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Principles for Effective Teaching

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ABSTRACT: Effective teaching in developmental education is one of the most challenging jobs in the college teaching profession. The search for teaching excellence in this field extends beyond basic cognitive issues to address noncognitive needs of underprepared students also. The six principles for effective developmental education teaching reviewed in the article are the product of integrating research findings from successful developmental education programs and general principles for effective teaching in undergraduate education. The principles focus on key elements that teachers may use to support effective teaching.

Many teaching professionals spend their entire careers in search of teaching excellence. This search may be even more important when students are underprepared adults. These students lack the foundation and skills required for rigorous college curriculum and many of them have adult responsibilities that place excessive demands on their time and other resources. These students present challenges to developmental educators that often far exceed those presented by traditional college students: “How to guide and teach students who are underprepared for traditional college level studies is the thorniest single problem for community colleges” (Cohen & Brawer, 1982, p. 236). This challenge extends throughout all levels of postsecondary education with developmental education serving as a gateway to postsecondary education for many students in this country. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 1999-2000, 32% of all freshmen in 4-year colleges and universities and 41% of community college freshmen required remedial education (NCES, 2001).

Research findings of successful developmental education programs and general principles of effective practice in teaching offer a strong foundation in the search for teaching excellence in developmental education. During the last decade, much has been written about the characteristics of successful developmental education programs. Boylan and Bonham (1998) provide a comprehensive analysis of developmental education programs in “Improving Developmental Education: What We’ve Learned from 30 Years of Research.” In this study, they identify 20 characteristics of successful programs. Eight of those characteristics relate directly to teaching: variety of teaching methods, sound cognitive theory-based courses, computer-based instruction to supplement regular classroom activities, classroom/laboratory integration, developmental course exit standards that are consistent with entry standards for subsequent courses, strategic learning that teaches students how to monitor their comprehension and think strategically about learning, professional training for faculty and staff who work with developmental students, and critical thinking that focuses on the types of thinking required in college-level courses.

Roueche and Roueche (1999) identify characteristics of successful developmental education programs similar to those of Boylan and Bonham (1998), with the addition of one very significant factor: recruiting, developing, and hiring the best faculty. This characteristic may actually be the single most important factor in successful programs.

Perhaps the most widely used college teaching guidelines relative to general principles of

effective practice in teaching are the “Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The guidelines suggest that good practices encourage student-faculty contact, promote cooperation among students, encourage active learning, give prompt feedback, emphasize time on task, communicate high expectations, and respect diverse talents.

It is not surprising that there are many commonalities among these studies. All of the elements required for effective college teaching apply to effective developmental education teaching as well. However, it may be even more imperative to apply them in work with developmental students and for developmental teachers to be more precise and in-depth. For example, the teacher of traditional college students can simply encourage active learning and usually achieve the desired student outcome. On the other hand, encouragement is not enough for most developmental students. The developmental education teacher must structure and lead the activities for developmental students while teaching them to become independent learners. Also, the issue of frequent feedback is more demanding with developmental students since they usually lack the ability to judge their own progress. Moreover, respect for diverse talents and ways of learning takes on a deeper meaning when it is applied to developmental students who are much less homogeneous than traditional college students. Nevertheless, all the aspects of teaching excellence important to developmental education students represent a model for teaching all students.

Volkwein and Cabrera (1998) suggest that the single most important factor in affecting multiple aspects of student growth and satisfaction is the classroom experience. The key to teaching developmental students successfully is to assure that teaching practices are consistent with the characteristics of successful programs and the principles of effective teaching. The six principles for effective teaching and their subsequent explanations are offered as a tool to help developmental educators in their search for teaching excellence. Additionally, institutions may find the principles helpful as they employ and train teachers to build successful developmental and mainstream education programs.

Principle #1: Commit to Teaching Underprepared Students

Unfortunately, some teachers teach developmental students for reasons that are not in the best interest of students. Perhaps the developmental class fits their desired teaching schedules, they think the developmental course will require less preparation and they will have more time to spend on their higher level courses or some other activity, or they may be teaching out-of-field and the college will not allow them to teach anything else. In some cases, their performance may be unsatisfactory in other areas so they are assigned to teach developmental courses. Further, research of staffing patterns has indicated that “among all institutions and all subject 72% of those teaching developmental courses are part-time” (Boylan, Boham, Jackson, & Saxon, 1994), a pattern that does not exhibit strong institutional commitment to developmental education. In reality, teachers who choose to teach developmental students must have visions for those students, know they can make a difference, and be willing to work hard to help students succeed.

