Contextual Factors

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Contextual factors are factors that play a role in how students in a classroom learn (University of Northern Iowa, n.d.) As an instructor, it is important to have a strong understanding of the contextual factors within the classroom that you teach. When an instructor understands what shapes the learning style of students in their classroom, the instructor will be able to reach more learners. Contextual factors may include anything from the setting of lesson to the socio-economic background of the learner. The target audience for my sports nutrition unit are college athletes, and my external teaching experience will be with Fontbonne’s men’s lacrosse team. College athletes will have contextual factors that may require different approaches to learning than non-athletic students or learners of different age ranges.

**Setting for Instruction**

When considering the contextual factors that affect learners, the first thing that comes to mind is the learners, of course! What is their background? What is their ability? However, at the center of contextual factors, is the setting of the learning experience. For my sports nutrition unit, I would like the college athletes to be in a classroom setting so the class and I can be in a structured learning environment. Without a standard classroom, technology like the PowerPoint and Podcast for the lesson would not be able to be projected. In a scenario where projection of PowerPoints and Podcasts were not necessary, I may consider meeting outdoors or in a spot that the team often met. The setting of the presentation sets the mood for the lesson, and could vary from lesson to lesson. If I wanted the athletes to be more focused and be able to retain information, a classroom would be a better fit. If I want to cover basic concepts, and have activities and open discussions, I might take them outdoors or in an open room so they felt more comfortable to contribute to class discussions.

**Subject & Content**

The subject content is another important thing to consider as a contextual factor in learning. It’s a no-brainer that college athletes would, at very least be able to connect or relate to the lessons of the unit. My individual lessons are: Calculating Energy Needs, Snacking for Energy, Timing Your Nutrition, and Hydration. These are all topics that are important for athletic performance and safety. Content has to be relatable to the audience, or else it might not catch their attention! If there are lessons in a unit where the correlations may be less than obvious, there are always ways to help students make connections with the subject matter. Students need to feel like there is a purpose for their learning.

**Age & Grade Level**

Another thing I must consider for my audience is age and grade level. Everyone in my target audience will be a college athlete; most will be between the ages of 18-24. If I were targeting a younger audience, I would need to simplify my lesson. For example, my first lesson, Calculating Energy Needs, would be too advanced for middle school or high school athletes.

Since college students are assumed to be advanced in their education, and have basic math skills mastered, I felt they could easily handle and understand an equation that calculated energy needs. The hypothetical younger students might be given average ranges of calorie needs for their age, or given examples of calories of foods using common foods and food models.

**Gender**

When considering the ages of my learners, I also think of how gender plays an important role in how student athletes learn. Although my unit is directed towards both male and female athletes, my external micro-teaching is the men’s lacrosse team at Fontbonne. When preparing for my lessons, I inquired with my athletic (male) friends on things such as how they would enjoy a learning environment and what type of information they would want to hear more about. This gave me insight on a male perspective of the lesson that I would not have had otherwise. I therefore adapted my external lesson accordingly, to gear towards males, but not so much that a female could not take part in the class. I knew simply talking about fruits and vegetables wasn’t going to catch their attention. Originally, I had a podcast in mind about timing nutrition for physical activity, with a woman as the speaker. I made a simple tweak by digging further and finding a very similar podcast from a reputable source, with a man, by the podcast-host name, “Get-Fit Guy”. For a room full of guys, I felt that they may feel more of a connection with a male figure giving a quick podcast on the benefits of timing nutrition, followed by a lesson from me going into further detail.

**Ability & Achievement Level**

There is an obvious differentiation between age groups, genders, and grades. Something to consider along with these factors is the ability of the student. Some students are naturally able to retain information, while others may struggle, or need a slower paced, simplistic learning environment. For my external teaching experience, knowing the ability of my learners beforehand is tough because I have never met the lacrosse team, therefore I cannot assume their natural ability to learn. Through the little that I know about college sports, I know that on average, college athletes have to prove their ability to maintain their grades in order to stay on the team. This leads me to believe that these players must have an average or high ability to learn in the classroom.

On the same token, not only does the natural ability of the student matter, but the willingness to learn, or achievement level of the student matters. If the athletes are over achievers and have a passion for learning more about my sports nutrition unit, then I may have to make future lessons more challenging and innovative to keep their interest. If the students are under achievers, I may have to slow the pace of the lesson, or ask for feedback on what might make the students more motivated next lesson.

