Learning is a complex process and there are many interacting variables that influence learning. Learning is not an isolated human activity and for internal school students learning occurs within the context of a classroom, the school, a broader community and a particular society. The teacher, who is a variable in the classroom context, is charged with the function of acting as an intermediary between the variables outside the classroom and the students to assist the students in their learning (Tylee 1992). The function of being an intermediary means that the teacher has the role of facilitating student learning, as well as being a part of the school and community. Fulfilling the functions of a teacher means that the teacher is also actively engaged in learning. Learning about themselves, the changes in their field, the expectations of the community and society and most importantly learning about their students and ways of enabling their students to grow and develop. The role of the teacher has many facets but that of facilitating student learning is very important. This paper addresses the role of teacher as facilitator and its importance for student learning. The role of the teacher in the overall context can be represented diagrammatically as shown in Diagram 1.

Learning can be defined as occurring when we change or elaborate what is already known to us (Cambourne 1990). The learning process can be defined as "…making connections, identifying patterns, organising previously unrelated bits of knowledge, behaviour, activities, into new (for the learner) patterned wholes" (Cambourne 1990, p.12). The philosophy underpinning Cambourne’s (1990) definition is that the learner is actively involved in the learning process. The learner is constructing their view of the world and constructing ideas. They are interacting with materials, directing processes, making connections, identifying patterns and organising materials. All of the learning is linked to existing knowledge. The learner is not passive, they are not receiving pre-digested or organised materials. The definition does not focus on what is to be learnt but on how the learning occurs. This approach to learning means that the important aspect of lecturing is not imparting knowledge (although this is important) but in creating opportunities for students to learn. This is the role of the teacher as facilitator and this is consistent with the liberal/progressive orientation to curriculum.

Both the teacher and students bring a set of physical, social, emotional and mental attributes and needs to the classroom. These influence the way one interacts with the other and therefore the way learning will proceed. The more the teacher is able to learn about themselves, their needs and educational philosophy and about the nature of their students the more they will be in a position to facilitate student learning. This is a part of the learning role of the teacher and this learning assists the teacher in their role as facilitator.

In order for teachers to facilitate student learning several things need to occur. The processes that the teacher as facilitator needs to undertake are as follows:
• assess the students;
• plan the learning;
• implement the plan; and
• evaluate the process.

Assess the students

This aspect is conducted in a number of areas and will develop as the teacher builds rapport with the students. It can be seen as ‘getting to know’ the students. Some aspects to be assessed are:

The student's willingness and ability to learn are key to developing learning opportunities that will engage and extend the students. The willingness is associated with the student's values and feelings about the school learning process. Each student’s ability to learn refers to their understanding of and the skills involved in particular tasks. A part of assessing student's value systems is to understand what is important and interesting to them. These are related to how and why students engage in learning. Students also have feelings and beliefs about themselves and the learning process. These are related to their self confidence, their willingness to take risks, their beliefs about learning and how they view themselves as learners. Cambourne (1989) suggests that students will not engage with the learning unless the following three criteria are met. The learner needs to believe that:

• they are potentially able to do the learning;
• the learning will somehow further the purpose of their lives; and
• they are able to suffer and live through the risks (from an emotional perspective) associated with engaging in learning.

A student’s beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning will interact with a teacher’s beliefs. The teacher therefore needs to understand what students expect and are willing to do as well as what they themselves expect of the students.

As well as assessing the student's willingness to learn the teacher needs to assess the student's ability to learn the material that they intend to teach in their subjects. This is the understanding of and the skills involved in the learning. This is akin to determining where a student is placed in relation to various criteria in either key learning areas (such mathematics, science and technology and so forth) or domains (such as cognitive, social/emotional, psychomotor, asthetic and so forth).

The student’s preferred learning styles. All learners have a preference for how they learn. There are many ways of viewing and assessing learning style preferences. Burns (1989) suggests that first we perceive information and then we process the information. The way we perceive and process information is our learning style. Burns (1989) places the learning styles on a 4-matrix system. With perceiving extending from concrete to abstract and processing from active to reflective approaches.
**Plan the learning**

Following student assessment the teacher is in a better position to plan learning opportunities that will provide a fit with the student’s needs and interests and thus optimise student learning opportunities. A part of this process is to determine student learning outcomes. The teacher will determine these outcomes as a result of the interplay between what is contained in the course documentation, the teacher’s personal theories about teaching and learning and the teacher’s assessment of student needs. Once the learning outcomes have been determined the teacher plans the unit outline and individual lessons. There are therefore many aspects to the planning. These include:

Understanding the philosophy behind the intended objectives and learning outcomes of the course documents. Kemmis, Cole & Suggett (1983) present three orientations to curriculum, the vocational/neo-classical, the liberal/progressive and the socially-critical. The orientations shape the approach to many important educational issues including knowledge, desired learning outcomes, teaching, learning, assessment, the role of community and so forth. The orientations have embedded within them assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning. The role of teacher as facilitator and the constructivism approach to learning are consistent with the liberal/progressive orientation to the curriculum. A part of the role of teacher as colleague and community partner is to be involved in what is developed in course documents.

