



Faculty Development Series

### 3.1.1 Overview of Quality Learning Environments

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For more than ten years, a team of innovative educators has investigated and experimented with ways in which the learning environment motivates, sustains, and enriches the learning process. Creating and growing an educational setting helps faculty engage meaningfully with students. It is important, however, to distinguish the effort of establishing a learning environment from that required for facilitation, assessment, and curriculum design. The process of setting up a quality learning situation can be simplified by employing a clear methodology and using a set of well-defined principles and key skills. Such an environment is intricate and must be sustained through the use of assessment procedures and methodologies designed to enhance learning. This module shows how social processes, physical space, and learning tools must be combined using the “glue” of assessment to create a quality learning environment.

#### Need for a Quality Learning Environment

Most educators are aware that a collaborative, stimulating, and challenging learning environment can significantly enhance performance and growth for every individual, whether it be an infant learning to speak, a worker on the job, or a student in the classroom. It has always been important to structure temporal space, improve collaborative processes, and employ appropriate tools in order to help learners achieve desired learning outcomes. Every teacher is looking for those magical moments when “the lights go on” and transformational change occurs. A learning environment conducive to such breakthroughs definitely increases the likelihood that those satisfying events will occur.

Faculty and administrators are continuing to work at all levels of undergraduate education to find ways to improve the learning environment. Within community colleges, the learning college movement has illustrated the range of learning environments that are possible. Liberal arts colleges have consistently pioneered new and more effective learning environments to increase collaboration between students and faculty, using such approaches as cohort models, residential colleges, and paired courses (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990).

The Boyer report recommends that universities transform their learning environments to support inquiry-based learning, a collaborative effort among research faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates to address the following: “Many students graduate having accumulated whatever number of courses is required, but are still lacking a coherent body of knowledge or any inkling as to how one sort of information might relate to others. And all too often they graduate without knowing how to think logically, write clearly, or speak coherently” (Boyer Commission, 1998).

To achieve a quality learning environment in which the greatest growth is possible for all students, faculty need to follow a few key principles, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1 **Principles for Establishing a Quality Learning Environment (QLE)**

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Establish a high degree of trust and respect.</li> <li>2. Make sure both learner and mentor are committed to the learner's success.</li> <li>3. Get student buy-in very early in the process.</li> <li>4. Challenge students.</li> <li>5. Set clear and high expectations.</li> <li>6. Encourage risk-taking.</li> <li>7. Seek student feedback regularly by using assessment on a consistent and timely basis.</li> <li>8. Measure and document progress and growth.</li> <li>9. Create a collaborative learning space.</li> <li>10. Create a balance between structure and flexibility.</li> </ol> |
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1. **Establish a high degree of trust and respect between students and teacher**—Mutual trust and respect enable learning to take place. A successful learning environment must be learner-centered, knowledge-centered, assessment-centered and community-centered (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).
2. **Make sure both learner and mentor are committed to the learner's success**—In order to persist in the face of failure, the learner needs to believe that the mentor is committed to his or her success. Conversely, a teacher is reluctant to invest in students who show no interest in learning. Thus, a signed commitment is often required at the beginning of the learning process.
3. **Get student buy-in very early in the process**—We know that students commit themselves to improving their performance through a number of different strategies (3.1.5 *Getting Student Buy-In*). A successful learning environment requires this commitment from each student before any content learning can take place.

