



A Concise Guide to Improving Student Learning: Six Evidence-Based Principles and How to Apply Them

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Book Review

Tags: assessing learning | Learning Designs | student learning

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The authors of this brief resource provide educators with six of the most important principles to emerge from recent research on human learning. Taken together, these principles provide the elements of a framework for effective constructivist pedagogy, particularly in higher education:

1. Desirable difficulties increase long-term retention (5-7)
2. Meaningful and spaced repetition increases retention (12-13)
3. Emotion and relevance deepen learning (15-16)
4. Multisensory instruction deepens learning (25-26)
5. Small groups engage students (32-33)
6. Formative assessment or low-stakes evaluation strengthens retention (43-46)

The authors offer a series of concrete “instructional applications” as well as an annotated summary of a few of the most salient research studies relevant to each principle. Interleaved with their treatment of the principles, concrete applications, and annotated bibliographies, the authors provide outlines of workshop sessions that address specific instructional techniques funded by the various principles under discussion. The main body of this highly practical book ends at page 60. Three appendices (on course design, lectures, and class discussions) bring the book to page 78. The final quarter of the book is taken up with extensive bibliographic references.

The book has several strengths. It harvests a burgeoning body of literature on human learning

in a highly accessible manner. It backs up its claims with relevant research. Specific instructional techniques and ideas that have solid grounding in empirical research on learning are also offered. Ample bibliographical references appear at every turn. Useful guidelines for improving student learning positively emerge from the book.

The weaknesses of the book arise from its strengths. The authors' treatment of the six principles, while insightful, come across as thin. Explicating and unpacking each principle in five or six pages as opposed to the one or two pages given to the task in the book would have aided the process of internalizing the concepts involved. The practical applications in each section have a great deal of merit, but the added interspersed workshop materials make the book somewhat difficult to follow. I would have preferred a less cluttered organizational structure. While I appreciate the authors' intentions to offer a clear, pithy, and brief resource for faculty who want to make the shift toward more learning-centered pedagogy, the book as a whole comes across as a series of edited outlines for in-service presentations at faculty meetings. A lot less bibliographical material and a lot more explanation of key concepts would likely help the newcomer to discover the way of thinking about learning and teaching advocated in the book.

This book might serve as a useful resource for faculty members who want to move away from the traditional orientation of the "sage on the stage" who suffers from "content tyranny" and toward a more engaged pedagogy, but only for those motivated by the books' remarkable brevity. It would work well as a brief introduction for doctoral students who have to take a required course on teaching in higher education. It also could work well for faculty who already know this material and who want to have a quick summary at their fingertips when designing syllabi or who have the opportunity to teach other teachers how to teach effectively. In order to go beyond preaching to the already initiated, it would probably need further development and revision.

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