The philosophy embedded in the course documents will interact with the teacher’s theories of teaching and learning. The teacher in the classroom context is able to respond to variables that are different from those that are uppermost on the course document developer’s agendas (Lundgren, 1983; Tylee 1992). The interaction between the teacher’s view and those of the course documents will influence what is actually taught in the classroom. For example, the course may contain a vocational/neo-classical orientation whereas the teacher is oriented towards socially-critical theories. In the classroom the teacher will work with students as co-learners to critique socially important issues such as the nature of ‘work’, while providing the students with ‘work’ related skills.

Teachers build ‘personal theories’ about the nature of teaching and learning. These ‘personal theories’ may be based upon established and researched ideas or substantially upon personal experiences. Teachers need to understand their personal theories as they influence the way they proceed with their teaching (Tylee 1992).

Develop student learning opportunities. This takes into account the course documents, the teacher's personal theories of teaching and learning, the student’s interest, their preferred learning styles and their understanding and skills. It is in this area that the teacher as facilitator is able to provide opportunities for student learning that will take hold of the students' interests and thus motivate them to engage in the learning opportunity. Harrison (1998a & b) has presented the S.P.A.C.E. model for creating optimal learning conditions. The conditions for optimal learning include the following:
Self-affirmation – the learner’s view themselves as effective learners and the teachers provide them with feedback to that effect;

Personal meaning – the learners are able to find personal meaning in the learning. That is, the learning is relevant to them;

Active learning – the learners are active in the learning, whether that activity is physically doing something (as for concrete learners) or intellectually doing something (as for abstract reflective learners).

Collaborative – the learners are able to collaborate with others in the learning process and not to view learning as an isolating experience;

Empowering – the learners are able to shape the learning process, to have control over what is learnt and the direction of the learning.

These factors need to be considered as the teacher develops the learning opportunities and as they shape the classroom process.

The teacher needs to give attention to this part of the planning to see that the classroom processes and emotional climate are conducive to optimal learning. The classroom and general school climate needs to encourage students to take risk and try out new approaches. This will interact with the student’s willingness to participate or engage in the learning. Among other things, this means that the learners:

- need to feel safe;
- attempts to solve problems need to be respected;
- unconventional approaches will be rewarded;
- will feel confident that the lecturer knows where to pitch the challenge for them – that is not too hard or too easy or too repetitive;
- will work on real problems with personal relevance to them and is therefore relevant; and
- work on challenging problems that provide opportunities for creative thinking.

Implement the plan

This will include the classroom management and the teaching strategies that will cater for the varied learning styles of the students. It will also include the emotional climate of the classroom and the quality of the interactions between the students and the teacher.
Evaluate the process

The teacher as facilitator will revise their student assessments. At the completion of a classroom session there will be an assessment of the learning that has taken place and this will inform following teaching. The emotional climate will be subject to continual evaluation so that any problems can be identified and a plan developed that is able to deal with the problem.

The assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation process may be extended to include the school. The teacher as colleague will work with others to plan and implement changes that will enable the school, to become more effective in facilitating student learning.

The processes outlined above should not be seen as exclusively linear, although they can function as a structure for thinking. Many of the functions are able to occur simultaneously.

Conclusion

The role of the teacher is diverse and has several orientations. One important aspect is that of facilitator of student learning. The facilitator attempts to provide circumstances that will enable students to engage with the learning opportunities and construct for themselves their understandings and skills. This role will interact with those of teacher as learner, colleague and community partner.

Notes

1[1] The classroom is also used to designate anywhere students are gathered together in the presence of a teacher. This could therefore also include field experiences.

1[2] There are other approaches to teaching and learning. One is to see the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge that has been structured and sequenced to allow the students to achieve mastery. Kemmis, Cole and Suggett (1983) called this the vocational/neo-classical orientation and Tylee (1992) called it the traditional/status quo orientation. Another is to see the teacher as a co-learner where the activities are negotiated with the students and the community in general. Kemmis et al (1983) termed this the socially-critical orientation and Tylee (1992) the society-transforming orientation. To consider the wider approaches to the nature of teacher and learning is beyond the scope of this paper.

[3] Curriculum is defined in the broad sense, that is, the contexts of formulation and realization and not just the curriculum texts or syllabus documents.

[4] The three main tenets of constructivism are that:

- knowledge is viewed as being actively constructed by the learner;
- the development of abstract concepts and generalizations are derived from students' reflections upon existing knowledge; and
- learning is a social process.
References


Diagram 1. Lecturer As Facilitator In Context

Community and Society

University

School/Faculty

Lecture theatre or classroom

**Lecturer**
- Needs & interests

Lecturer’s roles
- Learner
- Facilitator
- Colleague
- Community

**Assesses, plans, lectures**

**Student**
- Needs & interests
- Values & feelings
- Understanding & skills

**Learns & provides feedback**