

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 10 : 1 January 2010

ISSN 1930-2940

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Papers Presented in Karunya University International Seminar

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Archana Shrivastava, Ph.D.

Coping with the Problems of Mixed Ability Students

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Abstract

A group of students sitting in the class, napping as they are, not getting anything out of teacher's delivery, and a group listening with all interest, eager to ask questions - this kind of diversity, as any educator knows, has always been a part of classroom teaching.

It results from the heterogeneity of the learners present in one class.

Students' ability varies in their interest, attitude, knowledge, speed, etc. However these variations may vary in different degrees.

Problem of handling classes with mixed ability or heterogenous learners is an age old challenge for all the teachers.

Various solutions keep coming from time to time. The most common solution that comes up is differentiation, i.e. dividing the students into common groups of intelligences. But this solution has raised many eyebrows of parents as well as students who doubt whether this technique will help or negatively affect the students.

Instead of physically dividing them into groups teachers need to work on varying degrees of structured pedagogy which they can apply in the same class without letting students know that they are being discriminated on the basis of high and low abilities. My paper deals with a pedagogy as well as andragogy that help in developing techniques for dealing mixed ability classes.

Heterogeneity in Classes

Heterogeneous classes are one of the basic realities which every teacher has to face. Heterogeneity could be seen in terms of language background, learning speed, learning ability, cultural background, etc. It could be seen everywhere at every level of teaching learning process.

With such kind of diversity existing in the classroom we cannot think of providing homogeneous learning. We teachers need to identify the problems of mixed ability classes and try to come out with the solutions of eliminating them.

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The Goal of This Paper

My paper makes a systematic study of the factors that create diversity, identifies the challenges it presents to the teacher or tutors and approaches that might minimize the complications involved and maximize the learning process. Being a teacher myself I have taken my food of thought from my workplace only.

To support my ideas I have completely relied on secondary data as well as my personal experiences dealing with mixed ability students.

Transactional Model of Teaching

A transactional Model of Teaching/Learning process by W. Huitt (2003) classified the reasons into four categories:

A Transactional Model of the Teaching/Learning Process	
Context	All those factors outside of the classroom that might influence teaching and learning
Input	Those qualities or characteristics of teachers and students that they bring with them to the classroom experience
Classroom Processes	Teacher and student behaviors in the classroom as well as some other variables such as classroom climate and teacher/student relationships
Output	Measures of student learning taken apart from the normal instructional process.

(source: <http://Chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/materials/tchlrmmd.html>)

Four Variables

The model we see deals with four variables.

Context mentioned in the table deals with all those variables outside the classroom that have an impact on teacher and student characteristic, classroom processes, and output.

