

II. Course Planning -- Management

Chapter 4 — Knowing Your Students

If there can be one characterization of FSU students, it is their diversity. Race, religion, disability, sexual preference, academic entry level, aptitude, socio-economic status, age, and marital status are all factors that impact how a student learns. Your expectations, goals, and teaching style are based on your experiences, which might be quite different from those of your students. Understanding the various learning preferences of students and the differences between you and your students and among your students can help you plan your course to take advantage of the diverse population at FSU rather than letting it be an obstacle to student learning.

- **The FSU Student: A Brief Sketch**
- **Diversity and the Academic Culture**
- **Teaching and Learning Styles**
- **Other Factors Affecting Student Learning**
- **Resources on Diversity and Teaching and Learning Styles**

The FSU Student: A Brief Sketch

Breakdown of the Fall 2005 Student Body

Distribution by Gender		
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Male	17,216	43.4%
Female	22,436	56.6%
Total	39,652	100.0%

Distribution by Race		
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
White	28,081	70.8%
Black	4,490	11.3%
Hispanic	3,758	9.5%
Asian	1,176	3.0%
Native American	148	0.4%
Non-resident Alien	1,349	3.4%
Not Reported	650	1.6%
Total	39,652	100.0%

(From ***The Florida State University Fact Sheet***)

Diversity and the Academic Culture

Aspects of an instructor's personal identity such as race, religion, socio-economic background, and learning style are important as the teacher tries to relate to students and instill in them an interest in a field. Good instructors not only convey a body of knowledge to their students, but they enable learning by connecting their own experience with their students' experiences of the world.

You bring your own physical appearance and culture into the class at the same time your students do. Students who perceive you as belonging to a particular racial or ethnic group and who then draw initial conclusions from that classification can affect the class atmosphere from the first day either negatively or positively.

One assistant professor at FSU faced with perceived diversity issues in the classroom put it this way:

An issue that concerns me greatly has to do with issues of gender and race/ethnicity in student-teacher interaction. Although some of my students have shown respect (and even admiration) toward me as a professor and as a person, other students have challenged my authority and have openly questioned my knowledge. I wonder to what extent the combination of my gender and ethnicity colors students' perception of my teaching.

The best way to minimize the likelihood that your own perceived diversity will affect student behavior is to establish a "safe" environment in which the class can discuss diversity. Even in a large lecture class, a safe environment can be encouraged through a statement in your syllabus about your awareness of diversity issues and your desire for tolerance in the classroom.

Invisible Diversity

Invisible differences such as political opinion, sexual orientation, teaching and learning styles, regionalism, class, family history, and religion impact the learning environment. Being aware that there are many issues not immediately apparent that influence how students respond to the course materials and to you as an instructor will help you avoid inadvertently alienating students.

The assumption that diversity has only to do with the students in the classroom can make it hard for an instructor to recognize personal hidden assumptions. This may in turn hinder proper learning in class, as the instructor unwittingly slants the choice of reading materials or the direction and form of class discussions. Any choice of class materials presupposes an exclusion of other materials; any organization of those materials into a coherent syllabus involves decisions about which elements to emphasize -- being aware of your own presuppositions and assumptions will help you avoid the kinds of slant in your class that can alienate students or unnecessarily strain your relations with them.

The diversity in your classroom can serve as a stimulus for intellectual inquiry, both for you and for your students. Seen as an opportunity rather than as a handicap, the diversity of your class can facilitate the kinds of change that a university education is designed to promote. A motivated teacher can challenge hidden assumptions in the classroom, and provide equal and fair access for students from all walks of life.

Age: Widening or Closing the Gap

Younger instructors who are close in age to the average student sometimes fear they will fail to command attention and respect; however, most students respect instructors who come to class well prepared and behave respectfully toward students. The advantage of being close in age to your students is that you will have had the same cultural backgrounds in regard to politics, important events, art, music, and television.

Instructors who are four or more years older than their students, however, have the opposite situation. Initially, they are perhaps able to gain students' respect more quickly, but for ongoing rapport, which facilitates learning, it is important to be able to speak to your students about their culture and put the major topics of your field into the context of their lives. Here, you might take the opportunity to become a student of your students by educating yourself about their experiences of the world. Some knowledge of current interests can mean the difference between being able to teach and to interest them in your field or presenting them with material that seems irrelevant.

