Workshop 6:  
The news on adult learning principles and offenders

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Engagement is a term used to describe certain learning behaviours of young adults. There are two recognised kinds of engagement, procedural and substantive. Procedural engagement refers to the involvement in day-to-day routines and activities within the learning environment and substantive refers to the mental effort, active participation and commitment to particular learning tasks. Of particular interests to educators of inmates is the concept of substantive engagement. For successful learning to take place, some degree of engagement must occur.

Educators need to recognise the examples of engagement and disengagement in their students. If students are actively engaged with the learning task the following observations may be noted. Punctual students who are organised for the class with any set work completed are representative of procedural engagement. If these students are substantively engaged, they should be able to integrate new material with previous knowledge, provide active responses to learning tasks, maintain good interest levels and general attitude and comprehend the course content.

However, poor schooling experiences are commonplace with many of our students within the correctional setting. It is more likely that during their previous schooling there were significant absences from class, that assignments were late or not completed at all, that there might have been difficulties linking knowledge to new material. Poor interest and attitude levels may have contributed to passive responses to learning tasks such as non-participation or asking of questions and little effort would have been applied to comprehend the content involved.

Our challenge as educators within the correctional setting is to employ a series of strategies to ensure that students do not follow that pattern adopted at school and switch off in our classes. There are no magical solutions but a combination of these strategies consistently being applied will help. The ideas are not rocket science and as practitioners some of these may well be already part of our teaching repertoire.

- Organise learning into short bursts that focus students’ attention and capture teachable moments. Keep in mind that chronological age plus two minutes generally measure attention spans.

- Use teacher-student talk in every lesson to strengthen student-teacher relationships and sustain a positive classroom culture.

- Set high expectations in your classroom but break them into achievable parts. Research indicates that high expectations have a positive effect on the quality of teaching and learning.
➢ Add some fun to learning by using content and materials relevant to significant issues in students’ daily life.

➢ Teach the literacy and numeracy of your subject so the subject language is not a barrier to students’ ‘switching on’.

➢ Use explicit teaching that involves spelling out the purpose and content of the task, communicating clearly and simply, modelling and guiding the learning, encouraging independent learning and having upfront progressive assessment.

The issue is then, how do we improve our students’ participation in lessons. There needs to be a concerted effort to influence the mindset by capturing the students’ attention. At the start of the lesson try some of these:

➢ Use positive statements about learning and try to establish a positive attitude

➢ Use stimulus materials about learning around the room

➢ Have a set ritual to start the lesson; create a focus

➢ Use opening questions like “How many remember the key points from last the lesson?”

➢ Plan against the BTDT syndrome – (been there done that) ie students not remembering the previous lesson’s work. Use review and preview methods

➢ Preview set the mood for what’s coming – isn’t this what movie theatres do?

➢ Use the visual domain. Remember 90% of the information that comes to our brains is visual. Our eyes can register 36,000 visual messages per hour yet much of our instruction is auditory

➢ Use symbolic (iconic) posters for key messages. The poster on the next page uses visual, auditory and kinaesthetic modes. These posters encode information using the language of the brain (i.e. metaphoric – symbolic language)

➢ Use visual language such as “picture yourself as a …”

➢ Use graphic organisers eg mind maps, flow charts and concept maps with colour
Each time you get visual, you help your students to retain and recall information

Change the pace of the lesson.

Learning has a natural rhythm and flow. The brain is an adaptive organ. Don’t think that by teaching more slowly you increase attention and comprehension. In fact you may be teaching too slowly for the brain! Aim at the majority when you set the pace for the lesson. The majority will appreciate a quick transition while the others will learn that you and your lesson has a rhythm. Reassure those who may struggle with the quicker pace that you will give them assistance at key times.

Use open loops of information to build anticipation and interest.

The brain likes closure, completeness and wholeness.

What do you see and do with the diagram opposite?

We can increase students’ appetites by momentarily withholding bits of information. Given that the brain can parallel-process, students can still focus on what you are teaching while in the background they can anticipate more information.

Break up your lesson with short activities (diffusers) to maintain attention span and enable students’ brains to shift gear.
The brain operates in alternating cycles of activity and rest. Prolonged periods of focus that don’t fit with the brain’s need for variety are actually detrimental to comprehension and retention. Below is a formula to calculate how long your students can stay on task.

**Age of the brain = minutes of focus + 2 minutes (not necessarily true for adults!!)**

**Example:** An 18 year old can focus for between 16 – 20 minutes.

Therefore your lesson should have the following structure:

- **Focus** ➔ **Diffuser** ➔ **Focus** ➔ **Diffuser** ➔ **Focus** ➔ **Diffuser**

The number of components depends on the lesson length.

- **Examples of diffusers:** draw a symbol for each main point of the lesson so far
  - Present a verbal summary of the lesson

Use dramatic effect and attaching content/concepts to motion.

The brain pays attention to, and remembers things that are different. By dramatising a point or attaching key concepts to body movements, we can improve student engagement.

Robin Williams in Dead Poets Society increased the focus on his key points by bringing his students close to him and whispering ‘Listen, do you hear it? Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary.”

Another approach is to attach a gesture or hand motion to a key concept. This process invites student participation and enhances memory function. For example: hand motions can be used for division, multiplication, addition and subtraction, the main parts of an essay or key historical dates.

(Adapted from Classroom Issues)

**Impacts for correctional educators**

The main issues for educators within NSW correctional settings are:

- Re-engagement of our students into the learning experience.

Many of our students come to us damaged from their time spent in previous learning environments. Traditional teaching methods failed them in the past and they are looking for something new and different. To check whether the engagement process is happening use the survey attached.

- Capture of teachable moments

Centres are obligated to organise classes for inmates so that they fit into the daily structure of the gaol. This may mean classes are scheduled in two-hour sessions. Difficulties arise if you are to change the pace of your lesson and present short quick grab chunks. Any lessons will need to be broken up with lots of diffusers requiring a great deal of organisation. The use of a thematic approach may assist with this.
Learning environment

A multidiscipline team makes use of the group rooms within the correctional centres. In order to present the learning environment as a relaxed, bright and inviting place to come, visual learning aids should be placed around the room. However when the room is not used for the sole purpose of for example literacy and numeracy, negotiation with other colleagues must occur before such a step is taken.

Visual & dramatic teaching Aids

Correctional centres are also limited to what teaching aids may be brought into a centre to add that visual or dramatic impact to a lesson. Appropriate and professional conduct will place constraints on this area of focus.

One resource that is readily available, and appeals to a large percentage of our students is the newspaper. Even students that profess to be illiterate will often use newspapers as a means of learning about things that are happening. Newspapers contain lots of visual information as well as a wide variety of information in a range of differing presentations.

Literacy and numeracy activities that can be presented through an exploration of this medium have been developed for the various levels of the Certificates of General Education for Adults (CGEA). Auditory stimulus can be provided by radio news and comparisons made regarding information selected for inclusion and what details have been left out. The information presented is authentic and relevant with an emphasis on the fun aspect of learning. There is recognition of the various learning styles among adult learners and that in the 21st century the quick-grab visual way information is presented must have an impact on the way we engage students in learning. Most importantly our aim as educators is to share our love of lifelong learning by engaging our students as they actively join in the journey.

References


Classroom Issues - publication of The District Middle Years of Schooling Project. NSW Department of Education


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