

# LEARNING MATTERS at LINGNAN

For internal circulation only



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From the Editor:

*Learning Matters at Lingnan are short papers that aim to promote a dialogue on teaching and learning. I encourage all staff to consider this as a vehicle for sharing thoughts on educational issues as they might affect us at the University. If you feel you have something which might be appropriate for inclusion in an issue of this publication, then please forward it to the TLC. I would be delighted if staff (and not only academic staff) from outside the Teaching and Learning Centre were to be prominent or even occasional contributors.*

## What Counts for Good Teaching?

Teaching and learning are both sides of the same coin. To talk about good teaching, we need to think in terms of good learning. The following is my own list of eight principles of effective higher learning that are well-supported by research. My 'list' isn't meant to be definitive or exhaustive. You may find many of the ideas familiar and commonplace, but I think they are worth mentioning to remind us of the solid principles to teach by.

### Principle 1

**Active Learning is more effective than passive learning.**

*"What I hear, I forget; What I see, I remember; What I do, I understand." — a Chinese adage*

Implications/applications:

Students learn best when they are asked to do things. They won't learn much if they are just made to read or listen passively. Good teaching always requires active participation by the students rather than passive receiving of information. Therefore, it is always advisable to build into the teaching/learning system relevant activities, exercises or questions. These activities require students to become involved in their own learning.

### Principle 2

**Learning requires focused attention, and awareness of the importance of what is to be learned.**

*"The true art of memory is the art of attention." — Samuel Johnson*

Implications/applications:

Remember, student's concentration spans are short. According to research, one's concentration will wane after some 10-15 mins. of instruction. So it's essential to keep students focused by pointing out some of the major landmarks, by writing a list of the five key points in your lecture on the board before class, for example.

### Principle 3

**To be remembered, new information must be meaningfully connected to prior knowledge, and it must first be remembered in order to be learned.**

*"Thinking means connecting things, and stops if they cannot be connected." — G.K. Chesterton*

Implications/applications:

Use examples, cases and metaphors to turn abstract concepts into more concrete learning experiences. Always assist explanations by referring to some real data, analogies, and illustrations. To help students organize concepts, it's important to relate things together and establish link between topics. Students will learn better if they can see relationships throughout the instruction. Always try to relate what is to be learned to previously learned material.

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**Information organized in personally meaningful ways is more likely to be retained, learned, and**

## Principle 4

used.

*“Learners construct understanding. They do not simply mirror and reflect what they are told or what they read.” — Von Glaserfeld*

Implications/applications:

Humans are extraordinary pattern seekers. Allow time for students to think through the concepts. Learning will become more effective if they can attach their own personal meaning to what is presented and relate their own experience to it.

## Principle 5

**Learners need feedback on their learning, early and often, to learn well; to become independent.**

*“Supposing is good, but finding out is better.” — Mark Twain*

Implications/applications:

Don't assume that students understand, ask. Try asking them to jot down what the 'muddiest point' was in a particular reading, tutorial, or lecture, then respond to the most common 'muddy points' in your next class.

## Principle 6

**The ways in which learners are assessed and evaluated powerfully affect the ways they study and learn.**

*“The best way to get students to learn something is to tell them it's going to be in the exam.” — any teacher*

Implications/applications:

One way to improve learning, then, is to make sure our test questions require the kind of thinking and learning we wish to promote, and that students know — at least generally — what those questions will be.

## Principle 7

**Mastering a skill or body of knowledge takes great amounts of time and effort.**

*“There are some things that cannot be learned quickly, and time, which is all we have, must be paid heavily for their acquiring.” — Ernest Hemingway*

Implications/applications:

Unplug all the TVs! No more night-time partying! Seriously, though, students need to know how long it actually takes to attain mastery in their field. Give students a simple form on which they can log all the times they study for a week and indicate how productively they used each block of time.

**Interaction between teachers and learners is one of the most powerful factors in promoting learning; interaction among learners is another.**

## Principle 8

*“Achievement is a we thing, not a me thing, always the product of many heads and hands.” — J.W. Atkinson*

Implications/applications:

If you want students to cooperate effectively with other students, first, challenge them with tasks that groups can carry out more effectively than individuals can; second, provide guidelines and guidance for group work; third, de-emphasize competition among individuals for grades and approval. Meaningful and positive interactions require mutual trust.

Concluding remarks:

Of course, whether the above list should include four, eight, or ten principles is not important. The purpose of this list is to encourage some kind of questioning and dialogue. It's to invite teachers to think, talk, and perhaps even read more about the connections between what we know from research on learning and how we practice teaching.

One final caveat: Given the range of human variation, there are bound to be exceptions to nearly every generalization about learning. It's up to individual teachers to determine which principles apply to whom, when, where, and how.

Maureen Tam