THE LEARNER AS A CLIENT

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1. INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher learning such as universities and Technikon's are primarily dedicated to learning and the furtherance of understanding. These institutions have as their client, a community of learners (students). A community of learners therefore refers to the way in which education, research, human relations, curriculum development, academic support services programmes, administration and development attended to and managed within a framework of learning and the willingness to learn. Academic staff, students, administrative and professional staff and management all play their part in enhancing the learning community. The behaviour of such a community is based on principles and guidelines determined by productive learning. Examples include: respect for another's view, candour and expectancy of candour, careful listing, postponing judgement, open-mindedness, flexibility and persistence. Learner diversity thus is addressed from an academic viewpoint, implying that this phenomenon (learners diversity) can be accommodated through participative, purposeful and proactive cultivation of a community of learners.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The learner as a client in the educational process is a student who comes to the university or any institution of higher learning with a diversity of characteristics. He is an adolescent person, an adult person, a worker, a parent with various paternal responsibilities who has to be assisted with his cognitive, emotional and social problems to adjust effectively to his new learning environment.   Such a learner comes from both an advantaged and disadvantaged background. To generalise about his background can be misleading on the side of the lecturer. Like all the students, such learner might be having both language and communication problems in as far as the subject content is concerned. It is therefore the duty of the lecturer to establish with certainty what background information does this learner have, take advantage of any strong point the learner has and also concentrate on the weaknesses that he might notice in this learner. The problems that the learner has, can be addressed through the use of relevant resources, relevant textbooks, flexible teaching styles, relevant curriculum, the lecturers' positive attitude towards his learners, regular evaluation and sympathetic administration towards his students.

3. WHAT CONSTITUTES LEARNING

Traditionally the concept of learning as an activity has been interactively intertwined with the varied purposes of learning: personal development, intellectual or cognitive development, and development of skills for economic self-sufficiency (Duke; 1992). To achieve these purposes, it is typically expected that students acquire personal and social self-confidence and responsibility, assimilate a body of knowledge, gain appreciation for the shared meanings of a cultural heritage, learn to think critically and engage in reasoned discourse, and often develop marketable professional and other skills. Lack of consensus

about priority among these goals and occasionally, the assignment of responsibility for them to different divisions of educational institutions, have obscured the commonality among them, namely that all involved changes in the learners' way of thinking and behaving. These changes are obviously not confined to students as learners or as clients in the educational business, but apply to all constituents of the learning community.

Current research on learning, according to Green and Stark (1986), attempts to define and conceptualise across types of learning, the processes by which individuals amass information and compare, sort, evaluate, and apply this information in appropriate or novel ways. These processes are believed to occur whether the learner is engaging in a new vocational experience, new personal social experienced, or an experience desired to foster intellectual growth.

It is widely accepted that individuals do not learn by passively accepting pre-formed knowledge, neatly transmitted to them, nor does unforced discovery facilitate learning (Leder; 1993). Svinski (1990) describes learning as a process which reflects the scientific method in general and the promotion of active learning techniques. The following features of learning process can be highlighted:

✦ The perceptual, affective, cognitive and psycho-motor domains of learning are interdependent and inseparably part of the learning process.
✦ Classroom and experimental (active) learning can and ought to be one and the same thing.
✦ In essence, learning is a process of adaptation a way in which a person learns to deal with his/her changing life world.
✦ Learning is complex, but forms a dynamic total process comprising a series of definable, relatively simple sub-processes and occurrences, taking place in a rational and ordered way.
✦ Although learning is rational, why a person learns, what is learnt, and how and when the knowledge and skills are applied, are not always rational in a given situation. Various factors influence learning and its application (Butler, 1985:9).

Another fact that one may not loose sight of is that although learning is central in education, there is no universal way of learning. Different people will use different strategies on different tasks, however, two dominant orientations can be identified, namely the knowledge seeking and the understanding seeking (Brown and Atkins, 1988). Knowing that and know why are both important, thus both orientations must be considered useful and necessary in efforts to make successful learners.

