

Learning Needs Analysis

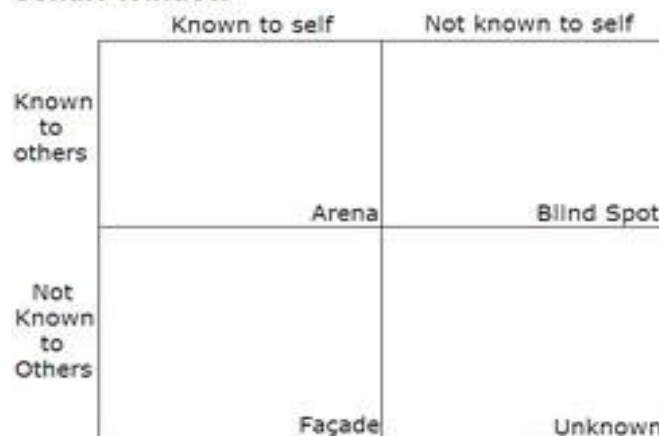
Preparation for almost any teaching session should involve consideration of the AILMENTS acronym:

The **A**ims of the session, the **I**ntended learning outcomes, a **L**earning needs assessment, the teaching **M**ethods, an **E**valuation of the session, any **N**ext steps, the format of the **T**est, and a **S**ummary¹. The tutor's handbook for the module you are teaching will contain the learning aims and objectives for the unit, and may also give guidance on or suggestions for appropriate teaching methods, as well as information regarding the format of the assessment used for the unit. Unit or Year-specific tutor training sessions and Tutors' Days can also be useful resources for identifying effective teaching methods.

All students come to a teaching session with their own perspective based on their own unique past experience². A key component of student-centred teaching is that the teacher is required to have an idea of the student's prior knowledge and experience, in order to pitch the teaching at the right level. As well as assessing this, a learning needs assessment can also identify skills or competencies that need further development, and also what outcomes in particular the student wishes to achieve during the session. It has been suggested that learning is more likely to lead to a change in practice if a needs assessment has been conducted³. As such, a learning needs assessment is an essential part of teaching.

A learning needs assessment may take various different formats, depending on the nature of the teaching session. In smaller groups this is more likely to involve questioning, and in larger groups this may involve a written questionnaire. However either approach requires the student to be able to articulate their own needs, and students often need help recognising these. The Johari window can be a useful framework for thinking about this.

Johari Window



Students will be aware of some of their learning needs. Some of these will also be known to the teacher (arena), for example at the start of a teaching unit it may be possible to make an assumption of no prior knowledge on the subject, or the teacher may have taught this student before and knows that there is a particular area of weakness. Some of these needs will not be known to the teacher (façade), and this is often the case when teaching students you have never taught before. These are the needs that can be identified through questioning, and for this to be successful it is important to develop a relationship of trust with the student, and to promote a safe and supportive teaching environment.

You might begin a tutorial or very small group teaching session by asking the students to tell you what they already know on the subject (for example “what are the causes of GI bleeding?”) and to state what they are hoping to learn during the session. With a larger group, or if the teaching material is appropriate, you might email the students a list of questions to answer before the session, or you might start the session with a short quiz on the planned topic of teaching.

There will be other learning needs that students will be unaware of. Some of these may be known to the teacher (blind spot), for example after the teacher has observed a student consulting with a patient and displaying poor communication skills, but others will be hidden to both parties (unknown), and these are more difficult to identify. It is important to consider all four parts of the window, as focussing only on the needs that are easily identified risks the teaching and learning being unsatisfactory to both the student, who will be failing to fully meet the learning objectives and will be unaware why this is the case, and the teacher, who may feel frustrated that they are not seeing the student progress in the way they expect.

There are various methods that can be used to identify those needs that are unknown to both student and teacher. You are likely to use observation as the key method, observing the way students respond and participate in teaching sessions and discussions, and observing their clinical and communication skills with patients and in role plays. Other methods such as peer review, self-assessment by logbook, and exam (in particular OSCE) performance can be very useful in helping students to identify their own needs, but students will usually need training in their use. If you are teaching the same students over several sessions or over a period of time it can be very useful to spend time reflecting after each session and to use any learning needs you have identified in the students to inform the forthcoming sessions. It is also important to feed these identified needs back to students, and the usual rules of giving feedback apply.

Whatever method you use, once the students’ learning needs have been identified, you will be able to plan a teaching session that focuses on what they want to learn, what they need to learn, what they have failed to understand so far, and which does not duplicate previous teaching. This should result in an environment in which students’ understanding is deeper and your satisfaction as a teacher is greater.

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1. ITTPC London Deanery 2011 Course Materials
 2. Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall 2009. Supporting student learning. A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education
 3. Grant 2000. The effectiveness of continuing professional development. Association for the Study of Medical Education. (ASME medical education booklet).