SECTION 3

4. **Challenge students**—As illustrated in *The Accelerator Model (4.3.4)*, transformational learning requires a balance of support and challenge. There is a temptation for faculty to enable dependent behavior in students by an overemphasis on support. The goal is to provide an environment that will encourage and challenge students to live up to their potential and become self-growers.
5. **Set clear and high expectations**—Students' productivity is highly correlated to the expectations set at the beginning of the educational process in which they are engaged. In general, they perform to the level of these expectations, so it is important that they be challenged to achieve at the highest possible level (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993), and that those expectations be clearly articulated for them.
6. **Encourage risk taking**—In an environment governed by high expectations, there is always the potential for students to experience failure on the road to success. When a less-than-desirable outcome does occur, it is important for mentors not to react adversely. When all parties involved in the learning process feel supported, they will be ready to take the risks involved in achieving genuine learning together.
7. **Seek student feedback regularly by using assessment on a consistent and timely basis**—At the initial buy-in session, after three or four weeks, after midterm, and whenever problems spring up, it is helpful to ask students for assessment feedback. This gives students ownership of the learning environment. It is just as important in a quality learning environment for faculty to regularly mentor and assess each student as it is for the students to provide feedback about the environment (*4.2.1 Overview of Mentoring*). Self-assessment is necessary for students to improve their performance.
8. **Measure and document progress and growth of both faculty and students**—The learning environment must include records that document growth and track the progress that has been made. Students need to see evidence that demonstrates that their performance is improving or diminishing. Otherwise, they will lose their motivation to work hard and put forth a quality effort.
9. **Create a collaborative learning space**—While the learning space in which we teach is often not under our control, whenever possible faculty should communicate to administrators plans for their ideal classroom. This is especially important when renovations are being planned. For instance, would round tables, rolling chairs, functional workstations, and state-of-the-art projection equipment enhance the environment? Even traditional

classrooms can be transformed into collaborative learning spaces simply by rearranging chairs and tables or by leaving empty rows to allow the facilitator to move among teams.

10. **Create a balance between structure and flexibility**—The ideal learning environment is one that is well organized and conceived, yet flexible and responsive to the need for change. The objective is to support and encourage a free-flowing give-and-take between and among the students, instructors, and other people involved in the learning process, allowing for dynamic interaction (*3.1.2 Introduction to Learning Communities*).

These principles are helpful when addressing the following commonly mentioned learning environment issues. The first seven issues are explained, and the remaining ones are listed in Table 1 in the *Methodology for Creating a Quality Learning Environment (3.1.3)* with links to other modules.

### Issues Regarding a Quality Learning Environment

1. **Shifting ownership of learning to the students**—While faculty would like students to be more independent, self-directed learners, many students come into their courses as passive, non-aggressive learners wanting the faculty to direct their learning. The quality learning environment is based upon learners' focusing on peak performance, setting their own learning objectives, and reflecting on their own learning performance to maximize both their learning and learning growth.
2. **Motivating students**—Many faculty are concerned that some students do not care about their learning; this attitude can demoralize their peers, as well as the instructor, thus degrading and depressing the learning environment.
3. **Diversity of learners**—Students today “vary considerably by age, gender, ethnic background, home country or region of the country.... “traditional” students are becoming hard to find” (Davis, 1993). A major goal of the learning environment is to set up a culture based on high expectations, challenges, and risk-taking which can support the learning growth of these diverse students.
4. **Administrative attitude toward valuing learning improvement**—Creating a quality learning environment often requires resources and encouragement that only administrators can supply. Lack of this administrative support can erode faculty motivation.

5. **Having students prepare for class**—Even the best learning environment will be rendered ineffective if students do not prepare for class. It is important to build into the environment a way to check preparation. Techniques include providing quizzes, integrating short in-class writing assignments into the course structure, and checking homework assignments at the door. Conversely, productivity is decreased by lecturing on previously assigned reading material, allowing students to use class time for preparation, ignoring work that students have completed for class, and issuing assignments with vague or unclear purposes, parameters, or due dates.
6. **Creating an assessment culture in your environment**—Recall that a learning environment maintains a balance between support and challenge. Assessment is often used to assist students as they struggle to learn course materials: it helps them to monitor their progress. Evaluation, on the other hand, is typically employed to challenge both students and faculty to higher levels of achievement. Ideally, the two processes are woven into the fabric of the course, used alternately to goad and encourage participants to greater growth.
7. **Who should teach which courses**—The conventional wisdom operating at many colleges is that the most qualified faculty teach the higher level and more content-heavy courses. Yet, research has shown the need to re-evaluate that thinking; assigning experienced faculty (as opposed to adjuncts and graduate assistants) to entry-level courses can help increase the retention of students, create a fully functioning society, and improve student success (Astin, 2001).

