

## Engaging Graduate Students to Deepen Learning

by Bob Turner

I was first introduced to Jane Vella's steps of design and the world of Dialogue Education™ during my graduate studies at [Fuller Theological Seminary](#). To say that my world was flipped upside-down would be an understatement. I found it extremely encouraging to know tools were available for teaching in an academic setting that helped to engage learners and create a strong learning environment.



Before that moment in time, Dialogue Education was as foreign to me as the countries I had visited. The adage, “We teach the way we were taught,” was a living reality as I lectured to students in a variety of settings and languages. With each lecture, I increased my knowledge of the subject, but something was missing. Apart from an exam at the end of the course, how could I measure the level of learning for each student? I desired greater engagement yet feared open discussion due to my inability to answer the unknown, or worse, the uncomfortable.

As an educator, I realize I have much to learn to develop what I refer to as the Optimal Learning Environment (OLE). Basically, the OLE exists at the intersection of the methods, objectives, and evaluation of the learners' cultural context. Incorporating formative evaluation throughout the [Eight Steps of Design](#) makes the optimal learning environment possible. Because the cultural context is dynamic, formative evaluation is essential as each step of the design process is formed and implemented. The result provides both engagement and learning for every participant.

I recently taught a graduate course in Advanced Homiletics at the [Bear Valley Bible Institute International](#) in Denver, Colorado. The academic dean asked if I would focus on expository *preaching*, but also wanted a larger portion of the course to address *teaching*. As a rookie in the arena of Dialogue Education, this was my opportunity to implement what I had learned as well as deepen my own learning. Let me share a few take-aways from this first-time experience.

1. **The Learning Needs and Resources Assessment (LNRA) is critical.** The LNRA provided essential information to initially structure the course. I learned personal information about each graduate student, gained an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, listened to what each learner desired to achieve, and captured a glimpse of their plans for the future. Based on this invaluable information, I determined achievement-based objectives (ABOs) that guided the lesson plans for the week. My classes will not be taught without this information.
2. **Evaluate every step.** At the end of each day, I processed what was experienced in the learning environment. This time of formative evaluation enabled me to adjust the direction needed for the next day. While this might be considered as education “on-the-fly,” I assure you it was not. I became less concerned about covering an amount of content and focused more on adjusting the content to achieve what these graduate students desired to learn. I will admit that I am far

from perfecting the formative evaluation process, but I learned that even a small tweak here and there makes a major difference in the result.

3. **Model the method.** In other words, “practice what you preach.” Why say it, when you can show it? I knew that Dialogue Education was as foreign to these graduate students, as it was to me years ago. Therefore, if they were going to transfer these concepts into their context, then I needed to model the concepts, design learning tasks that enabled learners to put these concepts into practice, and discuss how the whole process might impact their ministries. By the end of the week, I am positive I learned more than anyone else, but their enthusiasm was clear as they implemented the process and applied the principles and practices of this learning-centered approach.
4. **Feedback is vital for future growth.** For the purpose of my own personal development, I followed up the course with an evaluation sent to each graduate student. The design of the evaluation form offered participants an opportunity to share honest feedback and ways to improve the course. The value of the information provided cannot be measured. I have already implemented changes for the future and am confident this iterative approach will continue to strengthen my courses, planning and teaching.

As I continue to process the experience of the week, additional lessons surfaced that highlighted the value of Dialogue Education. Let me sum up my approach to Dialogue Education in this way:

- Become a learner, not a teacher
- Draw upon the experience of others
- Invite dialogue by posture, not position
- Equip by providing more learning tasks, less lecturing
- Grow in application, not information
- Introduce more strategy to learning, less content
- Bring passion, not power to the learning environment.

I want to thank my friends at Global Learning Partners for the opportunity to share my experience. When these graduate students engaged in learning through Dialogue Education, the whole process made sense and learning was deepened.

### How do you deepen learning in your university or college classes?

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Here are a few additional GLP resources connected to the topic of teaching in academia:

1. [Dialogue Education in the University: First and Last Day](#)
2. [Dialogue Education in the University: From Monologue to Dialogue](#)
3. [Dialogue Education in the University: Creating a Learning Environment](#)
4. [Dialogue Education in the University: Using a Learning Needs and Resources Assessment](#)
5. [Dialogue Education in the University: Starting with the Syllabus](#)