

Wisdom and strategies that support engagement for students

By Rosanna Matovinovic

In February 2022, I was asked to make a small presentation for a conference our Work Education Program was having on methods and practices in teaching adult learners with intellectual difficulties. My contribution was to be a personal reflection on the wisdom and strategies that support engagement for students. Essentially: “What works for your students?” and “How do you know it is effective?”

When you have taught for several years, your actions become quite automatic and you do not stop to think about your wisdom and strategies, you just do what you do instinctively. Wisdom is an interesting word to use and probably a useful one when talking about teaching. The Macquarie Dictionary describes knowledge as being about facts, information and skills while wisdom is knowing how to put the knowledge to good use. To quote Brian O’Driscoll (2009), “Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad.”

For teachers to teach effectively, the wisdom we bring to our teaching is important. In our evolving world, knowledge is changing, adapting and growing. Teachers are not, and cannot be, the font of all knowledge and the days of “chalk and talk” are far gone. We need wisdom to assist student learning, enabling them to make connections and plan pathways. I see teachers as facilitators and guides in the learning journey.

All students are different. They have different needs and skills and come with different knowledge and experiences. In a way, it is like an orchestra. An orchestra is made up of many different instruments, who come in and out of the music at different times and have very different skill sets to play their instruments. The teacher is the conductor bringing it all together so that the music can be played in harmony.

No matter who you are teaching, students with additional learning needs or without, children or adults, the key is to understand your learner then plan and teach according to their needs. In TAFE, if a learner has additional learning needs, they are still adults and come with varied experiences



and so should be treated as adults and with respect. They have the same rights and needs of any other learner.

High Impact Teaching Strategies

Educational discussions on teaching strategies for the past few years have been about High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS). The ten HITS set out by the Victorian Education Department are: setting goals, structured lessons, explicit teaching, worked examples, collaborative learning, multiple exposures, questioning, feedback, metacognitive strategies and differential teaching (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2020).

The language in naming the strategies has become more sophisticated, with the aim to bring teaching strategies into a unified framework, so that all teachers can be on the same page when engaging students in learning. These strategies are not new to experienced teachers. In order to teach diverse student cohorts effectively, all teaching strategies come into play in delivering the curriculum.

The program I work in delivers Certificate I in Transition Education and Certificate I and Certificate II Work Education to young adults with additional learning needs. Following are my reflections on wisdom and strategies that support engagement for students and how subconsciously, whether you know the names of the HITS or not, they are all clearly in use.

1. Keep lessons relevant

In TAFE teaching, we have set curriculums and training packages with performance outcomes to be achieved. We need to be conscious that we are following these for students to gain the certificate they have applied for. It is important to grab the interest of students and use these interests to move towards curriculum goals. It is important that we make sure the subject matter is at their level of understanding for the students to gain skills relevant to

their certificate. (HITS: goal setting, structured lessons, explicit teaching)

2. Focus on the learners' life experience

We try to acknowledge students' achievements and allow them to share their knowledge. We want them to gain confidence as they learn and in learning. Through our initial meeting processes with students, we establish what has helped them learn in the past and what life lessons they can share. We reflect upon the questions: Why are you at TAFE? What do you hope to get out of the course? How is it relevant to your life needs, past, present and future? (HITS: differential teaching metacognitive strategies)

3. Tell stories as you're teaching

Most experienced teachers are good storytellers and use stories to engage their students. Stories share real life experiences, sometimes in real time. The story does not have to come just through the teacher. The students may have relevant stories and experiences to share. This allows for a give-and-take approach to teaching which is useful for lifelong learning. (HITS: collaborative learning)

4. Break up information to avoid cognitive overload

Our program is the perfect example of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011). We use a student's prior knowledge and experiences in the planning of learning activities and assessments. We develop and build upon their current skills and knowledge. Students plan goals that they would like to achieve. We break down the information into steps. We take care not to bombard with information as it can become overwhelming. We take small steps, check for retention and understanding, building upon information and knowledge before we proceed to new information. (HITS: goal setting, explicit teaching, structured lessons, differential teaching)

5. Provide feedback in the moment of need

Students need to understand the concepts of positive and constructive feedback so that they can grow from their experiences. We always assure students that support is available. With some students who are sensitive or may be on the autism spectrum this can be quite challenging as you do not want them to feel you are criticising them. Feedback may be a matter of gentle coercion, as you nudge them to come up with an idea or you steer them in another direction in small increments.

