Needs of learners can differ greatly depending on many contributing factors from the groups past experiences and knowledge to what their goals for professional development entail. Differences in learning situations however are most notable when you consider the dynamics of an undergraduate course to a group of Master level students. These groups have distinct differences that are important for instructors to consider within initial design, teaching, and evaluation. This reflection documents a process that was engaged in to consider how to support a learning situation for undergraduate students.

**Dynamics of the Course**

Course: Introduction to Exceptionalities

Course objectives focus on building awareness in supporting children with disabilities in general education settings and overview of high incidence disabilities. Majority of the students taking this course have intentions of teaching in general education settings, rather then a focus in the area special education. In this particular section of the course, the class was comprised of 28 students from elementary education, intermediated, and high school. Only two of the students were interested in a career in special education.

Presentation Topic: Overview of Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education

*Preparation for the Presentation*

Past experiences in teaching Masters level students had not prepared me for what I was about to embark in preparing to teach undergraduate students. To truly recognize
the differing needs of these two groups of students it is important to consider on their characteristics of learning are similar and how they differ.

Focusing alone on the content to be covered in any professional development experience will not be sufficient to support the objectives of the learning situation (Garmston, 2005). However, considerations related to content become essential when one considers the need for building a connection between the audience and the topic. Past experiences would support the fact that with Master level students, I have been able to assume to some level that students have some knowledge about working with young children and many times also have experience to support their understanding and foster further knowledge development. In other professional development situations outside of higher education settings, I am usually able to assume has had experiences with young children, but may or may not have limited knowledge about the topic I am presenting. Therefore, I build off of common experiences that take place in a classroom to support their interest in the topic. However, with undergraduate students assumptions of knowledge and experience should be done cautiously. For many students exposure to course content is usually highlighting information that students are being exposed to for the first time and may not have consider previously. Any assumptions about what students are being to class should only be done when an instructor is familiar with the students in the course.

Within initial planning of any higher education course, considerations should be made about the characteristics of adult learners and how these needs will be supported within the learning situation. Below lists the Characteristics of Adult Learners identified
by Knowles (1973) and how this considerations can be thought about in planning for presentations with undergraduate students.

1. Autonomous, Self-Directed, and Goal Oriented

   Lieb (1991) notes that adult learners build investment in a learning situation when they are able direct the learning situation in a way that allows them to meet their individual learning goals. However, during planning for my presentation I questioned if undergraduate students could direct the learning with very little exposure to a topic before hand. Also, how would learn motivation for learning support or interfere with their ability to engage in a learning process that was beneficial for them? If they were there only because of the required enrollment in the course, would they be motivated to find the benefit in acquiring knowledge about a topic? I really considered how I could build this investment from the start.

Addressing Self-Direct/Goal Oriented Characteristic of Adult Learners

   Knowing that many of these students would not be able to conceptualize what early intervention/early childhood special education was all about at the start of the class, I wanted to somehow to set the stage around the topic before giving them a chance to think about what they wanted to know or what goals they had for the session. At the beginning of the class session before I did an introduction or started presenting, I begin to play a video with various clips of early childhood settings. Everyone became very engaged in the watching the video. After the clip was done I directed questions to the group about what they had seen. Although very few answered this question, this gave me insight into the fact that this group was likely to not engage in large group discussion easily. Next, I had the students write down a few words that came to mind as they were
watching the videos and what questions they had about the topic. I had a few of the students share their questions which supported my understanding of their interest, as well as perception of the topic. I used this information throughout the class session to refer back to the questions they asked, as well as a way gain their attention as I was highlighting some of the topics I was going covering. I encouraged the students to think about the questions they developed as I continued on with the presentation so ensure they had the opportunity to get the answers they were seeked.

2. Connection to life experiences and knowledge, as well as relevancy

Connecting a topic to the experiences and knowledge of an audience in which an instructor/presenter is unfamiliar with can prove to be very challenging. However, for students to really develop their learning further, it is important to consider how this information is relevant to what they already know and what they may need to know for success in their future careers (Rosyne, 2001).

