Manipulating the Adult Learning Environment

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I was hired for my very first teaching job just a few days before Labor Day weekend. It wasn't the scenario I had played out in my mind – no new teacher trainings, no working out curriculum and lesson plans, no getting mentally prepared for the task. I remember that as I shook hands with my new principal, my mind was flooded with the myriad of tasks that needed to be accomplished in order to prepare for my students. He must have been able to see my panic and the best he could offer was, "Would you like to see your classroom?"

When I took on my first class as an instructor at the college level, it was a completely different experience. I was asked to teach a course and was given months to think it all through. Looking back, I really didn't have much of a clue about what I was doing, but I was reading, researching, preparing lecture notes, and stewing over my syllabus for hours on end. I was committed to being more prepared than I had been for my first set of students.

The difference between these two teaching experiences is significant. In the first situation I was given no time to prepare and I used what little time I had to create attractive bulletin boards, arrange the desks into groups, and develop several ice breaker activities to get things started. These were teenagers after all – they weren't going to be questioning my scholarship. For my adult students I put all of my energy into the cognitive tasks of the course. I didn't even find out the room I was going to be using until hours before the class was to begin. I put no energy into planning for my student's physical, emotional or social needs. These were adults after all – they didn't need my help getting comfortable. What I
learned through both of these first experiences was that although the learning environment is not the only thing to prepare for, it is not to be ignored either.

Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2005) suggest that adult learners are different from children. They bring higher expectations, more life experiences, and a nascent need to be involved in all decisions related to their learning. However, they have many characteristics that are not dissimilar from children – they get nervous in new situations, they get tired of sitting for long periods, they are fearful of looking stupid, their minds wander, they get hungry or need to use the restroom periodically, and they even like the comfort of sitting by their friends.

Establishing a learning environment that optimizes engagement is among my top priorities as an educator. Tileston (2000) suggests that creating a learning environment is so critical to the success of learners that no other technique we use as educators will be effective without first addressing this. The environment that we must create is both a physical and a psychological one because, "emotional and cognitive learning are not separate entities; they work in tandem with one another" (Tileston, 2000, p. 1). Despite what is often the practice in higher education, this is not just something we should think about when teaching children. Knowles (1980), the father of andragogy, is adamant that the need for an educative environment also applies to classrooms filled with adults.

Business clearly understands the influence of environment; they put a lot of effort into developing atmospheres designed to produce emotional effects in the buyer that will increase the likelihood of their making a purchase. Health professionals have studied the atmospheres that boost the outlook of the patient, produce positive effects on the immune system, and ultimately increase the probability of healing. I am not the slightest bit
ashamed to say that my goal as an educator is to optimize learning, therefore I need to pay attention to the classroom environment where my students learn.

Heimstra (1991) offers this definition, "A learning environment is all of the physical surroundings, psychological or emotional conditions, and social or cultural influences affecting the growth and development of an adult engaged in an educational enterprise" (p. 8). The physical, psychological and social environments are all things that educators can adjust to make the climate of their classrooms either more or less conducive for learning.

Being intentional about the physical environment of a classroom is one of the simplest ways to manipulate the classroom environment. Fulton (1991) suggests that educators must consider the following:

- Layout of the room -- sociopetal or semicircle arrangements are best for adults according to Vosko (1984).
- Level of autonomy given to the learner to make adjustments in the environment. Students should be encouraged to customize the environment to optimize their learning, such as opening a window or moving a chair if it improves the potential for better focus on the learning tasks.
- Sightlines of the seating arrangement should allow students to easily see the classroom visuals, their classmates and the instructor without any extra effort.
- "Fit" of the space they are using. Not surprisingly, small groups should have small rooms and large groups should have large ones – finding a classroom that matches the number of people in the space or matches the activity level needed for the learning activities is an element of environment that is known to impact the learners.
As a college instructor I used to believe, as many do, that the furniture arrangement, wall color (or lack there of), and choice of room were completely outside of my locus of control. However, after requesting better fit classrooms, creating posters to bring color to drab surroundings, and drawing floor plans to request specific furniture arrangements to match my teaching style, I learned that maybe I had more power than I thought.