### Quality Learning Environment Skills

The principles stated above set the stage for a quality-learning environment. Yet, participants in this process need to develop the following skills to monitor the effectiveness of that environment and continuously work to improve it.

**Risk-taking**—The self-confidence to put oneself into challenging environments that require an ever-increasing level of performance and possibility of failure

**Following convictions**—Consistently acting according to one's beliefs; this behavior builds trust, an essential component of a learning environment

**Respecting**—Feeling and showing honor or esteem for others in the learning environment; showing

consideration for the different qualities they bring to it. Without mutual respect, creativity is limited, people avoid risks, and the likelihood of inducing quality collaboration lessens.

**Committing to others**—Pledging oneself to work for the well-being and success not only of oneself but of others in the learning environment. This is often done formally with all parties completing and signing a pledge or contract outlining the details of their commitment, listing the actions they will take.

**Valuing process**—Valuing the methods used to do something, as opposed to merely valuing the accomplishment itself. In other words, unless students actually see the value of the methodologies used (such as sharing, collaborating, and assessing their own and others' work) and openly engage in using them, it will be difficult for authentic learning to occur.

### Quality Learning Environment Contexts

Although all student learning requires a supportive environment, the following contexts have proved especially important: first-year courses, entire programs (such as economics), academic skill centers, and faculty.

When one builds a quality learning environment, one must attend especially to students in first-year courses. Generally, they lack self-confidence, good study habits, and the ability to work together effectively. Each step in the *Methodology for Creating a Quality Learning Environment (3.1.3)* must be implemented for every class period of a first-year course, but especially during the first two weeks. Until students feel supported, respected, and ready to take risks, it makes little sense to expect them to learn in-depth content. A worthwhile goal for a first-year course is the significant improvement of learning skills and experience with all phases of assessment.

Once the learning environment has been well established during the first course of a program, it is much easier to recreate it in subsequent courses. Thus, it behooves program directors to help faculty value and actively contribute to this environment. Teachers of some courses, such as statistics for economics majors, find it particularly difficult to motivate students to buy into the material. It is best to treat such courses as first-year courses, and not expect that the program's quality learning environment will automatically overcome the lack of student motivation.

The learning environment in an academic skills center is different from that of a class in that the former depends primarily on one-on-one interactions. Thus, it is necessary to establish a positive learning environment

with each student from the start. It is important to work through the Methodology for Creating a Quality Learning Environment with each student, rather than hastily jumping in to address the immediate problem the student presents. Most students who seek help from the center need help not just with course content but with specific learning skills. Unless the center personnel focus on assessing and teaching students those skills, they are treating only the symptom and not the underlying problem.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to creating a quality learning environment in an institution can be found in dealing with the faculty. In some programs, the leadership has emphasized student-oriented teaching within their professional development programs, urging faculty to work as teams to build quality learning environments. In other programs, innovative faculty who are guided by the principles enumerated above are considered to be troublemakers, largely because they raise student expectations regarding the quality of their learning experiences. It takes great courage on the part of faculty, especially those who are non-tenured, to persevere under these circumstances.

### Concluding Thoughts

Pressured by the demands inherent in designing courses and preparing classes, many faculty can end up neglecting or even totally ignoring the quality of the learning environment itself. Time spent incorporating the principles, considering the issues, and mastering the skills contained in this module will help streamline the teaching process and stimulate student learning growth. When attempting to implement the Methodology for Creating a Quality Learning Environment, the reader should proceed slowly, making use of supporting modules at each step. Much research has highlighted the importance of the learning environment, but we do not yet fully understand to what extent and in what ways this multi-dimensional factor affects student learning. By keeping that question in mind as we design, teach, assess, and evaluate our courses, we can report our experiences and expand the research base.

### References

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