

As shown in the diagram on the right, the individual teacher and learner interact within, and are influenced by, the context of each learning experience.

You can hardly influence the wider environments of the Faculty and University, but you can set up the circumstances in your class to encourage each student to learn. Another page on this site discusses the importance of knowing Who Your Learners Are when you interact with them and discuss things in class.

Theories of learning, too, can inform what you ask students to do in your classes and how you engage and motivate them. The list of theories relevant to university learning that can help you understand the different ways your students learn is almost endless - see the Learning Theories website.



## Surface and deep learning

Individual students will react differently to any given learning experience - some will stand back and attempt to uncritically rote learn whatever is presented by the teacher; others may look for the deeper meaning of the interaction and see how it fits with what they know. They will challenge what is presented critically and ask questions. These approaches to learning are referred to as **surface** and **deep** approaches.

In any given learning situation, each student can choose either to approach the experience superficially or with more critical awareness, and this approach is influenced by, among other things, the clarity of course expectations, teaching methods and assessment, as well as the capabilities of the teacher. You, as teacher, can choose to structure your classes to encourage a deep approach. This table summarises the characteristics and factors influencing student approaches to their learning.

## Learning styles and preferences

Students learn in a variety of ways: by seeing and hearing, working alone and in groups, reasoning logically and intuitively, memorising, visualising and modelling. Some prefer pictures to texts. Others prefer concrete before abstract.

Teaching methods also vary: some teachers lecture, others demonstrate or discuss; some focus on principles and others on applications; some emphasise memory and others understanding. How much students learn in a class

depends, among other things, on the match between their learning style preferences and the instructor's teaching style.

An awareness of the different types of learners likely to be in your class can inform how you present material, design activities and sequence your explanations. Equally, an awareness of your own learning preferences will help you to understand how you learned. There are online tools to help measure and identify those different preferences.

Teaching that better matches learning preferences is more likely to engage and motivate your students.

For information on different university learning contexts, see this [article by Ramsden](#).

### Empathising with your students

In this video, Elizabeth Tancred from Medical Sciences talks about empathising with students to enhance their learning.

ELIZABETH Building Empathy

## Motivating and engaging students

Most students (and their families) have invested large amounts of time and energy to gain access to university. They arrive excited and ready to engage with their chosen courses. Sometimes, however, along the way they are discouraged and lose interest and motivation to continue with their studies. This loss of engagement can arise from:

- internal conditions such as health, confidence, poor self esteem and time management and loneliness, or
- external conditions such as course structure, teacher dissatisfaction, disappointing grades, or any number of other distractions.

As teachers we have an obligation to acknowledge and emphasise their initial interest and motivation to learn and then help them to maintain it through to completion of their course.

Individuals are motivated by different forces, but some essential influences on student motivation and engagement are:

- course design that addresses the needs and expectations of students
- teaching that inspires and rewards commitment and restates the purpose of study
- inclusion of student individuality and diversity
- opportunities to work with others
- timely and effective feedback from teachers and other students
- being active rather than passive learners.

(Source: Bok, D. (2006). *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**Chickering and Gamson** (1987) summarise the principles of good practice simply as:

- student-staff contact
- cooperation
- active learning
- prompt feedback
- time on task
- high expectations
- respect.

For more information see **Motivating and Engaging Students.**

## **Understanding Learners**

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