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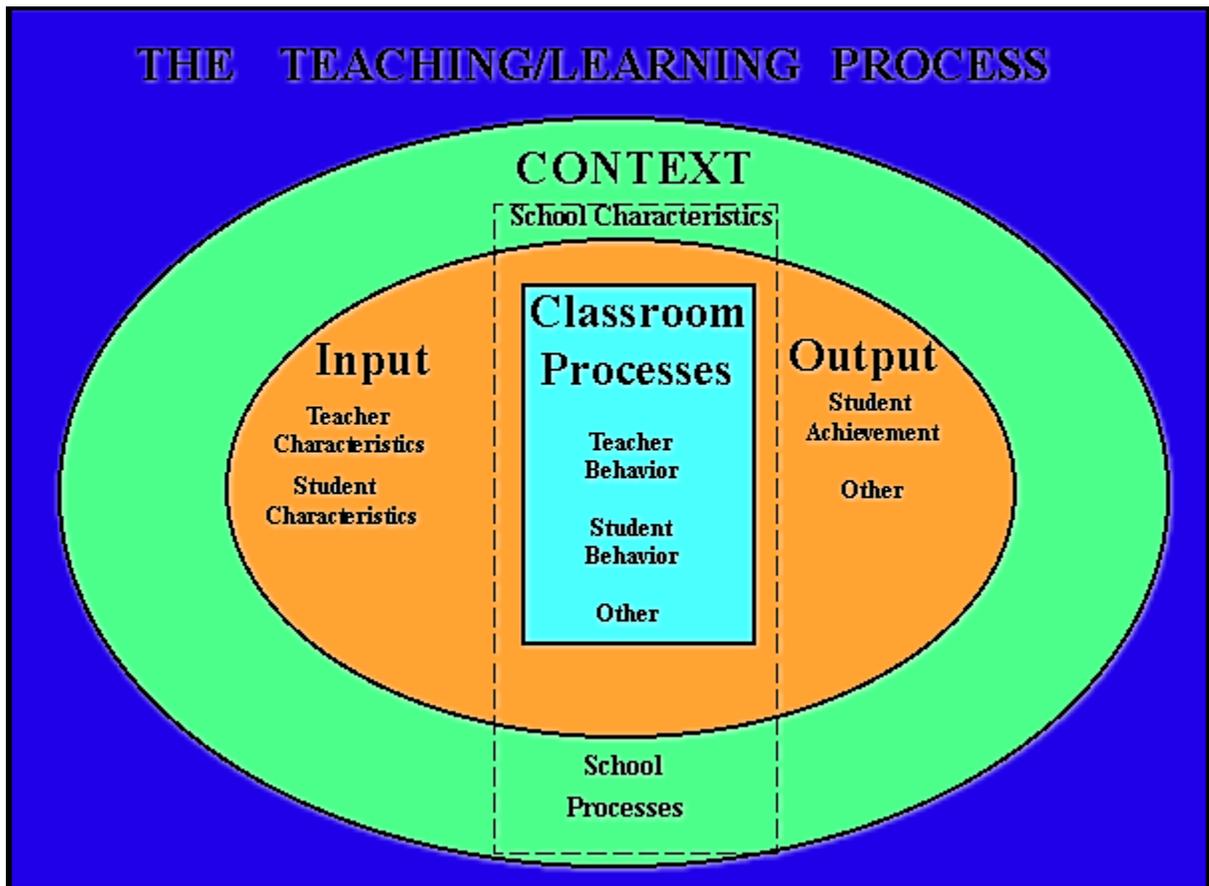
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Input is the category that includes both teachers and students characteristics. Teacher characteristic includes the teacher's beliefs and values, knowledge, thinking, performance skills and personality. Student characteristics include their class room behavior and achievements.

Even the **class room processes** include number of variables that can affect the performance of teachers and students as well.

Of the four categories **output** is the most important category because all the variables mentioned in other categories finally lead to the last one. The model very successfully depicts all the reasons which together create diversity among students.



(source: <http://Chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/materials/tchlrnmd.html>)

Thus, according to the model we see that there could be number of factors which create diversity. The model very appropriately figures out multiple reasons that create diversity among students.

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From Source to Profile: Reasons for Diversity

Taking the model in mind I also tried to figure out the reasons of diversity among students in my institute. I noticed that at my workplace diversity among students starts from the selection point itself where we aim to bring students from all over the country.

These students come from different cultural backgrounds so they have different eating, talking and living habits.

Next cause of diversity I noticed was school education. Students with government-run school background carry the feeling that they are inferior to private school students. They sometime also differ in their approaches.

I found that students from big cities or metros are more extroverts and open up easily than the students from small towns. They readily accept challenges while students from small towns hesitate to mix with others.

Personal interests, grasping capacity, learning ability, etc are some of the other reasons that create diversity among students.

As I have worked at various institutions I gather that these are some of the reasons that are common and are seen everywhere. All this adds to the challenge for the teacher to face in providing every student an opportunity to learn in his or her own way and at his or her own pace.

What Can We Do to Overcome the Effect of Mixed Diversity?

Proceeding further, if diversity cannot be avoided, what should be the next step of a teacher? Could it be an effort of coming out with homogeneous classes or to find out ways to handle heterogeneous classes?

