

12:00 AM, March 14, 2018 / LAST MODIFIED: 01:26 PM, March 14, 2018

A successful formula

Engaging students in classrooms



It should be the goal of a teacher to create a congenial classroom environment where students have the freedom to contribute and debate their ideas. PHOTO: COURTESY

Muhammad Foyzal Mubarak

Vygotsky, a Soviet educational psychologist, describes learning as a social process in his socio-cultural theory of human learning. According to this concept, learning takes place first at the social level through interactions with others. Another aspect of his theory is the idea that the learners are mentally prepared to a certain level and they require support from a teacher or more experienced peers in order to fully develop. These theories have several implications for teaching in the classroom.

Teachers need to plan activities using cooperative learning so that learners can be meaningfully engaged. Student engagement is the fundamental component of successful academic achievement. If students are active in the learning process through interactive activities, they are being provided with the opportunities to

strengthen different interpersonal skills. Students increase their understanding through interaction with their teachers and peers.

It should be the goal of a teacher to create a congenial classroom environment where students have the freedom to contribute and debate their ideas. It is very likely that students will participate in class activities if they find the classroom environment-friendly. If teachers are highly engaging and set clear expectations, students will feel as if they belong in the classroom. If teachers encourage students to be engaged with the contents of their studies through various activities, students are more willing to commit themselves to hard work. This helps students take ownership of their own academic progress and to become self-regulated learners.

For a highly functional classroom, high-quality peer support is also important. Two heads are always better than one. A team can accomplish a lot by combining their individual ideas. When students have the opportunity to interact with each other and share learning experiences, they feel that they belong in class. If they interact with classmates, they practice giving and receiving feedback, providing help and setting academic goals. They negotiate activities in the classroom, cooperate on group projects, explain assignments to each other, develop the ability for deeper understanding and, most importantly, they don't rely on rote learning.

Thus, peer support joined with teacher support is instrumental in the engagement process. A faculty member of a private university was asked why and how he engaged students in collaborative work and he replied:

“Employers today not only look out for academic qualifications but also keep a close eye on a candidate's communication, networking and various other inter-personal skills. I point out the set of skills the students can acquire through collaborative working and I then communicate with the students on how these skills can become a precious set of transferrable skills which they can essentially exploit in their career ahead. As a result, I notice in many of the students that they are not taking the collaborative work as an imposition, rather they are encouraged to reveal the skills they can acquire through means of working in association with others.”

However, it is not an easy task to bridge practical classroom application with pedagogical theory and apply interactive teaching strategies effectively. It requires skill to engage students with a variety of activities in order to develop their abilities in critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, problem-solving and communication. Accomplished faculty members are not scared of these challenges, but early career faculty members may face a number of challenges as they begin their role as academics. Resources for professional development should be available in the institutions to meet their teaching needs. The institutions should offer good quality and sustainable Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes which will help the faculty members to develop their skills. In order to promote innovation, universities should focus on keeping campus community up to date with pedagogical knowledge and support professional development. The basic principle behind this is that a good teacher should never stop being a learner.

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