



Engaging the learner : A Strategic initiative to maximize learning

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ABSTRACT

Medical educators frequently face difficulties motivating learners to achieve educational goals. Whether the specific concern is internal motivation, attendance or participation , the common issue is how to motivate the learners to achieve the desired outcomes and to become fully engaged with the excitement of learning. Hence, in faculty development programs, the emphasis should be directed towards how to engage learners in their learning activities and make them responsible for learning. Few identified principles are 1. Making Learning Meaningful, 2. Fostering a sense of Efficacy, 3. Coach them to Reflect on learning activities, 4. Provide Autonomy Support and 5. Embrace Collaborative Learning. While planning any teaching learning activity these facilitators of engagement should be considered which will make learning relevant, accountable and applicable to practice.

KEYWORDS

Learner; Engage; Feedback ; Reflection

Overview

"The fundamental pedagogy of Medical Education aims to have learners develop motivation and skill required to teach themselves, stimulated by clinical experiences..."

(David Irby , Educating Physicians, 2010)

The science behind comprehensive learning have always emphasized the importance of involvement and contributions of learners in the learning process. Medical educators frequently face difficulties motivating learners to achieve educational goals. Whether the specific concern is internal motivation, attendance or participation , the common issue is how to motivate the learners to achieve the desired outcomes and to become fully engaged with the excitement of learning. On the pedagogic side, modern medicine, like all scientific teaching, is characterized by activity. The learner no longer merely watches, listens, memorizes; he actually Does. Since education comprises of both learning and learning how; the learner cannot effectively know, unless he knows "How".[1] The two core principles of active learning i.e 1. Doing versus observing and 2. Dialogue with self or others, is the mainstay of engaging learners in their learning activities. Dialogue with self happens when a learner thinks reflectively about a topic, i.e., they ask themselves what they think or should think, what they feel about the learning activity. Dialogue with others is a much more dynamic and active form of dialogue. It occurs when a teacher creates an intense small group discussion over a theme or engage in peer teaching. The interrelated elements while designing and implementing learning activities can increase student engagement behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively, thereby positively affecting academic achievement.

The key Principles

The transformational change that has occurred in higher education makes it obligatory, first and foremost, to understand

learners and key concepts that promote and encourage learning. Today, when faculty development programs have taken shape, importance of training of trainers has been realized, the emphasis should be directed towards how to engage learners in their learning activities and make them responsible for learning. Few identified principles, as evidenced, have proved to be instrumental in engaging learners in a positive and constructive way as follows;

1. Make Learning Meaningful

It is crucial for learners to perceive activities as being meaningful. If the activities are not considered worthy of the time and effort, they might not engage in a reasonably well , or even disengage in response. [2] Connecting the activities with learners' previous knowledge and experiences one can highlight the value of an assigned activity in personally relevant ways.

2. Foster a sense of Efficacy

The notion of self-efficacy refers to a student's ongoing personal evaluation of whether he or she can succeed in a learning activity or challenge. Researchers have argued that effectively performing an activity can impact subsequent engagement in a positive manner.[3] In order to strengthen students' sense of efficacy, the assigned activities should be only slightly beyond students' current levels of proficiency and regular demonstration of students' understanding throughout the activity should be ensured.

This also encompasses continuous constructive feedback that helps student progress. The rationale of feedback is to help learners to maximize their potential at different stages of training, raise their awareness of strengths and areas for improvement, and identify actions to be taken to improve performance. It is a part of the overall "developmental dialogue" or interaction between teacher and learner. Feedback will

prove to be most effective when it focuses student's attention on their progress in mastering educational tasks, thereby engaging them in their own learning. [4]

3. Coach them to Reflect on learning activities

Feedback can act as a double edged sword wherein it can initiate reflection and the reflective activity paves the way for feedback.[5] Reflection, an approach to learn from personal experience; inculcates the habit of taking responsibility for one's actions and decisions. Discussing experiences and the reflective thoughts that accompany them is key to bring an internal process and external information together. A well thought incorporation of simple reflective techniques should be considered in all phases of medical curriculum and the learner should be in position to appreciate its benefits so that it becomes a voluntary effort in professional development. Reflection promotes critical thinking and offers more opportunities for feedback, including feedback from different sources. Reflection is no longer considered as an individual internal process, rather, a thinking process that needs to be complemented with external feedback. [6]

4. Provide Autonomy Support

Autonomy support refers to nurturing the students' sense of control over their own behaviors and goals. It is always advisable to foster an internal locus of control rather than compliance with directives and commands. Welcoming learner's opinion and ideas, using informational, non-controlling language and giving the time they need to understand and absorb an activity by themselves will improve learner's engagement. [7]

5. Embrace Collaborative Learning

Engaging in activities requiring group dynamic can make the entire exercise more productive. Strategies can be implemented to ensure that students know how to communicate and behave in group settings. Collaborative learning is a powerful facilitator of engagement in learning activities.[8] When students work effectively with others, their engagement is amplified, by feeling a sense of association with others during the activities.[9]

Teacher as "Facilitator": The Radical Change

It is wise for a medical teacher to direct their efforts towards facilitating the learners to develop insights, identify and take control of their learning needs and reflect upon their behaviors and practices. The transition from a traditional teacher to a trained facilitator, though challenging, is worth the effort. Facilitators are neither decision-makers, nor mediators, rather they are experts on, and advocates of, the process of life long learning skills. Except in rare situations where facilitators require to teach on particular aspects, most of attention while facilitating should be on encouraging reflection around experiences and process. In fact; teachers should engage in reflective activities themselves, which can serve as a guide to adjust teaching strategies accordingly. The decisions to adopt a particular teaching learning strategy should be based upon its potential to engage the learners and take control of their learning process.

Points to ponder

As facilitators, while planning any teaching learning activity, it may be worthwhile to ask few questions to yourself viz , are we considering any of the above facilitators of engagement while designing and implementing learning activities? , If so, which ones? How can these efforts increase student engagement in learning activities? And how can we quantify the resultant outcomes in terms of cognizable gains? Answers to them will resultantly make learning relevant, accountable and applicable to practice.

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