HELPING AND HINDERING LEARNING

J. P. POWELL
University of New South Wales

ABSTRACT

In order to identify factors which help or hinder learning, student evaluations of a course were analysed. The responses were classified in relation to learning in the areas of content, personal development and behavioural change. The major factors which emerged were expectations, learning style and personality. It is suggested that learning is strongly influenced by the interaction between these student characteristics and the parallel features of courses and teachers.

Introduction

It is well known that teachers are not enthusiastic readers of the results of educational research and this is as true of those in universities as it is of those employed in other sectors of the educational system. When they discuss teaching they tend to exchange anecdotal material which is very concrete and particularistic, relating to individual students and classroom events. The way in which students talk among themselves about learning displays similar characteristics. This suggests that research into the teaching and learning of adults, if it is to exert any significant influence upon practice, should be firmly rooted in what is immediately recognisable to the participants. This should also apply to the presentation of results: too many abstractions and theoretical considerations which have only a tenuous connection with classroom reality are to be avoided. This paper is written with this clearly in mind and assumes throughout that a great deal can be learnt from the kind of data which is usually dismissed as being "merely anecdotal".

The major focus is on factors which facilitate or hinder learning in institutions of higher education and the data are drawn from the experience of
teaching a course which was part of a master’s degree programme designed to improve the educational expertise of teachers of the health sciences. There were eighteen students most of whom were from Australasia and other countries in the Pacific region. The majority were medically qualified and all had been teaching for a number of years. The class met for two hours each week throughout one semester of fourteen weeks.

The main aim was to encourage reflection upon the students’ earlier learning experiences and events in class during the course in order to develop a fuller understanding of the ways in which these were related to course content and organization and to learning and teaching styles. The course exhibited a low level of structure and the teacher’s role was primarily that of commentator and facilitator of group discussion: these aspects of the data will be reported elsewhere (Powell, in press).

Data were collected from a variety of sources: written comments of each student at the end of each class, videotape recordings, de-briefing of the teacher after each class, notes and comments of an observer, statements of course expectations, autobiographical sketches, and final course evaluations. Only the first of these will be drawn upon here but some of the other data have been reported earlier (Powell, 1977).

Nehari and Bender (1978) have pointed out that course evaluations are usually designed to elicit judgements on the teacher and lack an “effect on the learner” dimension. They advocate the use of “course valuing” as a technique for investigating the impact of courses on students:

The term ‘course valuing’ is selected to reflect... the extent to which a student evaluates a course as having been a meaningful, valuable, and significant learning experience for himself, and the extent to which a student perceives the course as having had some impact on himself or herself, i.e. to have made a difference and to have produced change and growth.

For this purpose they developed an evaluation inventory with the following four categories: course valuing, content learning, personal learning and behavioural learning. These categories will be used here as an aid to classifying student comments on the course and the comments will then be used to help identify factors which influenced what was learnt.

Content Learning

We are not accustomed to reflecting upon what we are learning nor do we usually discuss with others the ways in which we tackle learning tasks: to