

# Guideline Universal Design

## Sheet 4: A powerful and safe learning environment



### What?

A powerful and safe learning environment makes participation, meaning-oriented learning and self-management possible. It respects the needs and specificities of a diversity of students, contributes to the learning output and is in line with the knowledge, interests and needs of a diversity of students. <sup>1</sup>

### Why and for whom? <sup>7,9</sup>

A powerful learning environment facilitates and supports the learning process of a diversity of students. Students learn best when they feel respected and part of the group. Certain students (e.g., students with disabilities) may experience stigma and stereotyping, which is detrimental to well-being and learning performance. It is therefore important for staff and teachers to become aware of any prejudices and stereotypes that exist, and to be sensitive to the diverse needs of students.

### Tips & Tricks <sup>2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10</sup>

#### A powerful learning environment

- **Psychological needs** | A powerful learning environment focuses on the psychological needs of the student: student autonomy, involvement and competence (check out Sheet 2: Didactic Principles).
- **Explicit** | Make the learning objectives, didactic methods and evaluation methods of the course unit explicit.
- **Agreements** | Make clear agreements regarding the organization of the lessons.
- **Structure** | Structure a lesson: introduction (generate interest), core (lesson content) and conclusion (summary and feedback with a connection to the objectives).

- **Lesson modules** | Divide the lesson into modules of 20 to 30 minutes, interrupted by an activation activity to retain attention.
- **Balance** | Ensure a good balance between teaching, activating teaching methods and assignments.
- **Environment** | Arouse attention and interest by addressing the students' living environment, or by referring to current events, for example.
- **Summarize** | Summarize the course material regularly (for example, each time after discussing a key point).
- **Connections** | Ensure logical connections between the topics and make these connections explicit.
- **PowerPoint** | Support the lecture with a PowerPoint.
- **Main and side issues** | Clarify the distinction between main and side issues during the lecture.
- **Visualize** | Use relevant visual material and visualize.
- **Cognitive overload** | Avoid cognitive overload.
- **Test the understanding** | Regularly test whether students understand the learning content of the lecture by asking questions (e.g. voting or a 1-minute paper) and answering questions from students.

### A safe learning environment

- Positive relationship** | Maintain a positive relationship: be involved, learn e.g. the names of students by heart if possible. Involve students during the course and actively move around the room.
- Positive learning environment** | Create a positive learning environment: give students the space to express their opinions and feelings by providing moments for consultation and discussion. Always be approachable.
- Enthusiasm** | Show enthusiasm: elements such as a short welcome at the start of the lesson, an open and positive attitude, and possibly some humor during the lesson will show your enthusiasm.
- Role model** | Be a role model: be an example on both moral and professional level.

- **Learning community** | Stimulate connectedness and relationships between students by creating a learning community within the group. Use cooperative methods for this, for example.
- **Microaggression** | Be attentive to microaggression (comments that are not meant to be offensive or discriminatory, but that can be interpreted as such) between students and focus on inclusive and appropriate language. Think about how to convert difficult dialogues between students into a learning moment.

## Know more?

- Check out: Valcke, M. (2014). Krachtige leeromgevingen. Academia Press. (Dutch)

## In practice

“We experiment with social buddies. This is often linked to an extra course to help with personal development. This is how we persuade students: engagement in exchange for points.”

“Our digital learning environment supports a clear structure: the structure recognizable and always comes back. These guidelines help the teacher and the student who has to go through it. For example, teachers also use the same icons.”

“Within our learning environment we provide adaptive learning: we do not release everything at once, but per chapter. In this way we guide students a little in what they do and when. That is a source of discussion: perhaps they want to look much further based on intrinsic motivation. Teachers really think about it and try to make the assessment: what can my students do and what do they need?”

“We try to offer both: we open everything up, but we work with clear diagrams and model paths. That helps students: it is very visual. In mind maps we also make connections between chapters. Students find that very useful, this idea also comes from a focus group with students.”

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Steunpunt diversiteit en leren (z.d.). Krachtige leeromgeving. Geraadpleegd op 25/01/2019 via <http://www.steunpuntdiversiteitenleren.be/themas/krachtige-leeromgeving>
- <sup>2</sup> Van Petegem, P. (2016). *Praktijkboek Innoverend Hoger Onderwijs*. Tielt: Lannoo Campus.
- <sup>3</sup> Van Petegem, P. (2009). *Praktijkboek activerend hoger onderwijs*. Leuven: Lannoo Campus.
- <sup>4</sup> Kallenberg, T., van der Grijsparde, L., & ter Braak, A. (2009). *Leren (en) doceren in het hoger onderwijs*. Den Haag: Boom Lemma uitgevers.
- <sup>5</sup> Mueller, P., & Oppenheimer, D. (2014). The pen is mightier than the keyboard. Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking. *Psychological Science*, 25(6).
- <sup>6</sup> Kraushaar, J., & Novak, D. (2010). Examining the Affects of Student Multitasking with Laptops during the Lecture. *Journal of Information Systems Education*, 21(2).
- <sup>7</sup> Thurber, A. and Bandy, J. (2018). Creating Accessible Learning Environments. Retrieved [18/01/2019] from <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/creating-accessible-learning-environments/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Steunpunt Inclusief Hoger Onderwijs (2017). Universeel ontwerp [onuitgegeven intern document]. Gent: Steunpunt Inclusief Hoger Onderwijs
- <sup>9</sup> Rowe, Anna & Wood, Leigh & Muchatuta, Michelle. (2010). Inclusive practice in higher education: Feedback that breaks pedagogical barriers.
- <sup>10</sup> Bracken, S. & Novak, K. (2019). Transforming higher education through universal design for learning: an international perspective. Oxon and New York: Routledge