

TC PRACTICE: GETTING TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS AS LEARNERS

What is this practice?

Getting to know your students as learners is more than formally assessing students' content knowledge. It requires a targeted and systematic inquiry into your students' ways of thinking, how they "do school" and how they understand the subjects you are teaching. This includes knowing about your students' prior learning experiences and resulting habits of mind, their cultural norms and social status within the class, their self-esteem and sense of efficacy, and also their dispositions and attitudes — and goes hand in hand with getting to know students as *individuals*.

Why is it important?

Everyone has different learning preferences and abilities; we cannot assume that what is productive for us also applies to others. Gaining knowledge of your students as unique learners gives you the means to determine whether your students are ready for a specific task or topic, what your students can do individually, and what they can do

Educators understand that the business of coming to know our students as learners is simply too important to leave to chance — and that the peril of not undertaking this inquiry is not reaching a learner at all.

Powell & Kusuma-Powell (2011)¹

as a learning community in class together. It helps you to design differentiated support systems and scaffolds that are needed to ensure individual students' learning. If practice and learning expectations for individual students are too low, they may get bored; if the expectations are too high, they can get frustrated and anxious about their performance in class. Both situations can result in students either checking out or acting up. Finally, knowing your students as learners gives you the means to foster awareness and expansion of ways of thinking and modes for learning with your students².

Tips for doing this practice effectively

Getting to know your students as learners requires inquiring into their existing habits and preferences in learning environments like your classroom. We suggest trying structured reflections for some of your students. This kind of inquiry can help educators remain open to changing how they perceive their students, thus preventing us from operating according to assumptions or foregone conclusions. In such a structured reflection on a student as a learner, you could answer the following questions (built into the "*My Student as Learner: Structured Reflection Tool*"), but we encourage you to come up with your own prompts, too:

- What is working well for this student? What are their interests and strengths?
- What is this student avoiding or needing help with in class? What do you see as struggles or dislikes?
- What are my own attitudes towards and expectations for this student? What evidence do I have for my attitudes and expectations? Where do I see the student's future potential?
- What strategies have I tried with this student? What has worked, what has not, and why?

- What questions do I have about this student?
- Based on my reflections, what will I change for the student or do differently myself?

Where to start?

You have already inquired about your students as individuals and into the communities your school serves (see *TC Practice Guides* at <http://mentorteachers.org/how-to-resources>), so you've already taken a big step towards understanding your students as learners. Consider doing two sets of structured reflections for three different students in your classes (e.g., one student who you suspect is high achieving but easily bored, one student who is struggling in your class, and one student you (still) know little about). Over the course of the school year, you will add reflections of other students as learners and revisit your earlier ones. This kind of inquiry will become faster over time as you gain experience with evidence and patterns, but be aware of stereotyping students. An active inquiry into another person as a learner will often result in new insights, even when you think you know a particular student well.

Summing up

- To start, do two sets of structured reflections for three selected students in your classes — you may find the *“My Student as Learner: Structured Reflection Tool”* helpful as is, or you may want to adapt the questions or determine a different way of recording noticings.
- Make structured reflections a regular exercise to become more attuned to more of your students as unique learners.
- Use what you learn to adapt your teaching practice and/or interactions with specific students.

¹ Powell, W., & Kusuma-Powell, O. (2011). *How to teach now: Five keys to personalized learning in the global classroom*. ASCD. See chapter 1: <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/111011/chapters/Knowing-Our-Students-as-Learners.aspx>

² Tomlinson, C. A., & Moon, T. R. (2013). *Assessment and student success in a differentiated classroom*. ASCD.