motivation I've found involves professional standards and expectations. Most students in my first-year composition courses have little interest in grammar or sentence structure as such, but their ears perk up when I explain that they're going to be judged in the work force based on how well they use the language. Which brings me to the importance of:

4. Relevance. Students learn more efficiently and effectively if they understand the relevance of a topic to anything else in their lives or the world at large. One of the biggest complaints about a college education — especially now, when even some bright students are considering skipping college altogether — is that it's largely theoretical. It's also true that a fair amount of theory is often necessary for students to fully grasp certain concepts.

But our courses don't have to be all theory. We should constantly be looking for opportunities to connect what we're teaching to the "real world" outside our classrooms (which includes, by the way, the rest of the college experience). I don't just mean bringing in news articles on current events or pop-culture references. I also mean showing students how the work they're doing in class will prepare them for what they'll be doing in a year or five years.

I tell my composition students from Day 1 to ignore the "ENGL" prefix. It's not an "English" or "language arts" course. It's a writing course, and the reason they're in it is that they're going to have to write their butts off just to get through college. And then they will spend the rest of their professional lives writing reports, proposals, letters, emails, etc. (They generally do not regard that as good news, but at least it makes the material immediately relevant.)

5. Engagement. Students who understand the relevance of what they're learning are more likely to become engaged with it. Engagement itself is something else they need in order to achieve mastery.

Of course, "engagement" has become kind of a buzzword, used to describe everything from flipped classrooms to service learning. But what does it really mean? For me, it means that students are immersing themselves in the subject matter. They're listening carefully in class, participating in discussions, and reading the text and other course materials closely. It also means they're thinking carefully about the concepts, especially those they find difficult.

Most of all, engagement means that they have gone beyond mere listening and thinking to actually doing. That's easier in some disciplines than others. After all, students have to write in a writing class or conduct experiments in a biology lab. Getting students to "do" history or sociology might be more of a challenge, but I'm sure the best teachers in those disciplines have figured out how.

6. Reinforcement. That includes the repetition that is so necessary for learning, covering concepts again and again to make sure students understand. It also includes assessment, determining how well they are grasping concepts and then modifying our teaching accordingly. And it entails the motivational tactics (positive or negative) that teachers employ, such as grades, recognition, praise, constructive criticism, and so forth.

Mostly, though, I think of reinforcement in terms of students' desire to see evidence — apart from anything we or their textbooks say — that the material is actually important in the broader scheme of things. This is where bringing in articles, surveys, or even guest speakers can be really valuable.

I cut my instructional teeth teaching technical writing to mostly upper-division engineering students. Talk about a bunch of folks who really didn't want to be there. Their body language practically screamed: "Why do we have to take another English class? We're engineers, for crying out loud."

After combating that level of resistance for a semester, I started bringing in, during the first week, an engineer friend of mine who had graduated from the same program. As he explained to them how much writing he had to do on a daily basis on the job, you could see their attitudes starting to change. That was some serious reinforcement.

7. Support. As college professors, we have a natural aversion to "hand-holding." Yet sometimes a bit of hand-holding is precisely what the situation calls for — in the case of a terrified nontraditional student, for example, or a thoroughly lost first-generation student. Occasionally, we have to step out of our own comfort zones and expand our role from mere teacher to coach, counselor, or even cheerleader.

Support can take many other forms, too. It can mean making sure students have all the tools they need to succeed in the course. That includes intellectual tools (like critical-thinking skills), technical ones (mathematical formulae, organizational structures, or taxonomies), and physical resources (lab equipment, texts, and other course materials).

But primarily, we as faculty members have to build an environment in which students feel safe yet challenged, accepted yet pushed, valued as human beings yet evaluated as scholars. Our continuing quest, both individually and as a faculty, is not so much to figure out how to teach best as to figure out how to create a place where students can and will learn.

That is the quest of a career, of a lifetime, full or trial and error, fits and starts, failures and successes. But undertaking that quest is, for me, what it means to be a teacher, and it is worth every moment of time and every ounce of effort.

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The opinions expressed here are his own and not necessarily those of his employer. You can follow Rob on Twitter @HigherEdSpeak.