One of the first tasks for a facilitator of a class or workshop is to discover, validate, and classify the learning needs of the participants. This module describes common learner needs, explains why it is important to recognize these needs at the start of a learning experience, and outlines techniques for eliciting and validating them. Some recommendations are also provided for merging learner needs with instructor goals.

What are Learner Needs?

The needs of a learner represent the gap between what the learner wants to get out of the learning experience and his or her current state of knowledge, skill, and enthusiasm (Noessel, 2003). Table 1 identifies potential learning needs in four different domains: cognitive, social, affective, and psychomotor. When facilitators establish a new learning environment, it is important that they assess preparedness of participants in all four domains (3.1.3 Methodology for Creating a Quality Learning Environment). For a more detailed discussion of learning skills within each domain, see the Cognitive Domain (2.3.4), Social Domain (2.3.5), and Affective Domain (2.3.6) modules. For more information on managing different learning styles that affect learning outcomes, see 3.1.4 Establishing Initial Respect Without Prejudging.

Why Identify Learner Needs?

Each learner is unique, and brings to the learning situation his or her own different learning style, knowledge set, pool of past experiences, and motivation. In learner-centered instruction, it is important for instructors to consider the level of knowledge and skill development attained by the learners prior to instruction (Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2004). The best way to get this information is by asking the learners themselves. To determine the readiness of participants for learning, the instructor/facilitator should decide, prior to the first class or workshop, how to collect and use data on learner needs. The process of collecting and playing back these data can raise the level of participant excitement about the learning experience. The instructor can use this knowledge throughout the rest of the educational process to customize instructional strategies to enable learners to reach shared educational objectives (3.2.3 Facilitation Methodology).

Eliciting and Validating Learner Needs

There is no single best way to gather information about learner needs. In many situations, instructors can anticipate learner needs based on their prior knowledge about learners who have completed similar instructional sessions. The techniques described below can uncover valuable supplemental information on learner needs in a minimal amount of time. Some of these techniques are more effective than others at shaping learners’ expectations toward the instruction.

Analyze the syllabus—As instructors review the course syllabus, they can ask students to consider the general skills and content knowledge they will need to successfully achieve the outcomes of the course. Instructors can also invite students to ask questions about the course and to express any concerns about prerequisite skills. An outline for this activity is given in Foundations of Learning by Krumsieg & Baehr (2000).

Table 1  Examples of Learner Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Affective</th>
<th>Psychomotor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognize good questions.</td>
<td>Communicate with peers.</td>
<td>Attain goals.</td>
<td>Be in a comfortable setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask good questions.</td>
<td>Give and receive support.</td>
<td>Nurture positive attitudes.</td>
<td>Have transportation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get help from experts.</td>
<td>Experience external motivation.</td>
<td>Be open to feedback from others.</td>
<td>Have child care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use learning resources.</td>
<td>Manage time and tasks.</td>
<td>Understand motivations of others.</td>
<td>Engage in appropriate and timely demonstrations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Free write—Instructors may ask students to write about a topic that will provide insight into their attitudes, expectations, and motivation for the course (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). Instructors may validate learners’ needs with short handwritten notes on their papers. These comments may also be aggregated and presented to the class to encourage students to appreciate the range of responses and the diverse viewpoints present in the class. This activity provides an opening for the instructor to comment on what goals are likely to be met or not met during the instructional period.

Develop group vision—Instructors can probe learner needs by having students individually list their positive and negative experiences in prior courses. Teams of students then refine these lists, synthesizing similar items. The facilitator generates a list of the team results on the board and responds to the list by indicating what from the positive list he or she can accept as suggestions and what from the negative list he or she will avoid. This provides a good opportunity to point out how the course syllabus speaks to these needs.

Survey—It can be useful to construct a survey to explore students’ learning preferences such as learning style, their prior experience, and their motivation to learn the subject matter (Davis, 2001). It is useful to conduct surveys before or at the beginning of workshops in which the learners might be at very different skill or experience levels.

Identify lessons learned—Students often enjoy reading and responding to tips collected from former students about what content was most challenging and what learning strategies were most effective. This can also be helpful in addressing social and affective domain issues that might otherwise impede learning (Provitera-McGlynn, 2001).

Publicly record and synthesize—This technique can be applied in situations in which groups or individuals share goals and expectations. As instructors or facilitators compile responses, they have an opportunity to rephrase and classify learner needs into broad categories. During this process the instructor/facilitator can help students reflect on what might be required for them to meet their stated goals.

Pre-assess—At any time during a course or workshop, the instructor or facilitator may conduct a pre-assessment at the beginning of a new learning segment to determine whether the participants are ready cognitively, socially, affectively, or physically. This assessment can be done in class or as homework, and can be completed individually or in teams.

Aligning Learner Needs with Instructor Goals

Instructors’ language and facilitation skills are important in merging their own goals for instruction with learner needs. Ideally, instructors want to meet their goals and to satisfy the learning needs of the students. To help connect their own goals and expectations for students with those of the students themselves, instructors may choose to publish their instructional goals in the course syllabus or workshop agenda and analyze it using the technique described above. By discussing results from learner needs analysis and comparing those findings with the rationale for course design, facilitators ensure that they accurately inventory learner needs and that they give timely feedback to participants.

Concluding Thoughts

Identifying and acknowledging learner needs is a powerful facilitation skill that can ally instructors and students at the start of any learning journey. The insights gained can be used to customize instructional strategies that enable learners to reach and exceed personal as well as curricular objectives. While it is easier to elicit and reconcile cognitive and psychomotor learner needs, outstanding facilitation also weaves social and affective needs into instruction (3.2.2 Profile of a Quality Facilitator). Achieving early consensus on a small set of skills most relevant to a course or workshop provides a powerful framework for connecting course content, learner needs, and constructive interventions.

References


