



3.1.3 Methodology for Creating a Quality Learning Environment

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An effective learning environment has a strong impact upon a person's growth, development, and performance. In order to improve student learning performance, faculty must create an environment which allows for greater student ownership, responsibility, and control of the learning process. It is important to create this environment early in the course so that mutual trust and respect can develop. Against this background, judgment is minimized and quality assessment of performance is more likely to occur, ultimately leading to student success. This module describes a step-by-step process for creating a quality learning environment. It is presented first through a scenario depicting a summer orientation program and then followed by a step-by-step explanation. Other modules in this section provide techniques for implementing each of the various steps.

Table 1 **Methodology for Creating a Quality Learning Environment**

1. Establish initial respect.
2. Start with no prejudging.
3. Obtain shared commitment.
4. Foster and support risk-taking.
5. Permit the learner to fail.
6. Set high expectations.
7. Establish clear performance criteria.
8. Implement a quality assessment system.
9. Document performance.
10. Continuously challenge performance.

Example of Using the Methodology

The context in this example is preparing a summer orientation session for new students to acclimate them to a learner-centered environment, as advocated by Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (2000).

1. Establish initial respect.

It is important to arrange the group space where learning is to take place so that each student can readily contribute to the discussion or activity. Using circular tables or arranging chairs in circles works well. Another way to show respect is to set up name signs at each place that can be read by other participants. It is essential that no one thinks he or she is in an assembly process.

2. Start with no prejudging.

When arranging activities, make sure all students are treated equally. For example, students from influential families, honor students, or athletes should not be singled out for special treatment; those eligible for significant financial aid should not be segregated.

3. Obtain shared commitment.

Students commit to a strong performance on the obligatory placement and assessment exams provided as part of summer orientation. In exchange, program facilitators commit to completely answering students' questions and issues.

4. Foster and support risk-taking.

Since students are averse to risk-taking, it is important to have them take initial risks within a small group. Use small group discussions with high performance criteria, but insert an experienced student as a mentor in each group.

5. Permit the learner to fail.

Incorporate tasks that are challenging yet which allow students to fail, e.g., a scavenger hunt around the campus. It is important that the failure be turned into a learning and growth experience.

6. Set high expectations.

Clearly state that you expect students to connect to the college, to carefully process the information and experience, and to come in the fall ready for success.

7. Establish clear performance criteria.

Students will know they have met the orientation expectations if they complete the full registration process, give a strong performance on the placement exam(s), and complete a financial aid plan and package, if appropriate.

8. Implement a quality assessment system.

Some components of this system include real-time monitoring as students work on the placement exam; pre-assessment of their readiness to complete the financial aid package; a process to assess issues that will cause problems in the fall; and an instrument to survey each student's interests and suggest to them opportunities to investigate campus programs related to these interests.

9. Document performance.

The results of the placement exam should be communicated to students, ideally before they leave the orientation event, or as soon thereafter as possible. Students may be given a written exercise to plan their first few weeks of school. They should also be required to do a written self-assessment which includes the most important things learned and areas to focus on to improve readiness for college.

10. Continuously challenge performance.

Most students could learn much more during orientation. Find ways to intervene so that students are challenged to perform the tasks more productively.

Discussion of the Methodology

Note that the Methodology to Create a Quality Learning Environment can be applied within the context of a single course, a cohort group in a program, a department, or within the culture of a college.

Step 1—Establish initial respect.

From the faculty perspective, it is important that each learner be recognized as an individual; for who he or she is, for what he or she can contribute, and, most importantly, to be respected for his or her potential to perform. Note that the focus here is on faculty respect for student potential to perform, as compared to respect earned through actual performance.

The more one facilitates student growth and sees individual successes, the greater one's belief that every student can be a star. As this belief is communicated to students through faculty actions and attitudes, they gain confidence in themselves.

When a faculty member is well organized, maintains a demeanor free of judgmental language and statements, accepts each student as an individual with unique value, takes on the student's perspective, understands his or her personality and learning preferences, and connects with his or her cultural values, he or she establishes an interpersonal relationship with students and earns their respect (Roscoe & Peterson, 1982).

Step 2—Start with no prejudging.

Nobody likes to be prejudged. People like to start with a “clean slate” that has no history or baggage that could negatively influence the building of a new relationship. This does not mean ignoring information that faculty might know about a student; it means not letting this information create a prejudicial attitude toward him or her.

Do some form of pre-assessment to determine a person's knowledge and skill level before starting to work with him or her. Avoiding assumptions allows an instructor to approach the student with a clear and open mind.

In the case of a classroom learning community, the absence of prejudging helps relationships among learners, as well as between the learners and the instructor/facilitator. Defuse prejudgments, the more students are judged, the more they withdraw.

Also, realize that students are coming into the class with information they have gathered about the instructor—and judgments they have made about him or her. Students who are not prejudged are less likely to prejudge their instructors.

Step 3—Obtain shared commitment.

Best results will occur in a course when both faculty and students are “on the same page” with respect to their commitment to working together to achieve the course outcomes. A faculty member wants students to be committed to learning, to their community, and to hard work. Students want to know that the instructor is determined to help them achieve the course outcomes. This agreement should be made public so that there is no misunderstanding.

A quality educator must go beyond his or her devotion to his or her discipline and a strict emphasis on content to include a genuine desire to help students grow and develop as learners. He or she must get them to believe that he or she is committed to their growth, and to their success in the course and beyond, and that the faculty member has students' best interests at heart (*3.1.5 Getting Student Buy-In*). This is the beginning of creating an environment of trust, one that promotes growth without judgment.

Step 4—Foster and support risk-taking.

