

Dialogue in the University: Using a Learning Needs & Resource Assessment

by Jeanette Romkema and Dan Haase

NOTE: These tips were written with the undergraduate professor and students in face-to-face full-time learning environment in mind. However, they can be equally valuable in the post-graduate, virtual learning environment, distance learning, and part-time university program setting.

Having a clear sense of the various people involved in your university course (the WHO) is vital for creating a meaningful and relevant learning experience. Using a learning needs and resources assessment (LNRA) is an essential part of course preparation. However, it doesn't end there. The LNRA is a posture carried through your entire course - from start to finish you are constantly collecting and listening for information that may impact your course: the design, the room set up, the course requirements, the grading, and the readings, and your facilitation. Here are some tips for doing this.

1. **ASK | STUDY | OBSERVE.** These three practices represent the guiding principles of an LNRA. Remember, "The dialogue should begin long before the course does." This dialogue requires that the instructor pays attention, intentionally collects valuable information and invites responses from the learners.
2. **Make the WHO matter most.** Too often we focus on the WHAT (the content of the course) to the detriment or exclusion of the WHO (our students). The WHAT and the WHO need to be fully congruent. How are you constructing your course around your WHAT in light of your WHO? What have you found out about the WHO that may impact the WHERE, WHEN, or HOW?
3. **Identify relevant characteristics of the learners.** Here is one way to respect the WHO in your midst: know them and how they best learn. You can ask them this directly as well as observe their interactions through the course. The better you know your learners, the better you will be able to teach and plan in such a way that best meets their learning needs.
4. **Collect quick feedback throughout your course.** Of course most of us distribute feedback forms at the end of the year, but this is too late to lead to meaningful change during the course. Consider asking for feedback during the first class (on the syllabus, time, grading, etc.), after the first few classes (on the pace, space, etc.), in the middle of our course (on timing, deadlines, etc.), at key intervals (i.e. an assignment, project, test, etc.), and at the end. Just inviting a word or phrase of input can be extremely insightful: "Use one word to describe your thoughts about the course thus far" or "Before we share our projects, call out a word or two to summarize your work."
5. **Gather and use the generative themes from the class.** Every group has certain topics that create energy. Listen for the hobbies, events, topics, and questions that repeatedly surface for your class. Then use these in your examples, stories, assignments, and readings to help foster greater engagement and interest. Knowing the generative themes of a group can help make

your course more relevant, respectful and personal. Some ways to collect this information include: from an initial survey or introductory questionnaire concerning the course content and objectives, a personal interview or meeting with students, or from classroom observations.

6. **Check your assumptions and clarify expectations.** The LNRA fosters a posture of humility as it invites the instructor to ask questions and ponder assumptions. These two key principles within this dynamic are found in an instructor who 1) genuinely listens, and 2) authentically wants to create a unique learning experience for each learner, where possible.
7. **Interact with students in a variety of ways.** Prior to the course you can send an email, make a phone or Skype call, use an online learning platform such as Blackboard, Canvas or Moodle to invite students share with each other who they are and why they are in the course. This introduction allows students to come to the class already knowing each other. Small groups could be designated prior to the start of the course based on information collected. If the course has a large number of students, consider just sampling the group (i.e. calling 10 from a class of 100 will still give you valuable information).
8. **Collect information from stakeholders.** Asking program directors, deans, parents, former students, and department chair what they think is important for your students can be a valuable source of information. We sometimes forget that our course was conceived and seen as important in the university program for a reason. What are those reasons and what do stakeholders feel is important today?
9. **Check with colleagues.** Many of your colleagues have taught students you will have in your class or may have taught the course you are now teaching. Ask them for their wisdom, resources, and feedback. Professors can sometimes function as 'islands' with little interaction or overlap with each other or our courses. See all the courses in your department as focused in the same direction and potentially valuable pieces to the whole.
10. **Ask: What will enhance the learning for this group?** This is a key question to always have top-of-mind as you design your course and syllabus. After all, this course is for a unique group of individuals, at this unique time in history, for the unique reasons they bring, and for the unique time and place the university/college has invited you to teach.

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