The literature is replete with admonitions to select teachers who are interested and desire to teach underprepared students. For example, Roueche and Roueche (1993) have suggested this in the first national study on remedial programs in 1968.

Because teacher attitudes are probably related to student achievement, no teacher should be arbitrarily assigned to teach a remedial class if he or she would rather not teach that class,

nor should any teacher be assigned who is only mildly interested in doing so: uninterested teachers cannot be expected to motivate students who are typically characterized by a lack of motivation. (p.58)

Another early warning was issued by Cross in 1976. She observed that a lack of achievement was more than a simple cognitive issue, so she admonished that knowledge of learning problems, along with interest and commitment, were critical factors in choosing staff to work with developmental students. These strong admonitions are still relevant in the 21st century. Selection of teachers to work with this special population is an important issue that should not be taken lightly.

Principle #2: Demonstrate Good Command of the Subject Matter and the Ability to Teach a Diverse Student Population

Proficiency in subject matter is critical for developmental education teachers. Since developmental students have generally been unsuccessful with traditional instructional methods and materials, effective developmental teachers must be able to present the subject matter in different ways, requiring teachers to have in-depth knowledge of the concepts and skills they're teaching as well as higher level content knowledge in the field.

When selecting teachers, it is important to follow the credential standards set forth by the college's accrediting agent for all teachers including developmental education instructors. For example, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACS; 1998) requires,

Faculty members who teach in remedial programs must hold a baccalaureate degree in a discipline related to their assignment and have either teaching experience in a discipline related to their assignment or graduate training in remedial education. (p. 43)

Although subject matter knowledge that is documented by professional credentials is critical, it is not enough for effective developmental education teachers. The ability to convey that knowledge to students who lack the subject matter foundation is the major challenge. Unfortunately, many new teachers try to employ the same teaching techniques their graduate professors used successfully, since this is their most recent experience with the teaching/learning environment. This is one of the biggest mistakes teachers can make, especially with developmental students who may have had little academic success.

First, when working with at-risk students, teaching and learning activities must be highly structured, with all requirements and standards clearly stated (Boylan & Bonham, 1998). Developmental students need to know exactly what is expected of them and when it is due. Teaching students how to pace their work is one of the most important things a teacher can do. Students often underestimate the amount of work required and the time required to complete it, so teachers need to help students develop specific plans. A helpful strategy is to require students to turn in drafts or small segments of their work as they proceed toward the final product. Second, many developmental students require a lot of time-on-task. Scheduled and supervised activities in class, in labs, and with tutors facilitate the "pacing skills" often lacking for at-risk students. Third, developmental students perform better when the curriculum they are studying relates to the real world and their specific interests (Cross, 2000). Fourth, information should be presented in small chunks that allow students to link new material to something they already know. Fifth, since developmental education is providing the foundation for more advanced learning, mastery of the content is important. If students fail to master one set of skills, concepts, or

knowledge before they move on to the next level, gaps similar to the problems the students are already experiencing are created. Finally, frequent testing and immediate feedback are critical for developmental students. Wambach, Brothen, and Dikel (2000) report that many developmental students lack the ability to provide their own feedback. These authors note, “highly skilled students are better able to know they have understood what they have read, to know whether they are prepared for an exam, and to evaluate how well they have done on exams. They know the difference between simply doing and actually learning assignments” (p. 8). Therefore, early, frequent, meaningful, and clear feedback is a major factor in helping students hone their metacognitive skills.

Effective teachers use knowledge of their students' varied learning styles as they plan their instruction. Boylan and Bonham (1998) report that developmental students learn in ways not generally accommodated through traditional instruction. However, many teachers still teach the way they were taught. This pattern is likely to be least effective in the developmental classroom where most students failed to learn the course content in traditional high school classes; it is unlikely that they'll learn via the same instructional methods in college. Knowledge of whether students are visual, auditory, or tactile learners and whether they prefer to work individually or in groups should shape the instructional delivery system and learning materials offered. Boylan and Bonham (1998) cite several studies which reveal that many developmental students are hands-on learners. Research indicates that collaborative learning, when well structured as part of the learning activities, is helpful in getting students actively involved. Cross (2000) reports, “There is strong support from neuroanatomy and from cognitive science for the thesis that students must actively involve themselves in their own learning” (p. 28). Moreover, she reports that students are well-motivated to get involved in learning when they are faced with peers who depend on them and, in turn, nurture them in challenging learning tasks. Research from Casazza and Silverman (1996) shows that students in remedial courses are more likely to be successful when a variety of instructional methods are used.