Most students are not risk-takers in the classroom. Past educational experiences have discouraged them from taking risks because of the negative reinforcement that often follows. In order to change this perception, it is important that faculty be supportive of risk-taking students from an affective or emotional perspective, immediately after an unsuccessful event occurs. For example, when a bad outcome occurs, an effective instructor congratulates a student for taking the risk and then provides constructive feedback to address the problem.

Faculty who care make it clear that risk-taking will be supported and not penalized in the course. They encourage students to “experiment and try it,” not always doing what they think the instructor wants. Students need to understand

that their demands for affirmation, validation, and answers to every question will not necessarily be met. Working in a risk-taking environment also means challenging students to think critically, to affirm and validate on their own, and to generate possible answers to their own questions.

Share with students that entrepreneurial environments, such as high-tech firms, often encourage risk-taking in their cultures (SCANS, 1991).

Step 5—Permit the learner to fail.

Most faculty find it difficult to watch students struggle in a learning situation. Their natural tendency is to jump in and remedy the situation, typically with a content-related intervention. This serves to temporarily end the struggle and provide momentary success. However, be careful to avoid enabling behavior which does not allow for failure, and, in the long run, is not in a student's best interest.

It is emotionally difficult to watch someone failing in a particular situation. Yet the key question to ask in these situations is, "What action will produce the best long-term result for the person who is struggling?" Sometimes not taking action is best.

It is important that faculty not view a student's short-term failures as a reflection of the instructor's performance. Realize that when a student experiences these moments, it builds emotional resilience and increases his or her ability to cope and respond. Allowing failure to happen in small steps actually empowers a student. The "good learner experiments, discovers and is secure in his or her emotions, so he or she can take risks and accept failure as a frequent and productive event on the road to success at a new task" (Krumsieg & Baehr, 2000).

Step 6—Set high expectations.

Student productivity within a learning environment is highly correlated with the expectations that faculty set up for their students (*3.1.2 Introduction to Learning Communities*). In general, students will typically perform to the level of faculty expectations. Students will raise their level of performance accordingly, a principle advocated by industry representatives who examined the preparedness of graduates for the workplace (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993).

As faculty observe students achieving at higher levels, expectations for their future performance increase, leading to setting higher standards. However, not allowing for failure often results in lowering standards to accommodate lower levels of performance.

Step 7—Establish clear performance criteria.

People in challenging situations which require high-quality performance want and need explicit and clear performance criteria. Students want explicit criteria so they know what an instructor expects: implicit criteria are of little use to students. Faculty need to avoid hidden or implicit objectives or criteria: lack of specificity erodes the trust built with students.

When expectations for student performance are high, it is critical to have clear performance criteria. Without them, students do not know what they need to do to be successful and are likely to rebel, stray off target, or disengage. Students want feedback that corresponds to the criteria so that they know how to succeed.

Step 8—Implement a quality assessment system.

Acting upon assessment feedback is the key to students' future performance (*4.1.1 Overview of Assessment*). Students want specific feedback to let them know how to improve, especially when performance does not meet the established standards. This information will have the greatest impact and benefit when given promptly. Over time this feedback can be replaced by self-assessment which then leads to greater student autonomy.

Assessment feedback should be given in a positive tone or manner and be limited to the most important points. An assessor should be consistent, complete, direct, and honest with his or her assessment. As an educator, be a "straight shooter" with your students; be genuine, not manipulative.

Step 9—Document performance.

A process-oriented course requires more effort on the part of students and faculty than does a traditional, lecture-based one. Faculty often think students are excited by the prospect of learning new subject matter. But in reality, students are far more motivated by experiencing and becoming aware of their own growth and skill improvement.

Students need to see evidence that they are making progress; otherwise, they will lose their motivation to work hard and put forth a quality effort. They also need to see tangible proof of their progress. Therefore, it is extremely important to document performance, both failures and successes, over time. By charting the trajectory of students' learning, faculty can help learners visualize their successes and learn to value the growth associated with these gains.

Step 10—Continuously challenge performance.

The implicit goal behind this methodology is to create learning environments that can facilitate quality outcomes. It is presumed that course outcomes include skill development as well as content mastery (Fink, 2003).

Growth occurs not when we are “coasting,” but, rather, when we are challenged. For this reason, do not let students get complacent; continuously challenge performance. Keep students motivated by raising performance criteria and by challenging work that is mediocre or not commensurate with a student’s level of capability. Realize that, by challenging the student to a higher level of performance, a faculty member shows respect and a sense of caring. Letting that person “slide by” with work that does not do justice to his or her potential is an insult to him or her.

Nobody can be at peak performance at all times. While it is important to challenge students, they cannot always be in high-performance situations. There needs to be some “down time” scheduled into the design of a course which can be used to celebrate individual and class accomplishments. Note, however, that providing such respites is different from lowering performance standards.

Concluding Thoughts

The learning environment created in most classrooms is often less than ideal; typically, it does not provide students with the optimal environment to support and nurture their growth and development. In courses that do, it may take the entire semester or term to achieve this result. Herein lies the problem: research shows that the key learning characteristics outlined in the QLE Methodology have a dramatic impact on student learning and growth. So, if faculty do not create an environment that incorporates those characteristics, and do so as early as possible within the course, they are missing out on an opportunity to reach and teach their students.

By researching questions such as those that follow, faculty can build knowledge about how to create and sustain a quality learning environment in their courses. This section provides a guide for translating this knowledge into classroom practice. It is recommended that practitioners focus on one question at a time.

1. Why is it important that we let students fail in order to set high expectations?
2. What is the difference between challenging students and badgering them?

3. What type of commitment does the student expect from the faculty member?
4. Why do students need and want clear performance expectations?
5. Why do students need to see documentation of their growth and development?

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