I personally feel that coming out with homogeneous class is just a myth. And I firmly believe that heterogeneous classes should be more welcomed as they provide more than one answer, perspective or solution to any existing issues or problems. They are the ones that actually help a teacher to extract highest potential of the students.

Looking at the inevitability of the heterogeneous classes, we should work upon the ways through which we can handle diversity in an effective way.

Steps We Can Take

Moving on to these steps, a teacher must first of all realize that learners will vary in their readiness, learning profiles, interests, etc. So, it becomes the duty of a teacher to plan a

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lesson that aims at essential understanding of the subject and is mentally prepared to use different ways, contents, and products in the class.

Another challenge on teacher's part will be to introduce the content in such a way that students do not realize that they are being differentiated. The challenge over here could be fulfilled only when teachers will come out from the conventional image of a tutor being a dictator to a friend or a facilitator. Denise De Fiore, a teacher at a new middle school in Silver Spring, MD, USA rightly points out, "It's more engaging for a teacher, too. It takes a different kind of energy than direct instructions" (Mary Anne Hess, http://www.weac.org/Home/Parents_Community/differ.aspx).

Pedagogy for the Situation

Coming on to the teaching pedagogy in such kind of classes' teachers can move in a strategic manner. There can be two stages of working for the task: first stage involves certain task at teacher's level where students are not aware that they are being judged.

This task can be accomplished by the teachers by following the steps suggested by Mary Ann Hess:

- Keeping the focus on the concepts, emphasizing understanding and sense making, not retention and regurgitation of fragmented facts.
- Using ongoing assessment of readiness and interests, and pre assess to find students needing more support and those who can leap forward. They don't assume all students need a certain task.
- Make grouping flexible. They let students work alone sometimes and also in groups based on readiness, interest and learning styles. They use whole group instruction for introducing ideas, planning and sharing results.
- See themselves as a guide. They help students set goals based on readiness, interest and learning profiles- and assess based on growth and goal attainment. (Mary Anne Hess, http://www.weac.org/Home/Parents_Community/differ.aspx)

Implementation Strategy

The next stage involves implementation of the strategy in the class amongst students. But before implementing we should remember that knowledge acquisition processes for today's students have changed; we have to be very cautious while implementing the strategies in the class. We have to create a conducive learning environment , which takes into account the complexity, diversity, and strengths of the students, and for that there should be ample opportunities for students to discover their own strength and talents, to learn in a productive and effective way and develop their creative and critical thinking as well.

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Use of Androgogy

Just opposed to pedagogy we can plan to introduce andragogy (the methods of techniques used to teach adults) where we give students liberty to have their own methods to learn, connecting their own experiences in the learning process.

This method is proving to be quite successful in imparting deep learning in the institute where I work. We give chance to the students to think actively about what they learn. They are given chance to discuss and dispute which help them seeking out information on their own. The method is proving successful especially because it is management institute where we have students with work experience also. Given a chance they very readily come out sharing their original experiences with their classmates.

Role of a Teacher in Such Kind of Classes

Important task for teachers in such kind of classes should be to create and manage tasks and activities which will empower students overall learning, both inside and outside.

Teachers will have to work hard on their facilitation skills so that they can motivate students to learn on their own and get efficient enough to apply what they have learnt in their daily life.

They should focus on enabling right level of dialectic in the class and making the students come out with real discussion. This also follows that good preparation on the part of teacher is also expected. They should be well prepared with the activities well chosen, cases carefully researched, etc.

The teachers should learn the art of stimulating the discussions on the right track by asking questions, by summarizing what has been said and moving the discussion on to a higher level or closing it down as appropriate.

Most important thing that teachers should take care of is to create a relaxed and accepting environment where students can come out with their own ideas without hesitation even if it is something controversial or radical. They should learn to not only listen patiently to the students specially those who are introvert and speak less but also encourage them by appreciating and praising.

