

How might my students approach their learning?

Module focus

- surface approach to learning
- deeper approach to learning
- achieving/strategic approach to learning

Module outcomes

- you will identify the characteristics of different approaches to learning
- you will reflect on how your approach to teaching can influence your students' approach to learning
- you will be introduced to the use of problem solving as a means of fostering deeper learning

'There seems to be a range of approaches to learning adopted by my students. Some seem to want to be told all the answers. Others seem to want to explore concepts more deeply and are really interested in understanding what we are doing. I wonder what they are learning. Some are just focused on memorising information for my assessment tasks.'

Take a moment to reflect on this issue.

What challenges does this pose for *your* teaching?

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Possible solutions

1. For an upcoming lecture or tutorial, plan a learning activity which requires students to:
 - a. reflect on something related to your discipline with which they should be familiar
 - b. use this existing knowledge to tackle a problem related to your discipline which you feel will challenge them
 - c. suggest that they decide on three possible solutions
 - d. require them to select the 'best' option
 - e. ask them to justify their choice (and elimination of lesser options)
 - f. ask them to report on what they learnt about the activity (not content, but process!).

For example:

Smalltown is one of the fastest growing towns in the area. It prides itself on its new bike trail that includes paved areas and beautifully landscaped natural settings. According to the Smalltown police chief, the bike trails are the target of vandals who have painted graffiti on the asphalt trail and on trees in more scenic and natural parts of the trail. Furthermore, the bike trails are constantly littered with empty water bottles, old tires, broken skateboard wheels, and rusty bicycle chains. There have even been two arrests for public drunkenness on the trail. The Chamber of Commerce has hired you to launch a local advertising campaign that will inspire some civic pride in the trail and develop a sense of community ownership of the trail. Based on this information, work as a group to reach consensus on the exact nature of the problem, analyze an audience for the advertising campaign that you likely could reach, develop criteria for measuring a "good" campaign for reaching that audience, and develop an outline for three different campaigns that meet your criteria and thus might be successful.

(Source: Weiss, R. 2003 'Designing problems to promote higher-order thinking', *New Directions in Teaching and Learning*, 95, 25- 31 - online available <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/106557111/PDFSTART> accessed 11 April 2007).

2. Follow up with a series of learning activities which lessen your transfer of information and require individuals or small groups of students to increasingly manage their own learning. It may be that as students perceive this

change occurring, those who merely relied on you to provide them with 'all the answers' realise they need to become more responsible for their learning – or maybe not!

3. Involve students more in active evaluation, analysis, critical thinking, re-design, exploration of alternatives – each lecture may begin with, or include a short problem or issue for students to analyse. As the end of the lecture nears, you return to the issue and solicit student responses. Be supportive and encouraging and allow for 'wrong' answers.
4. Begin a discussion thread in DSO in which you invite students to add to and build on an issue. Reward with positive comments and try to shift students towards their own intrinsic reward mechanisms.
5. Remember that depending on the context in which learning takes place, the same student may adopt different approaches.

More help

Here are some resources from which you may seek some advice. They are all annotated so as to assist you in making judgements about what might be useful advice for your particular teaching context. By exploring some or all of these resources, you may well be able to generate strategies to suit your particular circumstances.

1. <http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/Teaching/tutor/resources.html#deep> - is a brief discussion of the different approaches to learning which students may adopt, and includes a few basic suggestions about how to encourage 'deeper' learning.
2. <http://www.iml.uts.edu.au/learn/teach/resources/tm/studentlearn.html> - is a good discussion of:
 - a. the characteristics of different approaches to learning,
 - b. the influence that teaching has on the approach to learning a student may adopt,
 - c. some practical suggestions for discouraging a surface approach and encouraging a deeper and achieving approach to learning,
 - d. the factors which influence students' approaches to learning.
3. <http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/teaching/toolbox/pedagogy.html> - distinguishes deep from surface learning, lists factors which promote effective learning, and lists the characteristics of effective university teachers.
4. <http://www.springerlink.com/content/h783327838855132/fulltext.pdf> - an article from the *Higher Education* journal which reports on a quantitative study of the link between a teacher's approach to teaching and his/her students' approach to learning - the findings indicate a correlation between an approach to teaching which is information transfer based and a surface approach to learning by students.
5. <http://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/Newsletters/Currents/Vol2.1/approaches.html> - discusses approaches to learning as being primarily driven by either assessment or workload, which has implications for how we assess and teach.
6. <http://www.engsc.ac.uk/er/theory/learning.asp> - contains a useful discussion of how our design and implementation of the learning experience can influence the approach to learning adopted by a student.
7. http://www.ucd.ie/teaching/goodPracticeT&L_sub/deepSurfaceLearning.html - a very readable discussion of how approaches to learning are influenced by student workload, assessment, learning objectives, our own teaching and a feeling of choice being available to the student.

Alert !

Remember the distinction between approaches to learning (surface, deep, strategic) and learning styles (auditory, visual, tactile, kinaesthetic).

Related topics

How do I cater for different learning styles?