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Environments for learning

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‘There’s something different about your classroom,’ Janice announces one day in the lunchroom.

‘What do you mean?’ Margo asks.

‘There’s just a different feeling in there,’ she replies. ‘What do you do to make it different?’

‘Different from yours or different from everybody’s?’ I coach Janice as I look at Margo.

‘Yours is different from Margo’s, but in a way, it’s the same. I just know that my classroom is not like either of yours. What do you do to make it like that? The kids act so differently in your rooms,’ she relates.

Margo pipes up, ‘We do brain-based teaching. Our classrooms are brain-compatible. That means we follow some basic principles. The students are more relaxed and more learning takes place.’

‘So, is brain-based teaching the same as differentiation?’ Janice inquires.

‘Many of the principles of differentiation and brain-based teaching rest on the same foundations. Good teaching practices are good teaching practices. They both lend themselves to student-centred classrooms. That’s what you’re seeing and feeling that is different in our rooms. We centre the learning experiences around the students instead of around us,’ I suggest.

‘Well, my classroom isn’t anything like that. There are so many things I think I have to tell the students. If I don’t, how will they ever learn it?’ she sighs.

Margo tells her, ‘I went to a workshop about basic presentation skills given by Bob Pike (1994). I was told that as teachers and train-

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ers, we spend way too much time trying to get our learners to know everything. That's totally unnecessary. Just as the students have to decide what is most important to study and learn, we have to decide what they need to know – then if there is time, we give them the stuff that is nice to know!

'Please, start at the beginning,' Janice asks. 'Your rooms are interesting. The students seem to know exactly what to do and there's no tension. What do I need to do first?' She sits quietly and waits for us to begin.

A place to start

The process of differentiation, offering students multiple ways of taking in and expressing information, begins with educators examining four areas: content, process, product and environment (Tomlinson, 1999). The idea is to find out where students are in the learning process and offer opportunities for forward movement. This is not individualised instruction, nor does it offer an easy way out for the unenthusiastic learner. It affords different learning opportunities that are based on solid curriculum and high expectations. It does allow students to lead with their strengths and their interests in order to understand essential questions and feel successful in the understanding of concepts and skills.

Good teaching calls for realising that everyone in the classroom is also a teacher. Getting off the stage is not easy for some of us. Our great fear is that our students will not realise the wisdom that we are sure we can impart. True wisdom resides in the ability to step back and facilitate learning.

I begin with three basic premises:

1. We are all teachers and we are all learners. My students may be the memory sources for each other. The stories they have to share, the ideas they come up with or simply the way they put things into words may make all the difference in learning for some of their classmates. According to David Sousa, during every instructional session, the teacher should become the learner and the learner should become the teacher (Sousa, 2002).

2. Everyone can learn under the right circumstances. We each have our own preferred way of learning, which includes sensory stimulation and memory pathways. Students must be involved in their learning process.

3. Learning is fun! The brain wants to learn and, indeed, is learning all the time. When learning is varied and interesting, it is appealing.

With those ideas in mind, let's look at the physical, social/emotional and cognitive environments in the classroom. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2002) has called these the 'root system' in the classroom. It is this system that will set the tone for teaching and learning.

Maslow's hierarchy of human needs

Abraham Maslow (Maslow & Lowery, 1998) is known for his hierarchy of human needs. His theory states that we are motivated to have these needs met. Until and unless these needs are met, humans will continue to focus on satisfying them. His study included successful people like Albert Einstein and Eleanor Roosevelt.

In our search for setting up a classroom in which students feel confident to work and learn together, Maslow's theory can be helpful. We can look at theories and hierarchies that have been postulated by others, like William Glasser (1992) or Stephen Glenn (1990), but I have found that each covers the same basic needs.

Physiological needs

These are biological needs and must be met first. They consist of needs for oxygen, food, water and a relatively constant body temperature. These needs are the most important, as an individual deprived of them would focus only on having these met.

Safety needs

When all physiological needs are satisfied and are no longer controlling thoughts and behaviours, the need for security becomes active. Our

Figure 1.1