<Addressing Relevancy Oriented Learning and Connection to Characteristics of Adult Learners>

After reflecting back on how I planned for the presentation and the information I was to cover, I now realize that I did not consider fully ways to make connections between my audience and the topic. I contribute this to a few factors. First, much of my focus of the presentation was around the fact that I needed to approach preparation for differently for undergraduate students in which I consider what their investment would be in learning about the topic. Next, I was really focused on making sure the students knew the basis of the topic, but I did not think about the connections I would need to make. As I think about this aspect of my planning, I find that ironic because this is usually the
forefront of my considerations when I put together my presentations. However, during the presentation I was able to compensate for this lack of planning. During the session I linked back to the questions they shared, as well as to consider why it would be important to be familiar with this information at the level they were interested in teaching. In the end, I think this help to build a connection between the topic and the audience to make it relevant and meaningful to their future career experiences.

3. **Need a practical focus in learning:**

   Keeping a practical focus on the essential information of a topic will support students’ investment in the information being presented. Instructors who help students answer the following questions will support their motivation to engage in the learning process (Bain, 2004):

   - Why do I really need to know this?
   - How will this knowledge benefit me?

   **Addressing Practical Focus Characteristic of Adult Learners**

   Thinking about covering an entire overview of early intervention and early childhood special education in just one class session really proved to be a challenge during planning and during the presentation. Zoning in on the essential information I wanted the students to take away from the class supported a focus topic within the presentation. I incorporated a who, what, where type of format so that it was not too overwhelming and gave they a good overview of the most practical information I felt they would need to know about the topic.

4. **Adult learners need to be shown respect**
Not until I started this reflection, did I consider how I would have to show respect differently for undergraduate students from what I have done with Master level students. One way I try to show respect is by highlighting participants’ knowledge on the topic as well as praising them for their contributions during class. I did not expect that undergraduate students would contribute as many stories or questions as I have experienced with Master’s students and this proved true during my presentation.

At the end of the presentation, I provided the students with an evaluation that included a question about instructor’s demonstration of respect for students. The students all highly agreed with this statement, however, I am still unclear how this was conveyed to them. The ways in which I believe I was able to show respect was perhaps allowing them the opportunity if they wanted to ask questions or share their opinions. Beyond these aspects, I am not sure how I achieved a level of respect as a presenter.

Conclusion

Having the opportunity to teach a class of undergraduate students proved to be a very beneficial experience. I found that in my preparation I focused on critical aspects to support an effective session, but then forgot elements that have always been a staple of my planning and instruction. For example, I did not clearly think through how I was going to evaluate if the students meet my learning goals. I think this is because I was a guest presenter in another instructor’s course and the fact that my objectives were based on awareness level achievement, not necessarily acquisition of knowledge or skills. However, for any type of presentation evaluation of students’ knowledge and skill attainment should be on the forefront of planning (Bain, 2004).
Considering the need to keep them actively engaged during the presentation I believe contributed to the success of the presentation. Including personal experiences stories, a few case studies for them to review, as well as video clips really supported their understanding. I tried a new technique with this group that I found to work well. At the beginning of the presentation, I provide the students with an outline of the main points I was going to cover. I left several blanks within this outline that they would have to complete as we went along. Some of the information they could get from the PowerPoint, other pieces relied on them focusing on what I was saying. This really kept them engaged and helped me focused on what I was presented. At the end of the presentation, they had an outline of the main points on the topic.

Next Steps and Action Plan

1). I would like to have a stronger bank of evaluation methods for awareness level presentations. I plan on reviewing the resources I have available on evaluation methods to ensure I have a stronger understanding of which methods will achieve this understanding for me as an instructor.

2) I found it very interesting that a few students commented that they would have liked more active learning situations. Since this was one of my intentions during the presentation, overall I thought I created a good balance between lecture and activities. I plan on talking to the course instructor to get a better idea of how she has organized sessions with the group and see if I can find resources pertaining to active learning strategies geared towards undergraduate courses.

References:


