

# Personal Philosophy of Learning and Teaching

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## **Learning**

I believe truly effective learning is an active, deliberate process. Individuals learn best when given the opportunity to interact, in purposeful ways, with the people and objects that make up their environment. Through this hands-on participation learners, both young and old, process and link new information and experiences to prior knowledge, construct meaningful understanding, and ultimately “come to know” the complex world around them.

Although I am interested primarily in adult learners, I have directly observed the learning process in action through my three young children. Each day my kids seem to live this idea that learning is a dynamic, deliberate process. Young children are amazing examples of learning because on a daily basis their understanding of the world grows immensely. Like mature adults, young children learn best when given the opportunity to “act on” their environment. Children do not sit back and passively listen to someone else’s description of “the way things are”; instead, children actively manipulate their surroundings and learn for themselves. However young, children *do* have prior knowledge, and if you watch carefully, you can observe them absorbing new information; comparing, contrasting, and linking that new information to their existing understanding of the world; and modifying those beliefs, as necessary, to meet their immediate goals. Furthermore, children do not negotiate this process alone. Instead, they collaborate, sometimes unknowingly, with the community around them and, in doing so, are able to find solutions to everyday problems that otherwise might not have come about.

Adults, like children, learn best when given the opportunity to interact with the learning content, connect new information with existing knowledge, and construct, often times socially, their own personal understanding. And while children are indeed motivated by certain short-term goals, adults’ motivations can be much more complex, and thus become a more critical component of their learning process. Individuals who are motivated to learn (or who are motivated to reach other goals that can only be made possible by learning) *will* learn more effectively than unmotivated individuals. Motivation, then, is the great equalizer; it is that invisible quality that can ultimately facilitate learning and improve performance.

## **Teaching**

I believe in an integrative approach to teaching that matches instructional methods with unique learning situations. For me, there is no “best technique” for teaching all subjects to all learners. Instead, like a carpenter selecting her tools, the teacher must select his strategies based on the materials he is given, the task at hand, and the environment within which he works. The teacher’s challenge, then, is to assess (before instruction) and reassess (during and after instruction) three interrelated components of the teaching and learning process:

(1) *Learner*. The learner is the most important component and should be viewed as the center of the instructional process. Who are your learners, what do they already know, how is their prior knowledge structured, how do they prefer to learn, and what motivates them to learn more? These types of learner-centered questions should principally guide the strategies you employ.

(2) *Learning Task*. The subject matter to be learned and the overall objectives or goals for learning must be considered. Are you teaching someone addition and subtraction so that he can shop at the grocery store, or are you instructing someone in underwater swimming skills so that she can escape a sinking aircraft? Both learning tasks require very different instructional strategies.

(3) *Learning Environment*. The physical teaching environment, as well as the socio-cultural environment within which all instruction is embedded, may ultimately influence the teaching strategies you can effectively exploit. Are you facilitating an online course for experienced graduate students, or are you teaching a traditional, face-to-face class to a group of immigrants? Considered alone, these two very different learning environments shape much of what you can and cannot do.

Effective teaching, and thus effective learning, occur when the instructor is able to integrate and properly apply a broad range of teaching strategies that support knowledge construction and adequately account for the learner (primarily), the learning task, and the learning environment. Although this dynamic, holistic approach to teaching is demanding and time-intensive for the instructor, it provides learners with their best opportunity to connect new information with existing knowledge and construct meaningful understanding of new information and experiences.