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Effective Learning Environments

The Fundamental Shift in What We Know About Learners

There has been a fundamental shift in what we know about learners and the learning process in the last decade or so. Classroom teachers, in creating the most conducive learning environment for their students, nowadays need to be fully aware of the following insights about students as learners:

- All students can learn, however if it is not present, 'a need to know' must be engendered or a stimulus to learn established.

- Once motivated, learners become active questers in the learning process, not passive sponges.

- The great majority of students have access to a huge body of facts so do not require teachers to be fact givers, but rather to point them in the direction of knowledge sources, and train them in the skills required to access sources and to analyse, synthesise and evaluate the material derived.

- If students have not already discovered a process or information through other sources they often need teachers to teach it, directly and clearly.

- Immediately following teaching, students need structured opportunities to practise the skill until mastery is achieved. This may take only one, or many attempts, depending on the capabilities of the learner. Close teacher monitoring and feedback is essential during this stage of skill mastery.

- In addition to practice of the skill, virtually all students need opportunities, individually tailored to their levels of aptitude, to transfer the learning to new and unique applications.

- A diverse range of curriculum offerings needs to be available for all students in order to extend their unique natural strengths and interests, and to enhance greater integration of their learnings.

- Students prefer, and are better served by, opportunities to display their understandings and achievements through a broader and more challenging range of products and assessments than traditional verbal written products.

Effective
Learning Environments

In a major Australian study, 'The Effective Schools' Project', views were tapped from over one quarter of Australian school communities, and analysed and documented by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in their book Making Schools more Effective *(McGaw, Piper, Banks and Evans 1992). Respondents conveyed the strong message that schools needed to be just as responsible for the social and emotional well-being of their students as for their intellectual well-being.*

It is clear that a nurturing classroom atmosphere is a vital prerequisite to effective instruction. It is well established that students with a strong sense of wellbeing and self-esteem are more amenable to the intellectual requirements of the classroom and are more likely to perform more effectively. Nurturing classroom environments incorporate the following elements:

- Clear rules for classroom functioning which are collaboratively derived in the initial teaching sessions of the school year. Such rules should be worded in positive terms and cover five main areas:
  - Communication: one person speaking at a time, using a moderated voice
  - Orderliness: hands up, belongings stored neatly, walking quietly inside
  - Respect towards others: listening attentively, respecting others' views
  - Group cooperation: taking turns, sharing, helping others
  - Self-responsibility: being organised for class and completing homework

- Rewards and praise for rule compliance which are regularly reinforced, and sanctions for non-compliance which are firm, consistent and completely predictable and understood by all class members.

- A classroom teacher who models respect and trust, and fosters open cooperative classroom functioning for all members, as well as enhancing self awareness, self-acceptance and personal growth in each student.

- A clear and enlightened process for conflict resolution: effective classrooms have the steps for the process on visual display.