Learning about your students' interests is relatively easy.

- Read the *FSView* to keep in touch with local events that are student oriented.
- Engage students in discussions about what music they listen to, what magazines they read, or what shows they watch on TV.
- View a television show or film and try to find ways to incorporate its content into your class.



Suggestions

- In a small class, an effective way to learn about your students is to require a 30-60 minute office visit for each student, near the beginning of the term.
- Establish an e-mail list that provides students with an opportunity to communicate both with you and other students in the class.
- In a large class, occasionally ask a select group of students to answer anonymously a question about the course and leave it for you on their way out. You can choose the students based

upon the last digit of their FSU ID. Eventually, you will have solicited feedback from the entire class.

- You do not need to make the students' interests the focus of your class discussions, but your understanding of their interests and occasionally incorporating those interests into the course material can make your material relevant to their lives and be a spark that ignites the students' enthusiasm for your discipline.

Teaching and Learning Styles

There have been many attempts at defining different types of teaching and learning styles. The Myers Briggs Type Indicator represents one common set of styles.

Without getting into the details of personality-type inventories, or their usefulness to educators, suffice it to say that there are individual differences represented by personality types. Two personality types you might recognize are the introverted and the extroverted.

The value in using personality-type questionnaires may be in realizing that there are differences among people, and so we cannot expect everyone to react in the same way, like the same things, participate with the same enthusiasm, etc., while at the same time recognizing that each one is perfectly capable of learning the knowledge and content of the course.

Some educators, such as Felder (1993), have made a career of studying how teachers teach and how students learn. One set of characteristics he highlights is the difference between inductive learners and deductive learners. Inductive learners prefer to begin with data or experience, and infer the principles behind them. Deductive learners prefer to start with abstractions or principles and deduce the data. He states that most college classes are taught in a deductive manner, because experienced professors are deductive learners. However, he says, most students think inductively.

No student learns in just one way or another, and one of the goals of education is to expand students' ways of thinking. However, it is helpful to remember that learning styles differ, and that your students may not learn in the same way you do. Thinking about multiple ways to help students learn the knowledge and skills in your class can go a long way to meeting the needs of students with different learning styles.

Other Factors Affecting Student Learning

John Carroll, an Educational Psychologist and Language Professor, researched five variables that affected language learning:

1. Perseverance
2. Time Allowed
3. Quality of Instruction
4. Aptitude
5. General Ability to Learn

All these factors, he said, determined one of two things: the amount of time a student needed to learn something, or the amount of time they spent in learning. Carroll represented the relationship among the variables in a formula.

$$\text{Degree of Learning} = f \frac{\text{Time Spent}}{\text{Time Needed}}$$

Time Spent was affected by the student's perseverance or motivation and the time allowed; and the Time Needed was affected by the other three variables: Aptitude, Quality of Instruction, and the student's General Ability. Improving learning, as Carroll sees it, involves increasing the time students spend, or decreasing the time they need. Obviously, some of these variables are more under control of the instructor than others. It isn't likely that an instructor is going to increase a student's aptitude for a subject by what he does, for instance, since aptitude is a function of the student's past learning.

What can we take from Carroll that might help us when we are looking at student characteristics?

- Some students are going to find your subject easier than others because some will already know more about it (i.e., they have an aptitude for what you are teaching).
- Some students will have better learning skills than others, represented by memorization skills, study skills, or other general abilities related to learning that they have acquired or developed over the years.
- You can reduce the time students will need by improving the quality of your instruction (only one of five variables), and making resources more available (time allowed). (Technology can help here as it not only makes content available, but also increases the opportunity for communication with the instructor and other learners.)
- It might be possible to increase the learner's motivation to spend more time on course material by making the curriculum relevant and satisfying.

In summary, learning is a complex process affected by many different personality and environmental factors. Being aware of these factors, and considering them during the course planning process, can go a long way in making instruction more effective.



Resources on Diversity and Teaching and Learning Styles

Books/Articles

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- Zinn, Howard. (1994). *You can't be neutral on a moving train*. Boston: Beacon Press.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

[On to Chapter 5: Managing Students and the Classroom Climate](#)