

A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO TEACHING

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'Go beyond the course material.'

'Consider how this information relates to other things that you know.'

'Apply your knowledge to your own life.'

Sound familiar? I encourage my students to do all of these things and it recently occurred to me that I could benefit from following my own advice.

In summer 2005, I decided to revise the Developmental Psychology course that I had taught for a semester. There was nothing *wrong* with the course per se: students achieved the learning goals and enjoyed the class. However, I had an unsettling feeling that I was doing all of us a bit of a disservice. As a developmental psychologist, I am very passionate about what I do, but I didn't feel that I conveyed the relevance and excitement of my discipline fully. I also wanted to maximize students' experience by defining more concretely their learning goals. I began to reflect on what is most important to learning...and remembered that the answer lies in basic tenets of my own discipline. That is, the basic principles that drive human development are also fundamental to learning and can be used successfully in the classroom. Below, I outline a few such principles and discuss how I put into action a *developmental approach to teaching*.

1. *Active learning*. Unfortunately, this teaching 'buzz word' tends to be ill-defined. For Piaget, however, it was simple. Learning involves *doing*. An infant who puts an object in his or her mouth acquires knowledge that cannot be obtained by watching the object passively. Now, I *am* not suggesting that you have students chew on their textbooks, but I am suggest-

ing that you have them act on the material in some way. For example, in my developmental psychology class, students can create an infant appropriate toy, write a prenatal development information pamphlet, and design a school curriculum, all of which have been met with terrific enthusiasm. This approach does not permit 'bystander apathy', and students benefit tremendously by immersing themselves in the material in a way that they cannot do when it is simply presented to them.

2. *Fostering intellectual curiosity*.

Piaget also believed that intellectual curiosity fuels learning. Although typically applied to children, this principle is relevant to the college student. There is little doubt that our students are eager to learn (despite the occasional glazed look in their eyes...), but their interests often vary widely. How can we channel individual interests but still meet general course goals? One way is to leave room for personal choice in any given assignment or exam. For their final project, students in my Self and Social Behavior class can explore the main themes of the course via any medium of interest (e.g., collage, sculpture, photo essay, poem/story analysis, film analysis). As part of their final exam, students in developmental psychology are invited to 'create a question' to answer based on their interests (with guidelines to ensure quality control). Students' responses to this 'intellectual freedom' have been wildly enthusiastic, and the quality of the work is the highest that I have seen since I began teaching.

3. *Learning from peers*. Both Vygotsky and Baldwin emphasized the importance of peers in learning. Ideally, students of varying backgrounds and ability levels should collaborate to maximize the learning experience. Collaboration encourages individuals to appreciate a problem from many perspectives and also

to learn to communicate their ideas clearly to others. In my Introductory Psychology class, students work in teams to design 'Pepsi Challenge' studies using different research methodologies, and the ideas are then presented to their classmates. Instructors need not fear being passive in this process; they can play a critical role by circulating between groups and using an inductive questioning technique to encourage students to engage with the material at a higher level.

4. *Assimilation and accommodation*.

These Piagetian terms describe the process by which knowledge is acquired and becomes increasingly sophisticated. When new information is encountered, students initially assimilate it or interpret it in reference to their current knowledge base, often leading to a shallow understanding of the material. Eventually, they experience cognitive disequilibrium (defined loosely as the sense that something isn't right) because their superficial understanding of this material is inconsistent with external evidence. In turn, this leads to accommodation of the current ideology to account for this new information, resulting in a more sophisticated scheme or understanding of a given phenomenon. We must challenge our students' current ways of thinking if we are to help them to advance their knowledge. Most of my students enter 'Self and Social Behavior' believing that high self-esteem is a strong predictor of success in life (e.g., in academics). When I presented empirical evidence that challenges this notion, it was met with tremendous resistance initially. As students reconciled the inconsistency between their current way of seeing and the novel evidence, they were motivated to restructure their understanding of this topic, leading to very fruitful discussions about the difference between self-esteem and self-efficacy and the implications for education.

5. *Principles of equifinality and multifinality.* These are lesser known ideas that are fundamental to understanding variability in development. Equifinality refers to the notion that *different* developmental processes can lead to the *same* outcome. One way of applying this to teaching is to keep in mind that students will achieve course goals in their own ways and that we must come to appreciate and foster unique processes of thinking. Multifinality refers to the notion that *same* developmental processes can lead to *different* outcomes. Many students are obsessed with having 'the answer' to a particular question and they can be frustrated by the prospect of uncertainty. If we are to encourage our students to be innovators rather than 'sponges', then we must foster an appreciation that the same information can be construed in different ways by different people – we must encourage them to be comfortable with confronting 'gray areas'.

Although these principles have been applied to psychology courses, I believe that they are applicable across disciplines and I hope that others may find them useful. For those for whom these ideas are already familiar, this may serve as a 'check list' with which to ensure that some of your teaching goals are on track. For me, this has been a useful reminder to practice what I preach: Our disciplines hold important lessons that serve us beyond our lives as scholars. I encourage readers to re-acquaint themselves with any such lessons that are inherent in their own disciplines.

References available on request.