**Socio-economic Status**

Socio-economic status and family background of students may not be the first contextual factor that comes to mind, they can play a role in learning styles of students in the classroom as well. Usher, Kober, Jennings, & Rentner state that, “…children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families possess lower levels of cognitive and non-cognitive skills and lag far behind their more advantaged peers.” (2012, p. 4) Socioeconomic status of the family of the individual college student can effect that student even as an adult. In addition, it is not uncommon for college students to live on their own or have children of their own. If other obligations are on the students’ minds, they may put proper nutrition at the bottom of their list of priorities.

**Cultural & Ethnic Background**

Cultural background can affect the learner if a student has certain food preferences or traditions. As an instructor, if I taught my sports nutrition lesson about eating more of foods that did not abide the rules of a student’s religious beliefs or traditions, that student might not feel that their beliefs are being respected. The student would want to be recognized so they can have suggestions to fit their needs and beliefs. A possible way to assess if there are students with certain religious or philosophical preferences, like vegetarianism, would be to give students a pre-assessment questionnaire and be sure to include options that include all students.

In the classroom ethnicity be a contextual factor and potentially create bias of student or teacher. I have a personal experience with ethnicity playing a role in student teacher relationship. In my first College Composition class at a community college, I was the only Caucasian in the classroom, other than the instructor. The class was pretty easy in my opinion. I felt that I understood the lessons and writing assignments, but I felt that my instructor often ignored me when I had questions and often undermined me when he did listen. He did not seem to have the same reaction to the other students. I was determined to get through to class gritting my teeth, but this instructor made me feel small in his classroom, and made it an uncomfortable learning environment. My assumption is that he was trying to not appear to have any racial prejudice, when he ended up treating me differently as a result. It is important to make sure that each individual in the classroom receives the same amount of attention. Athletes come in all genders, cultures, ethnicities, shapes and sizes. All should have equal opportunity to learn and receive respect from the instructor.

**Prior Knowledge & Experiences**

It is important for me to have an idea of what kind of personal experiences and knowledge my learners have before I create my lesson plans. While some athletes may come from a family background of growing up with healthy and balanced meals, some may have never had a nutrition education course before. Athletes may have grown up in a home that did not value or know much about healthy habits. According to Shriver, Betts, & Wollenberg (2013), in a study of 52 female college athletes, 75% percent of these athletes ate less than the required amount of carbohydrates to support their activity, and only 9% ate enough calories. Shriver, Betts, & Wollenberg’s (2013) findings prove that there is a need for nutrition education among athletes.

The athletes in my external micro lesson are all men, college students, athletes, and on the lacrosse team. Having a rough idea of the characteristics of my learners helped me as I created my lessons by being able to critique my lesson from a college male athlete’s point of view. If I was told by the coach that the athletes I would teach were very knowledge about nutrition and wellness, I might plan for more advanced nutrition material, otherwise, they might not learn anything new! From the information I gathered, and the eagerness of the coach to have his team learn nutrition concepts, I assume prior to my external teaching experience that my students are not necessarily nutrition experts, but maybe have an interest in growing their nutrition knowledge.

**Instructor Bias**

There is always a chance for bias for learners or instructors. In my external micro teaching lesson, the most obvious bias to bring to the forefront is that there will be a female instructor teaching a group of guys. There is certainly room for bias on both ends! As the instructor, it is important for me not to get wrapped up in stereotyping student athletes. In any Hollywood-ized movie, the athlete is portrayed as the hot-shot, pretty-boy, slightly air-headed guy who only hangs with his bros and laughs at the nerdy kids. It is important as the instructor that I go into the classroom with a non-judgmental attitude.

One way I could diffuse this potential for instructor bias, is to picture myself in the students’ shoes. I work out, love to be outdoors, and play sports like tennis and soccer with my dad. Do I think of myself as fitting the student athlete stereotype? Absolutely not. Just because someone does an activity that gets associated with a personality traits or habit, does not make it true for everyone.

Biases can create tension between the instructor and students in a classroom, which hinders the progression of learning. As the instructor, understanding the contextual factors of the learners and recognizing your own biases will help create a comfortable and productive learning environment for students.

References

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