Principle #3: Address Noncognitive Issues that Affect Learning

Underprepared adults in developmental education programs often carry many nonacademic problems with them when they enroll in college. Therefore, the successful developmental education teacher must develop the whole student rather than solely deal with cognitive skill deficits. According to Astin (1984), successful developmental education programs for underprepared students must deal with affective as well as cognitive needs.

Teachers indicate that motivating students to learn and to participate in learning activities may be the most difficult task, especially in working with developmental students. Related affective characteristics, such as self-regulation and academic procrastination, can be influenced by motivation. Kachgal, Hansen, and Nutter (2001) have reported that procrastination “compromises an individual's ability to set and achieve personal, academic, and career related goals” through self-regulated behavior. Further, Wambach et al. (2000) state that students who can self-identify skill areas that need improvement and are motivated to pursue assistance to gain appropriate skills are self-regulated. “The conscious development of self-regulation is the task that might distinguish developmental education programs from other postsecondary education programs” (p. 3). Some teachers, especially those with graduate school mentalities, declare that it is not their responsibility to motivate students. These teachers need to engage in professional development quickly. It is, indeed, the responsibility of developmental education and all education to help students sustain the motivation that led them to enroll in courses at the beginning of the semester and strengthen that motivation as the term progresses. Teachers are

challenged to try to determine how and when students lost their motivation and help them regain that initial vision. Of course, motivation is a team effort: No teacher can motivate a student who does not want to join the effort.

McCombs (1991) and the *Stanford University Newsletter on Teaching* (“Speaking of,” 1998) recommend these strategies for motivating students: define course goals and help students think about personal learning goals, make use of students’ interests and background knowledge, show the relevance of material, teach students skills for independent learning, and give helpful and frequent feedback.

Helping students set goals is critical to maintaining motivation. Unfortunately, many teachers assume that adults in college have well-defined goals for their lives and they should recognize that the developmental courses are the first step toward achieving those goals. It is the responsibility of the teacher to help students set both short- and long-term goals. At this point professional teamwork is vital, and the teacher may need to call on the advisors to help. Goal setting may well be the factor that determines if the student will complete the developmental course and continue in school long enough to achieve those goals. Tinto (1993) reported that students who have clear goals are more likely to be retained. An effective developmental education teacher helps each student create a vision and see how the course and everyday activities help to achieve that goal, a first step that should be repeated throughout the student’s academic career.

Developing and maintaining positive self-esteem is important for developmental students. Although some of them don’t show it, they often have low self-esteem, especially in regard to academic work. Teachers can help students overcome those perceptions that impede learning by using suggestions from research: create a supportive environment among students, enhance self-esteem through comments such as “you’re on the right track...,” simplify objectives and learning, use success in learning to promote student satisfaction, demand specificity in learning, advise and coach frequently, and avoid excessive negative feedback (Presiosi, 1990).

Principle #4: Provide Open and Responsive Learning Environments

Cross (2000) reports, “Research clearly shows that students who are most likely to drop out of college are students who are not connected with the people and events of the college” (p. 1). She notes that the connections need not always be face-to-face. They can be electronic via email or chat rooms, telephone calls, or letters, but humans need some way to feel that they belong. It is easy for developmental students to convince themselves that they are so far behind that the teacher would not want them back in class. A phone call or letter can be all it takes to assure most students that they still belong in the class and they will receive support to help them catch up. It is important for teachers to obtain local telephone numbers, addresses, and e-mail addresses from students on the first day of class. Tinto (1993) reports that being connected to the classroom and college has a significant effect on retention.

Students need to know that teachers recognize them as individuals. Goodman (2001) has found that simply calling students’ names aloud when checking attendance has a positive effect on attendance. He has concluded that teachers could enhance retention and attendance by orally calling the class roll and making individual comments when returning papers to students.

