Uncovering the New Among Assumptions of the Known

As many graduate students enter higher education setting they bring with them experiences and assumptions about topics related to their field of study (Romer, 2003; Schon, 1987). For example, many students enroll in the Early Childhood Intervention Specialist program to meet licensure requirements for their current job position. The topics that are covered in their courses describe and represent what many of them encounter on a daily basis. At the same time, students with very little to no experience in the field are also participating in the courses. Both groups of students have similar learning needs, but more prominently differ in the way they conceptualize course content.

Problem Situation

In my experiences as an instructor, different learning needs and challenges are presented from students who are new or entering a different role in the field from the needs of students currently working in this area. For example, students new to the field may spend more time becoming familiar with terminology, understanding the basic points of a topic, and making a connection between the information presented in class to how it is used in the field without actually experiencing the reality of the process. Course content is many times novel for inexperienced students and perhaps more intriguing than for a student who day in and day out lives the covered topics. For many experienced students, they are looking for a course to provide opportunity for more in-depth learning, as well as time to consider how this information can enhance what they are currently doing; goals that have been confirmed through my discussions with students.

One of the challenges I have continued to face teaching experienced graduate students, is helping them to initially see the benefits of the courses they take. Students in
my classes, on occasion, have looked through the course syllabus, made assumptions about what they know is going to be covered, and then determine the benefit of the information before the topics are discussed. Over past year I have taught several courses that focus on topics such as collaboration, professional development, and instructional strategies; many of which of my students have experienced, thought about, or have implemented. This semester in particular, the course I am teaching focuses on IEP development where all but one of my students was familiar with the process of developing IEPs.

After we reviewed the syllabus and course requirements on the first day of class, I had one student comment that she was not as overwhelmed as she had anticipated due to the fact that she already knew how to create IEPs. While this statement was not surprising to me, I left feeling discouraged and thinking that perhaps a few of the students were not going to take the course seriously. I had assumed that some students would enter my class with experiences that lead them to believe they already knew everything about a topic and, therefore, from the start would label the course as unbeneficial. For a few students my prediction proved true; however, other experienced students found benefit in reviewing and really considering the information that was being presented.

Addressing the Situation

After the first night of class, I took the opportunity to consider what I needed to do as an instructor to rectify the situation and ensure that all of my students would walk away from the course viewing the experience as beneficial. First, I knew that I had to build a connection between the content covered in the course and benefit that could be achieved. Accomplishing such a goal, however, was harder then I had anticipated. Many
of my students already had a personal connection with the content and therefore solely focusing on building a connection was not going to be beneficial. Connections students developed needed to highlight the fact that the information I was going to present would provide them with a new perspective on the topics that would prove beneficial within their professional role.

Assumptions that students bring with them to a course can prove to be a challenge as instructors look to reveal a new perspective (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). What I had not considered, but now understand, was the fact that my students’ assumptions opened up many opportunities for me to meet their needs as adult learners and support the process of building connections. Focusing on the work of Knowles (1973), adult learners who bring experience and knowledge about a topic to a learning situation allows an instructor to build on their understanding to make a connection between the learner and the content. Information can then be presented through the lens of practicality and relevance by relating the content back to the individual’s real life experiences. While I wish I had consider fully the basics of adult learning prior to covering the topic, I do feel that I met some of my students learning needs while the same time missing opportunities to address other aspects sufficiently (e.g., goal oriented learning).

Before we started talking about IEP development, I wanted to give my students the opportunity to think about what they really knew about the topic compared to what they assumed was understood; a perspective and way of thinking that I wanted them to continue as were considered IEP development further. I started out our class session with the following statement, *Not only of knowing and applying, but to what extent do we understand and address quality.* I had my students think about the statement, write down
what it meant to them, and then I asked them consider the statement related to IEP development. While this was not the first time I guided my students to consider a level of quality in the topics we discussed, this was the first time I was able to see an impact from this type of activity. Previously, I had shared with my students that I would present them with information about best practices and quality guidelines related to the topics we were going to cover; in addition, we would also examine what actually occurs in practice. I had thought that this discussion would highlight benefits of the intended course focus; however, I don’t think this was achieved for every student. After having the students think more about a level of quality compared to what they have been able to achieve in practice, I believe, supported their ability to think critically about IEP development. Reflection builds strong opportunities for students to engage in self-guided learning, rather then the instructor solely supporting the process (Brookfield, 1995). In return, the connections made are more meaningful.

Future Considerations

As an instructor, I don’t believe I have fully supported my students in considering and reflecting on their knowledge about a topic before moving into a discussion and presentation of what I want them to know. This semester, I have incorporated into my course design time for personal reflection and action planning after each class session. Students have found this time beneficial to consider what they have learned or will take away from the class. By also including time for reflection before covering course content students may a) consider what they know about a topic b) outline questions they have related to the topic, c) prepare for what they need to focus on during the lecture, and e) consider what they must get out of the session for them to find benefit. Engaging in a
process of reflection before the class discussion will allow them to clearly plan their learning and what must be accomplished as a result of their time in the course. Many adults enter learning situations with goals in mind. Through a reflective process, students will be able to focus their goals to guide the learning process more effectively (Lieb, 1991).

**Conclusions**

Building a connection between the students and the course content is not enough to ensure the information presented is going to be beneficial. Helping and guiding students to uncover how this information relates to what they know and how it has fostered a new understanding is critical (Bain, 2004). Supporting students in identifying their assumptions from the start will hopefully allow them to move beyond what they think they know and consider what they should understand and be able to do.
References