With on-site training we give feedback in the moment, trying to make it meaningful and constructive. We work

alongside the student, showing by example. Saying, "Everyone has done a good job," is not enough or appropriate feedback.

We aim to make our feedback relevant and targeted to the student. In this way the student gains an understanding of where they personally can improve and set personal goals relevant to their needs. It also allows for them to gain some independence in their learning as each student's pathway is different. In a simple way, this is steering them towards a student-centred approach to learning (McCabe & O'Connor, 2014). (HITS: worked examples, goal setting, differential learning, metacognitive strategies, feedback)

6. Make your material visually stimulating

Here is where teachers can play to their own strengths. If the teacher is engaged, enthusiastic and comfortable in what and how they are presenting then it will have a flow on effect to students. You need to understand what works for you and where your presentation comfort zone is and present accordingly. I am always on the lookout for funny videos, interactive PowerPoints, Kahoot, pictures, hands-on activities, on-site work.

My comfort zone is in funny, relevant videos that raise discussion points and hands-on examples. There is also a level of acting involved with exaggerated movements and use of voice to keep attention or explain and emphasise a point. By presenting visually stimulating material and lessons, students are more likely to stay focused. Each teacher has their own strength that they should play to. (HITS: multiple exposures)

7. Encourage questions and discussion

Students will not learn without questions; questions are a good indication of engagement. For students to become independent in the world of work they must have inquiring minds. Questions lead to some answers but often more questions. This is the pathway of life and lifelong learning. Students benefit from learning how to ask, what to ask, who to ask and having some independent research skills. We encourage and give time and opportunities for our students to ask questions. (HITS: questioning, differential learning)

8. Flexibility

Learning is facilitated when teachers present students with varied learning experiences. In any teaching situation one approach does not serve all. A lesson that was "the best ever" one year may not resonate the next with a different cohort of students. With our cohort, flexibility is the key

and the COVID pandemic showed how we were able to adapt and change to the varying situations presented and take our students with us.

Throughout the pandemic we kept our students engaged and attendance was high. We incorporated resources that they had at home, used videos, played games and had scavenger hunts. We kept lines of communication open (within reason) at the individual student level. Teachers need to be flexible and, if something is not working, change tack. Use a different approach or method. The curriculum must be adhered to, but how we get the message across is up to us. (HITS: multiple exposures, explicit teaching)

What works for your students? How do you know it is effective?

We teach a diverse cohort of students with mixed abilities, some students are on the autism spectrum, all with differing goals and learning challenges. With a diverse cohort of students, a fully equipped toolkit is needed. It is important to look at the person and not at the disability and not get caught up with ideas that autistic students should be taught in a certain way or Down Syndrome students in another, or make assumptions about students based on their disability.

It is important to not get hooked up on learning styles, that is, teaching to a student's preferred style. New research (Dinham, 2017) has shown that focusing on learning styles hinders students, because students, especially our cohort with additional learning needs, need as many arrows as possible in their quiver. If they are good in one style then we need to teach them another, to better equip them for future environments and learning.

In preparing this presentation I asked my students how they felt they learned best. Common responses were: "It depends on the task," or "I use listening and watching," or, "I take notes when someone is speaking." All described multiple ways of learning.

The students we teach are young adults, in an adult learning environment, who are looking for their future pathways. As teachers our aims are to equip them with the skills and knowledge for the world of work. We can only do this by catering to their individual goals and needs as best we can.

How do we know we are doing this effectively? In a simple way: Do they turn up to our classes? Are they engaged in class discussions? Do they follow and complete work assigned? Are they comfortable in asking us questions and coming to us if they need further assistance?

References

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Rosanna Matovinovic started her teaching career as a primary school teacher then worked with her husband running a small business in HiFi retail, wholesale and manufacturing business for many years before returning to the field of education. For the past 10 years she has taught students with a variety of disabilities and learning needs at Melbourne Polytechnic, within the Work Education Program, currently in the position of Lead Teacher.