4. WHAT CONSTITUTES A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

Much has been said about what constitutes learning. The question is who is this person who is engaged in the learning process? The answer is, he is the learner and he is an important client in this process. He is also a member of a community of learners. Now what constitutes a community of learners? The community of learners reform effort is distinctive in its focus on removing structural barriers to educational excellence and facilitating learning as the central goal of the institution. Amidst fragmentation caused by huge enrolments, diverse students and staff populations, competing missions and enormous specialization and fragmentation in the curriculum, it is an effort to establish

conditions that promote coherence, community and a sense of common purpose (Calbelnick, MacGreggor, Matthews and Smith, 1990).

The question arises as to what the university or technikon and its constituents (students, staff, management) can do in practical terms to create and enhance a community of learners and a culture of learning amidst the reality of increasing diversity, which includes differences in age, cultural heritage, language, academic preparation, religion, sexual orientation, gender and the like.

The institution of higher learning like the university or technikon can evolve within a new paradigm, accommodating traditional strengths and values as well as new missions and visions, as long as the behaviours of productive learning remain central and the activities are aimed at the promotion of a community of learners (Duke, 1992). The institutions are made and remade by new pressures and needs in new times and circumstances, as new societies emerge from the old. The creation of learning communities (or its frustration) rests within the institutions.

One example of how institutions van be successful in fostering learning in a diverse cultural environment, applies to teaching-learning situations. The following guidelines (University of Washington, 1991) should be considered:

- Include all students in the educational process;
- Recognize different ways of learning;
- Promote respect among university constituents;
- Recognize diversity through curriculum choices.

If the above are taken into consideration, any institutions are likely to accomplish its objective of providing proper services to its clients which are students (learners). In doing so the following guidelines are however very important.

5. GUIDELINES FOR LECTURERS

- Knowing students' names and referring to student by name in classes.
- Knowing backgrounds by using information sheets.
- Asking and answering questions, even in large classes.
- Using instant polls for integration into the learning process.
- Scheduling office hours as an extension of class and being genuinely available during office hours.
- Being aware that some students might feel singled out.
- Allocating time to talk to individual students.
- Holding group office hours.
- Recognizing differences, for example, between field sensitive and field independent learning approaches, without assuming that individuals from a particular group have a particular learning style.
- Using inclusive language and examples (inclusive of gender, age, cultural background, class etc.)
- Using campus resources to learn about diversity.
- Inviting students to share their learning experiences.
- Ensuring extended participation patterns during discussion.

- ✦ Conveying high expectations of all students.
- ✦ Cooperatively developing ground rules for respectful discussion.
- ✦ Incorporating new reading and projects to develop and inclusive curriculum.
- ✦ Indicating contributions of individuals of diverse backgrounds.

6. GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS:

Learning and personal development during the undergraduate years are enhanced when the students are more actively engaged in various aspects of institution life. To develop as learners, students are encouraged to:

- ✦ Get their reasons for studying right.
- ✦ Not allow other people to take complete chance of their learning processes.
- ✦ Compile their own learning agendas and communicate these to tutors and lecturers.
- ✦ Use self-assessment and construct criteria for self-assessment.
- ✦ Decide on learning targets for themselves.
- ✦ Get to know what campus and other resources are available to enhance learning.
- ✦ Make use of feedback from all possible sources.
- ✦ Ensure ownership of each study task or assignment.

7. CONCLUSION

The learner as a client in the education process is as important as the learning process itself. Learning process in essence is a process of adaptation – a changing life world. A community of learners at any institution refers to the proponents of a "movement" characterized by an absence of strict hierarchical structures and the presence of networks and learning activities through which structured and unstructured change occurs. It is in this "movement" or notion that we want to succeed, nothing less. In spite of all advantage or disadvantaged social, economic and political backgrounds, the learner remains and will still remain our important client and we must see him/her succeeding at all costs.

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