

Educational Support Cell (ESC)/TLDE Tips & Strategies

Critical Factors in Building an Optimal Learning Environment

To access all parts of this series, visit:
<http://soc.mil/ESC>

Over the past three months, we have been discussing considerations for building an optimal learning environment. We started with defining what such a thing looks like (Tips 15.6.1), spent one edition of our publication discussing Training and Education (15.7.2), delved into foundational perspectives such as Authenticity, Purposefulness, and Engagement (15.8.3), and are going to wrap up with this look at critical factors.

We define critical factors as elements that should run through all learning environments. Can you craft a lesson without these? Sure. Will that lesson resonate with your learners? Maybe. Will the lesson be effective (i.e. transfer into long-term memory/be “learned”)? Maybe not. These three critical factors ensure that learning occurs. If you are a high-achiever and want your students to be as well, weave all three throughout your materials and methods.

Relevance.

To truly make a learning environment effective, you need to meet your students “where they are” and take them to “where you want them to be.” This means pre-assessment - taking the time to assess your students (formally or informally) to find out their true skills and knowledge. Then, using this information, as well as their prior experiences, as your starting point, the instructor can properly design a learning environment for optimal training and education. Remember, the relevancy of the lesson to the mission is defined as “authentic” (see Tips, 15.8.3), but getting to know your students and what they already know and what they already can do makes the learning relevant to them.

An instructor can maximize conditions for relevancy in many ways including:

- Conduct a brief survey of the class on Day 1 (or before) to determine who your learners are and what experiences/careers they’ve had.
- Use the results to call on students to share their experiences as appropriate-- lending another perspective to the content/skills you are teaching
- Prior to teaching a concept or skill, ask if anyone has experience with the content.
 - Experienced people can be given the post-assessment, and then provided with extension activities to maximize their skills.
 - Experienced people who show mastery can be used as peer-to-peer instructors.
 - Experienced people can also be utilized as small group leaders, responsible for ensuring the whole group understands or can accomplish the necessary skills.

Remember, we are dealing with guys and gals who have tons of real-life experiences already. Let’s use what they know and can do as jumping off points for what we want them to become.

The ESC provides support for the uniform application of USAJFKSWCS educational processes across the Institution to include:

-Support to Curriculum & Instruction [Courses and Instructors];

-Support to Leadership & Professional Development Initiatives;

-Support to the development and implementation of program evaluation and assessment systems; and

-Support to the design and implementation of SOF Career Pathways.

For more information, contact Mr. Geoff Jones at jonesgeo@soc.mil, (910) 396-2518.

Educational Support Cell (ESC)/TLDE Tips & Strategies

Accountability

Designing your classroom to maximize student accountability is another critical factor for an optimal environment. Holding students accountable is a function of the methodologies you put in place in your class just as much as how you design the instruction.

- Place responsibility on students to do something with the new information or skills beyond just regurgitating a traditional check-on-learning—teach it, solve a problem with it, research more about it, use it in a different context, create a “how-to” guide for it.
- Require students to read and research a topic *prior* to it being taught and then have them discuss what they’ve learned and/or teach portions of the content themselves.

Remember, we are not only dealing with adult learners, but our students are who put the “special” in “special operations”. Many will be responsible for teaching indigenous people shortly after they leave our tutelage. We must set the example of how to teach and how to facilitate learning in everything we do. Get them in the practice and habit of doing so.

Motivation (Instilling Curiosity)

Explore ways to peak students’ curiosity or desire to know or to do. For starters, begin each class or class segment with some sort of an activity or question that peaks curiosity—an *activator*. Research has shown that when curiosity is peaked, the brain is more primed to soak in information. Additionally, the process of fostering inquiry has been shown to release dopamine—the “feel good” chemical—into the brain thus equating learning with a rewarding experience. In the book, *We’re Born to Learn* (Smilkstein, 2011), the author, introduces the concept of the 7 magic words: “**See if you can figure this out**”. She suggests that the human brain can’t resist a jump start when challenged with this.

Activators at the start of a lesson can assist with this and can take many forms.

- A vignette to consider
- A problem or situation to be solved
- A humorous video to relate
- A question to ponder
- A quotation to discussion

It’s the question that stimulates curiosity—being told the answer quells curiosity before it can even get going.

Willingham (2010).
Why Don’t Students Like School?

Research is not clear on how long the peaking of curiosity keeps the brain active, so use active methods of instruction throughout the day to keep your students engaged. Life-long learners dedicate themselves to continuous learning, education, and improvement when they are motivated - *when they are curious* – not because of an order or a memo.

At the end of the day, we all want to optimally prepare our students for what lays ahead. Researched methods lay out for us what comprises an optimal learning environment, and the ESC is here to assist you in the design and implementation of training and education that involves the components and critical factors for consideration in creating optimal learning experiences for all SWCS learners.

For additional assistance or to further this discussion, contact the Educational Support Group (ESC) at TLDE.