Becker, Sommer, Bee and Oxley in a 1973 study of college classroom environments concluded that simply altering the physical structure without an accompanying change in the social structure will not produce real change" (p. 523) which implies that we cannot simply move the furniture and expect our students to excel. Educators must also consider and improve the psychological elements of the learning environment. Sisco reminds adult educators of the three relationships that impact the psychological and social atmosphere of the classroom:

(1) relationships with other class members, many of whom become valuable resources, support givers, and close friends,

(2) relationships with the instructor, built on mutual trust, respect, and credibility, and

(3) relationships with the content, material, and resources of the course or workshop (1991, p. 46).

He further suggests that educators must use time in the "first session to reduce tension and anxiety, help acquaint participants with each other, foster involvement of all class members, and assist the instructor in getting to know class members and their range of experiences" (p. 46) if they really want to create an optimized learning environment. Sisco
(1991) also has a fantastic checklist for adult educators who wish to establish a positive psychological atmosphere in their first course session.

In my experience, creating a classroom environment that is psychologically and socially conducive to learning is fairly tricky. In fact, I find that I still get butterflies in my stomach before the first session of a new class. It's not because I don't know my content, but rather because the individuals and corporate dynamics of a class cannot be known until I actually meet my students. Each new group forces me to individualize and establish new strategies for creating a positive classroom climate.

Basic needs take precedence in our brains and when a student is experiencing anxiety, they have little space or energy for learning (Nunley, 2003). To help students feel more comfortable in their interactions with each other, I require name tents – written on both sides so other students can get a little help with names too. I move students around the room – especially during the first session. Because we are creatures of habit and we like to stake out territories, I purposefully get students to move around during class. This helps them to engage socially which creates a safer psychological environment. It also sets the tone that this is "our" classroom rather than creating a seating chart mentality. I have found students are more likely to mingle and sit in varied locations from session to session if we are mobile within the first class session. I encourage students to bring photos of their families, pets or activities that are important to them. Having these in class provides both me and the other students with ready reminders of the lives outside the classroom that continue to impact us inside the classroom.

To help students feel more comfortable with me, I do the standard introduction and share my credentials, but I also try to offer a short, recent personal story that provides the
students with a view into who I really am. Adult learners need to know that their instructors are real, genuine people (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005). I’ve stopped using the standard icebreaker strategies that are recommended for adult learners (Davis, 1984) and have opted to arrive at least twenty minutes before class, fully prepared, so I can personally welcome individuals and facilitate chit chat among those who would normally sit in anxious silence. (Let me say that this does not come naturally to me – I have worked at it and with prayer, I have improved.) Also, to establish a partnership rather than an authoritarian atmosphere, I use my first name and I tell my adult students that I will do whatever I can to help them learn.

Wang, Haertel and Walberg (1997) examined 28 categories of influences on learning based on 179 handbook chapters, 91 research syntheses, and surveys of 61 national experts. They found that among the top 11 most influential categories, 8 involved social and emotional elements in learning (e.g., student-teacher social interactions, classroom climate, peer group). Jensen (2003) offers a challenge for educators when he says, "Your role as an instructor is to facilitate learning and you cannot separate the content of what you offer from the social environment it is offered within. They form a complex, unified ‘package’ that is delivered to the learning brain" (p.17).

This makes sense to me based on evidence from my experience. At the end of the first session of class and then again sometime near the middle of the course, I invite feedback about the content, my teaching style and the classroom environment – the whole package. I encourage my students to let me know of any roadblocks that are keeping them from learning and ask them to offer things that would make them more successful – it’s amazing what they say. Once in awhile I get a comment about the lighting or the
temperature of the room needing to be tweaked, but usually they comment about the psychological and social climate of the class. These are actual comments from students in my classes this week:

• "I was nervous coming to class tonight, but I now realize that I can do this!"

• "Can we please have more small group discussion? I want to hear what everyone thinks."

• "Wonderful session. I am more of an independent learner, but it is good for me to stretch and it is nice to feel like I’m going to have a support system in my classmates."

• "This feels so different than other college classes I've taken. I'm excited to come back next week!"

This confirms for me that the classroom environment is critically important. Just as I develop essential learning targets, choose texts, design activities and write syllabi, I have realized that I also have the opportunity and responsibility to manipulate the physical, psychological and social environments of the classroom in favor of my students and their learning.
References


