

Characteristics of a SPEC vs. “Traditional” Learning Environment

SPEC Environment	“Traditional” Environment
<p>Student-Centered – Students learn by talking, listening, writing, reading, creating, and reflecting on content, ideas, issues, and concerns as they work in small groups or individually to engage the curriculum. Authority is shared with the teacher in many ways. Students have direct access to knowledge. They are encouraged to develop their own questions and arrive at some of their own conclusions with teacher guidance. It is presumed that students have pre-existing knowledge and skill that they can contribute to the learning. Students may learn from each other as much as they learn from the teacher. See Graphic 1</p>	<p>Teacher-Centered – The teacher is the center of authority. The teacher transmits most information and all knowledge to the learner. It is presumed that the teacher will ask most of the important questions and that these questions have a correct answer that must be validated by the teacher. Students are “empty vessels” - teachers are the experts that fill the vessels with appropriate knowledge. See Graphic 2</p>
<p>Problem-Based – Teachers design complex and increasingly authentic problems for students to solve individually or in collaborative teams. Students must grapple with information (the content) as well as use skills (social, intellectual, emotional) to solve the problems successfully. Feedback and assessment is an integral and ongoing part of the process. Successful learning is assessed on multiple levels: content understanding, group process, individual skill development, etc. Students receive personalized narrative feedback regarding their performance from several sources: peers, teacher, and self-assessment. The teacher serves as a facilitator, guide, co-learner, mentor, and coach who helps students through the problem-solving/learning process.</p>	<p>Content-Based – The coverage of content is the focus of the learning. Teachers create structured lessons designed to help students understand and recall important facts, concepts, and processes that they will be expected to recall on tests and examinations. Concern for skill development is often tied directly only to those skills that are required for improved mastery of the content. Assessment often comes at the end of a unit of study and is frequently evaluated in terms of percentages of correct answers or expressions of understanding as shown on pencil and paper tests. The teacher may have little or no opportunity to share personalized, narrative feedback with each student to provide direction for future improvement.</p>
<p>Experiential – Students learn by doing. All learning occurs within the context of real, first hand experiences. Students participate, make choices, and accept some responsibility for their role in the learning process. The interactive nature of this approach creates a wealth of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social experiences. Learners construct their own meaning by reflecting on all these experiences. They are prompted to make connections to their own lives, larger contexts, and theory during this reflective stage.</p>	<p>Theoretical – Students generally learn by listening, reading, writing, or following tightly scripted activities related to the curriculum. Students have very few choices of consequence. The curriculum exists in and of itself. Passing exams is the primary context for motivation. Curricular content is often pre-packaged in discreet bundles of information to be learned in a prescribed, often linear sequence. Students may or may not recognize any connection between the content and their own lives.</p>
<p>Collaborative – All learning takes place in a social context. Working as an individual or as part of a collaborative team, students consistently function as part of some larger “community.” While competition has its place, collaboration is the fundamental value. All learners are expected to work with and show respect for others. Through multiple experiences, reflection, and a conscious attention to the emotional health of the group members, students learn to value (rather than merely tolerate) the differences in each other. Success for both individuals and the group is recognized and rewarded.</p>	<p>Individual – Individual performance is the primary measure of success. Competition is encouraged as a predominant value. Individual accountability and achievement is recognized and rewarded. Group accountability and achievement may go unrecognized or actively discouraged. Little emphasis is placed on the development of social skills or group decision-making, management, or leadership skills. The emotional health of the group members is not as high a priority as individual grades on exams.</p>

Issues in Comparing SPEC vs. Traditional Approaches

SPEC	Issue	Traditional
SPEC learning usually takes more time. A powerful learning experience proceeds at the pace of the learner – not necessarily that of the teacher or some external schedule.	Time	Traditional lessons can be tailored much more predictably to time constraints as many (if not all) of the variables are under the control of the instructor.
SPEC learning definitely leads to a greater depth of learning among a wider range of students. Living the experience at multiple levels (physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual) creates the opportunity for a broad array of very powerful, long-term understandings and insights.	Depth of Understanding	Traditional lessons have the potential to produce reasonable depth of understanding in the specific area of focus (physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual), provided that the style of presentation matches the learning style of the specific student.
The SPEC approach may help many learners to synthesize a great deal of knowledge and experience. It is questionable whether this approach is worth the time it takes if the goal is to introduce and recall lots of information for the short term.	Breadth of Understanding	Traditional lessons can “cover” a wide area of information in a short amount of time. Effectively presented and reinforced, the information can be recalled successfully in short term memory.
SPEC experiences can be “life-changing” for some learners. Ownership implies some measure of personal investment. With the high degree of student participation and interaction, decision-making, and commitment required, SPEC learning invites deep investment and therefore a tremendous amount of student ownership and pride in positive results.	Emotional Impact & Ownership	Ownership is not often a descriptor associated with very traditional approaches. Since most decision making and control is in the hands of the teacher, successful participation in a traditional learning experience may require little student investment of personal energy.
Teachers who are successful using the SPEC approach generally possess all the qualities of a solid traditional instructor. However, in addition they must: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be comfortable with yielding some control to learners. - Be comfortable not knowing all the answers. - Be comfortable with the messy chaos that often attends experiential learning. - Be prepared to let students struggle and/or fail for the sake of the learning. 	Essential Teacher Qualities	Teachers consistently successful in traditional instruction usually have a complete mastery of the content, well-developed group management and organizational skills, an appreciation of learning theory, and an engaging and/or nurturing personality that develops relationships with a diverse array of students. It is important that the teacher be mature enough to put the needs and best interests of the learner first.