Some Methods Which I Use in my Classes to Cope with the Problems of Mixed Ability Students

1. Caring for Students

This is a tool that I personally follow to deal with students of mixed ability classes. I observe that sometimes by the behavior we teacher envelope ourselves with certain kind

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of attitude which forces students to recoil themselves in their shells and are afraid to approach us. I see to it that I give more time to interact with them when they work in group. I take care to discuss not only academic matter but also life in general. I also take care of students' absence from the class and revert back to them to know their well being. In this way I try to develop a relationship which is expected to go even after they leave the institute. This method helps those students who find it difficult to adjust to open up with their problems. They feel more free and out pour their problems which in some or the other way hindering their active participation in the class and in turn effecting their overall outcome.

2. Case Based Learning

Most of the faculty members including me use this method in our courses. We present the material facts and ask the students to discuss in groups. Each group is divided in a way that it carries a mixture of students with different calibers. Students are asked to encourage less speaking friends to speak amongst themselves. They are expected to come prepared for the session by doing the necessary reading. Teachers also do their part by selecting the materials, facts and issues. They also structure some questions based on the facts provided to the students. Students are left free to come out with assumptions. Teachers on the backstage of mind has this that they will encourage students with less abilities in comparison to others, without making them feel that they are doing it. The teacher is also clear on her part that he/she is not there to teach but to facilitate the discussion and see that it is going in right direction.

3. Dealing with different problem areas at a time

One of the best examples of mixed ability classes came up to me very recently when I was dealing with the writing skills for 1st year management students of my institution. The objective of my classes was to make my students write perfect business correspondences. The variations in their capabilities differ as few were good at content but were lacking at accuracy, somewhere good at grammar structures but lacked in organization and cohesion.

I cannot afford to improve every one's weak areas by one single lecture on the techniques of writing good business correspondences. Then I thought to convert the class into workshop mode where they were asked to draft the letter in the class itself. Then I reached at every ones place to discuss what they have written pointing out the areas that they lacked in correspondence which they drafted.

On spot feedback helped them make improvements in those areas. But in the process I never forgot to praise strong areas also which in turn made them confident and they accepted their weak areas willingly. This method proved very successful for me as slowly in the latter stages I observed that I was able to pick up weak areas of every individual

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student and help them overcome those areas finally leading to an overall improvement in their writing skills.

4. Group Presentations

I ask my students to prepare group presentations. Each group consists of 3 to 4 students. I randomly pick up a student to present his or her group and provide answers/explanation. If the presenter is unable to answer/explain the whole group is considered as a failure. Such kind of activities compel students to work together, encourages better students to help weaker students and pressure of group members make even dull students work for the team.

5. Simulation and Role Play

Conducting simulation and role play also helped me in coping up with mixed ability classes. We very recently introduced **theater technique** in the classes where students were first divided into groups then they were provided with the theme which they had to act in front of the class. Making the students work in through this technique helped them to open up with each other. Team spirit forced the students with strong abilities to encourage their friends with lesser abilities to participate. This technique helped out largely in refining nonverbal of the students and was highly appreciated by them.

Conclusion

The above examples are no doubt few of the ways which can help teachers cop up with the problems of mixed ability classes. There are many more which must have been explored by others. My personal experience of dealing with diversity or mixed ability classes as I have mentioned in my paper also has been a motivating one. Every challenge thrown out of such classes helped me explore new techniques of dealing with them. It's a two way process where both the party benefit.

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Colophon:

My experience of dealing with mixed ability students and coming out with a research paper involves a lot of hard work and efforts of many with whom I interact most at my work place. First and far most I would like to thank all my students who cooperated at every level whenever I introduced any new pedagogy on them. I express my deep sense of gratitude to the faculty members with whom I work who not only listened and guided me on the new techniques I incorporate in my classes but also shared their techniques of dealing with mixed ability group.

Archana Shrivastava. Ph.D.
Business Communication Area
Birla Institute of Management Technology
Greater Noida 201306 (NCR)
Uttar Pradesh, India
archana.shrivastava@bimtech.ac.in

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