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How to Teach to a Diverse Classroom of Students

By Tina O'Block

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Each year teachers are faced with the daunting task of teaching to a classroom of 20–30 individual students, each with their own learning styles, interests, and abilities. Providing optimal learning for such a diverse group can seem overwhelming. But, there is a simple approach that can be used which will enable all students to succeed, and that approach is simply using variety and choice. Not only does this approach address the multiple learning styles of students, but it also aides in making them independent learners.

While the classroom still needs to have structure (routines, rules, procedures), providing variety within that structured environment can aide in providing optimal learning for all students. Using a variety of instructional approaches such as lectures, PowerPoint presentations, inquiry-based instruction, hands-on experiments, project/problem-based learning, or computer aided instruction, not only addresses the various learning styles of the students in the classroom, but it can help learners become more flexible in their learning. Most learners do have a preferred learning style, however this does not mean they are strictly dependent on that style to learn. They are also comfortable with and able to learn from several other styles as well. Exposing students to a wide variety of learning styles will enable them to become more flexible learners.

It is also beneficial to vary the input devices used and the resources made available in the classroom. Children have a wide variety of preferred learning devices, therefore making as many available as possible provides for this diversity. For example,

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when presenting information use audio (songs, speeches, interviews, etc.), video, books, posters, hands-on manipulatives, food, and smells. Technology has made available a wide range of resources, such as PowerPoint presentations, live video feeds, chats, and communication. PowerPoint presentations are a great way to present information using a mixture of audio, video, animations (movement), and text. These presentations can also be made available to the students via the computer for them to review at their own pace. The internet/computers also offer interactive learning activities that combine movement, visuals, and sounds, such as virtual science experiments. These allow students to conduct experiments

never before thought possible due to danger or lack of equipment. Virtual experiments can be found at <http://www.explorellearning.com> .

Pre-exposure to material also aides in learning. The more familiar students are with a subject the easier it is for new learning to occur. Therefore, providing students with a variety of pre-exposure materials can better prepare them for new learning units. For example, monthly calendars that list the upcoming themes, a classroom website with links to various websites related to upcoming themes, books, magazines, maps, posters, computer software, and manipulatives can be provided for students to browse at their leisure. Providing a variety of materials takes into consideration the learning preferences of all students.

Novelty can be used to gain and keep students' attention. People usually only pay attention to things that are of value or things that are personally meaningful. Therefore, relating learning to your students' real life experiences or interests can catch and keep their attention. "Shock" them with an unusual noise, experiment, video, song, etc. You can also present them with a problem or project that relates to their real world in order to gain their attention and interest at the beginning of a unit. Issues such as environmental problems, problems with long lines in the cafeteria, designing the perfect playground, planning a field trip within the budget, local traffic issues, etc. can all be considered. Making learning meaningful, relevant, and interesting to your students not only gains their initial attention, but keeps it throughout the lesson.

When planning your lessons it is beneficial to try to include as many of the senses and/or Gardner's multiple intelligences

(verbal–linguistic, logical–mathematical, kinesthetic, visual–spatial, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist) as possible. You can do this by using a variety of activities in your plans such as songs, games, experiments, field trips, real world experiences, interviews, guest speakers, physical movement/exercise, small group activities, individual activities, partner activities, cooking/food/snacks, hands–on experiences, etc. Providing a variety of activities will enable students of all ability levels to succeed.

Not only do students have diverse learning styles but varying bio–cognitive cycles as well. Some students learn best in the morning, some in the afternoon. Therefore, having a flexible classroom schedule can provide for these differences. Also, varying the times and types of assessments can give all students a fair chance of showing their true abilities.

When applicable, it is beneficial to give students choice in activities and assessments. This provides students opportunities to showcase their individual talents and can aide in classroom management as well. If students are constantly dictated to and not given a voice or choice they can grow resentful and "act out". Provide a variety of classroom activities for students to choose from during structured and unstructured times, give them several projects such as posters, PowerPoint presentations, reports, interviews, videos, brochures, etc. to choose from when assessing their knowledge. Giving students choice provides them with a sense of empowerment over their learning and can aide them in deciding what learning styles and assessments work best for them, thus helping them become more responsible for their own learning.

It would be a pretty boring world if all learners were the same. Diversity makes the classroom more interesting and exciting. Teachers should honor and respect the uniqueness of each student by offering variety and choice in their classrooms. Not only will this address the diverse needs of the students, but it will also help them to become independent learners as well. After all, is that not the goal of education?

Tina O'Block holds a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction and a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. She has been teaching for 13 years. She is the author of *Now I Know My ABCs* and *A Whole Lot More: Alphabet Activities for Preschoolers and Kindergarteners* which is available at <http://www.oblockbooks.com> and the article, *How to Help Your Child be Successful in Kindergarten* (<http://www.oblockbooks.com/article.htm>).

Do You Know How Your Students Want To Learn?

By Brenda Townsend Hall

Learner power is the topic of this article. I wonder how many school directors think about asking their students how they want to learn. The idea of conducting a needs analysis to find out what students want to learn is nothing new, but I'm not sure if we are quite so used to trying to find out their preferred learning styles. I mention this because it strikes me that so many teachers come from the same mould, having qualified through courses based very much on progressive western views of educational practice. Typically, these teachers want lots of classroom activity, learner participation and have a view of the teacher as a facilitator rather than pedagogue. On the other hand, the students will probably feel comfortable if the teaching style is in keeping with what they are used to.

I can remember my own astonishment when teaching a group of 30 students in a French university only to discover that they didn't expect to be involved in activities that required them to actually speak.

They were used to being passive receptacles of information which they would record and then work on using reading and writing as the means of learning. Of course, I wanted to change all that but I realized that I could only introduce change by finding out what they expected, what they wanted and by negotiating with them possible better ways of effective language learning.

It seems to me that we should conduct regular surveys of students to find out their views about how they think the classroom should be managed, what types of materials should be used and how they should be used, how work should be organized, what activities should be done in class, how the teacher should interact with students. The information gathered can be useful to teachers whose own ideas might be quite different. Once they know students' preferences they will be able to judge more clearly which aspects of their teaching style to modify and which aspects to try to introduce incrementally so as not to deter students.

Brenda Townsend Hall, a contributing editor to *ESLemployment*, is a writer in the fields of English for business, cross-cultural awareness and business communications. Interested in receiving TEFL job listings weekly for free? To learn more visit



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