Another strategy to promote feelings of belonging is for the teacher to arrange to meet with

individual students during office hours. Although office hours are posted and announced, many students will not take the initiative to go to the teacher's office without a personal invitation or appointment. Ironically, teachers often feel rejected when students don't respond to their open announcement of office hours. This feeling of rejection may create a barrier between the teacher and student. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) report, "The educational impact of a college's faculty is enhanced when their contacts with students extend beyond the formal classroom to informal non-classroom settings" (p. 620). Such interaction gives the teacher the opportunity to get to know students better, and it helps students learn the value of using office hours that teachers set aside for them.

Principle #5: Communicate High Standards

It is important that academic standards in developmental classes be established in cooperation with the college-level curriculum to which students will advance (Boylan & Bonham, 1998). Teachers must have clear understandings of the subsequent curriculum and how it relates to the developmental education curriculum. Otherwise, they may give developmental students false security and preparation that may doom them to failure when they move into college-level work. One measure of a successful developmental education program is the success of the students in subsequent courses, data used by administrators and system evaluators as well. Moreover, teachers can also use this information as one gauge of their own teaching success.

Maintaining high performance standards may have other benefits. Wambach et al. (2000) discuss the importance of students learning self-regulatory behaviors that help them take responsibility for their own actions and learning. They suggest that self-regulation is developed through demanding situations. Therefore, it seems important for developmental educators to hold students to high standards of excellence and expectations.

Some students, especially those who recently graduated from high school, may engage in behaviors that are disrespectful to teachers and other students. A major responsibility of classroom teachers is to maintain a good learning environment for the entire class; they should not allow disrespectful behavior to disrupt this environment.

Principle #6: Engage in Ongoing Evaluation and Professional Development

Boylan and Bonham (1998) and Roueche and Roueche (1993) both examined successful developmental programs and identified program evaluation as a key element. However, program evaluation does not always include faculty evaluation and subsequent improvement in faculty performance. Faculty improvement is usually achieved through professional development activities that include reading professional journals, writing professional articles, taking courses, and attending professional workshops and conferences. These activities are time-consuming, but effective developmental educators make this a part of their continuing education.

Baiocco and DeWaters (1998) contend that professional development is the key to helping effective teachers manage change that is inherent in the 21st century. Effective teachers are constantly embracing change in their quest for improvement and also applying findings from evaluation outcomes to enhance teaching effectiveness and student success.

Maxwell (2000) stressed the critical need for professional development in the field of developmental education: “Few of the approximately 104,000 individuals working in developmental education were specifically trained to work with developmental students, or for that matter to teach college students” (p. vii-xi). She adds that there are only four graduate training programs for training professionals in developmental education, “thus most are trained to teach in specific disciplines or to work with younger or older populations” (p. vii-xi). She suggested developing a certification system, such as the one offered by the Kellogg Institute, to expand certification of individuals and prepare master teachers who can mentor their fellow professionals in given programs. In his policy paper to the Education Commission of the States, Spann (2000) has recommended that colleges “require initial training and ongoing professional development by educators working with underskilled students in a multicultural society” (p. 3). Effective teachers wholeheartedly embrace these opportunities.

Conclusion

If the democratic ideals of our educational and governmental systems are to be supported by American higher education, it is essential that higher education is truly open to all interested citizens. Further, in order for higher education to serve the needs of our general populace, quality teaching in higher education is imperative. Faculty at postsecondary institutions must recognize and embrace the importance of developing teaching skills that enhance learning for all types of students in tandem with continuing development of their content-area knowledge.

The principles for effective teaching presented in this article apply to all instructors and all students. Since many developmental students have already demonstrated a lack of success in learning environments which do not apply such principles, they may be the students most likely to fail without the benefit of instructors trained to help them meet their full potential. “Colleges must increase the support and structure they offer at-risk students, who need support and structure more than any other students in higher education” (Roueche & Roueche, 1999, p. 2). Student classroom experiences provide myriad opportunities for developing the whole student. Teachers can use and apply the principles of commitment; command of subject matter and ability to teach diverse students; integration of affective skill development; provision of connected, open learning environments; high-performance expectations; and ongoing evaluation and professional development to offer their best to students.

An anonymous writer defined ignorance as “doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different outcome.” Unfortunately this fits the practices of some colleges and teachers as they relate to instructing developmental students. Colleges must support effective teaching in developmental education as a base and expand it across the entire curriculum in order to avoid dismal outcomes. The application of principles for effective teaching will help better prepare teachers in their quest to assist students in meeting their goals.

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