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## Engaging learners: Challenges, strategies, and classroom assessment.

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## ***Engaging Learners: Challenges, Strategies, and Classroom Assessment***

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**Abstract:** Challenges of engaging students on real world culturally sensitive topics in a general education transcultural course are the essence of this presentation. Strategies used to create a safe environment in which students are free to state beliefs and opinions also hold students accountable to listen and respect other viewpoints. To this end, utilization of ground rules on civility, evidence-based teaching principles, and classroom assessment findings will be explored in relation to selection of teaching methods.

**Issue being addressed:** Challenges of student engagement

### **Objective 1 Discuss challenges of student engagement on multicultural and diversity topics.**

Challenges of engaging students arise for all faculty in their teaching from the beginning of course development to the dynamics of student-faculty interaction. The challenge of engagement is ever present in both the traditional classroom and distributive learning environments. Faculty readily recognize the cognitive domain with its challenge of stimulating student interest in the subject. To this end, faculty must strive to connect subject matter to reality-based situations relevant to the real world (Nilson, 2010; Knowles, 1990; Whitehead, Weiss, & Tappen, 2010). On the other hand, often overlooked is the necessity of targeting the affective domain with its challenges of exploring sensitive issues, emotions, and feelings (Nilson, 2010).

### **Objective 2 Identify ground rules for creating a safe learning environment.**

In the teaching of a transcultural, general education course in which sensitive topics often surface, student engagement cognitively and affectively is a necessity in order for the student to achieve course outcomes, as well as, valued learning. For this to happen, it is critical that the faculty establish a safe learning environment. Setting ground rules at the onset of the course greatly aides in creating a safe environment in which the affective domain may play an essential role in engaging students, and thereby, expanding the depth of learning. Ground rules must incorporate self responsibility, accountability to others, confidentiality, mutual respect, and safety for openness, self disclosure, and diversity of views. The creation of a safe environment makes it possible to push the boundaries in exploring values, norms, and cultural diversity.

Consistently, students themselves present a diversity of cultures. To explore cultures effectively, it is imperative for the student first to develop a self awareness of his or her own cultural background (Purnell & Paulanka, 2008; Giger & Davidhizer, 2008; Spector, 2009). Such self exploration sets the stage for holistically exploring the cultures of other peoples. Select teaching strategies, strategically applied, further enhance student engagement to expand awareness, develop sensitivity, and begin to understand and interact with people from diverse backgrounds.

**Objective 3 Identify multiple teaching strategies evolving from evidence-based adult learning principles for self and multicultural exploration.** Three assignments were designed to engage students in active learning in this transcultural course. The first assignment involves self exploration in a “My Story”, an activity in which students gain deeper self awareness as they explore their own history and cultural background.

Collaborative learning with peers in small groups is required in the second project. Each group selects a culture to present to the class in a creative manner. Following the presentation, the group submits a summary profile to the instructor detailing the strategies used for engaging the student audience. The groups not presenting participate in any activities directed by the presenters, follow-up discussion, and collectively write a summary profile of major learning outcomes. Beyond student led discussion, skillful faculty management of discussions to maximize active participation is of utmost importance with discussion being defined as "a productive exchange of viewpoints, a collective exploration of issues" (Nilson, 2010, p. 127).

Finally, the third assignment is completed individually with the expectation that students build on prior learning from the first two assignments. The “Cultural Interview/Assessment” requires the student to locate a person from a culture different than his or her own, use the evidence-based interview questions provided in the course, and apply socio-cultural theoretical principles to the analysis of the findings (Purnell & Paulanka, 2008; Neuman & Fawcett, 2011). A brief oral summary report is given in class.

**Objective 4 Examine classroom assessment findings on learning preferences.**

Preferred learning preferences can be a determining factor when considering what teaching strategies would have higher degrees of effectiveness for engaging students. “Teaching to different learning styles is a major factor of equity” (Nilson, 2010, p.229). Classroom assessment of preferred learning methods has been initiated and is ongoing. Preliminary findings support educational methodologies embedded in this transcultural course.

**Outcomes.** The processes used to engage students in meaningful, relevant, real world learning have been examined. An evidence-based instructional design was featured in which adult learning principles and various teaching/learning strategies were applied. Responsibilities, accountability, and mutual respect rest with both faculty and students. Motivation to learn and ultimate engagement must come from within the student, while faculty assumes responsibility to assure a safe environment to explore sensitive topics and differing viewpoints on real world matters. Citing the words of Nilson (2010), the authors’ anticipated outcomes are to "induce genuine fascination with the subject, a sense of relevance and applicability to life and the world, a sense of accomplishment in mastering it, and a sense of calling to it" (p. 51). This vision can only be experienced in partnership between faculty/student, students/students, and students/people from diverse backgrounds. Only then will the educational goals of expanding awareness, sensitivity, and beginning cultural competence be realized.

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