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What is Wrong with these Students and How Can We Fix Them? The Changing Face of Motivation and Engagement Strategies in the College Classroom

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Abstract

There is much discussion in higher education today focused on concerns of the lack of student engagement and motivation. Variations of the phrase, “I’ve never seen such lack of student effort” ring through the hallways of institutions across the nation. Much research has been done on ways to enrich the classroom environment to make it more enticing to the college learner, but the root of the problem lies much deeper. This paper focuses on the hierarchy of needs, as identified by Maslow’s (1970). This hierarchy of needs is generally described in pyramidal fashion with the understanding that, until lower levels of need are met (starting at level one), higher needs cannot be obtained. Learning, in the traditional sense, occurs at level five. Thus, if an instructor wants to increase motivation and engagement in his or her classroom, it becomes imperative that an attempt be made to address the lower level needs first.

Keywords: motivation, engagement, college, Maslow

“Don't try to fix the students, fix ourselves first. The good teacher makes the poor student good and the good student superior. When our students fail, we, as teachers, too, have failed.”

Marva Collins

Introduction

There has been much research on the difficulty of motivating and engaging students in the PreK-12 realm of education. Teachers and administrators from those age and grade ranges long ago discovered that the focus, attention span, and interest of students are changing. Why is it then, that lack of motivation and engagement of college students is now being treated as a relatively new problem? Many of the students that have been filtering through the PreK-12 programs for the last several decades have been migrating into the higher education setting. The engagement and motivation issues these students demonstrated during their elementary, middle, and high school years did not simply fade away during the summer between their senior year in high school and their first year in college.

Just as PreK-12 teachers recognized what always worked before was no longer working, and there was a need to re-evaluate the pedagogical practices they were using, college instructors must also be willing to recognize and accept that change is necessary. Contrary to the saying “if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you have always gotten,” doing what they have always done is no longer working for college instructors. The physical, social, and emotional makeup of today's college students is very different from 20, or even 10, years ago. Thus, it is time to alter the approach. Higher education instructors must re-examine their own pedagogical approaches if they wish to address the problem of lack of motivation and engagement in the college setting.

The first step in this process is to recognize and accept the fact that nothing is “wrong” with the students who are entering higher education. They are not broken, and if the approaches used in solving the motivation and engagement issues are addressed through the lens of us trying to “fix them,” then the approaches will fail miserably. The students currently sitting in college classrooms could be considered a form of natural selection. That is to say, the students have evolved to fit the new environment in which they find themselves living and learning. The attitude of “fix the student” would only work if it were possible to change the environment. No, the student and environment are not going to adapt to fit the mold of the traditional college setting. Instead, the mold must be reconstructed to fit the new student and the ever-changing learning environment.

Let me begin with a clarification of the term engagement. Taylor, Hunter, Melton, and Goodwin (2011) defined it as the “amount of time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activity” (p. 74). According to Axelson and Flick (2011), student engagement refers to “how *involved* or *interested* students appear to be in their

learning and how *connected* they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other” (p. 38). Research has shown that several factors play an integral role in creating an engaging learning environment: relevance, control and choice, challenge, social interaction, anticipated sense of success, need, novelty, and cognitive dissonance (Kirby and McDonald, 2009).

When asked who is responsible for creating and sustaining high levels of student engagement, Axelson and Flick (2011) surmise that institutions have been relegated with progressively more of this responsibility. “Colleges and universities – and especially the professors in whose classroom students find themselves – clearly have a large role to play in fostering student engagement” (p. 42). This supports Kuh’s (2009) research that the institution is, at least in part, responsible when he surmises “student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college *and* what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683). Thus, if it is deemed that higher education instructors are responsible for creating engaging classroom environments, where do we begin? According to O’Connor (2013), recent research into student engagement is indeed leading professors into a reevaluation of their own pedagogical practices. His research focuses on ways to increase class participation in the college classroom.

After spending nine years in public education, followed by another nine in higher education, I have discovered that the pedagogical strategies that engaged and motivated my third and eighth graders are the same ones that I find working with my college students. To demonstrate the connection between engagement strategies at the college level and those proven effective in K-12 settings, I will build on the work of Marzano and Pickering (2011) and on the work of renowned educational psychologist, Abraham Maslow (1970), which focuses on a hierarchy of needs that all people experience.

According to Marzano and Pickering (2011), four areas establish a framework of engagement: emotions, interest, perceived importance, and perceptions of self-efficacy. They frame this research in what they refer to as four emblematic questions that students, in essence, ask themselves to ascertain their engagement level in that moment: How do I feel?; Am I interested?; Is this important?; and Can I do this? Through analyzing and responding to these questions, instructors are able to identify barriers to learning and, through addressing them, address the engagement and motivation issues that may be occurring.

Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs is generally discussed in pyramidal fashion with the understanding that, until lower levels of need are met (starting at level one), higher needs cannot be obtained. Those levels are: 1) biological and physiological needs such as air, food, sleep, shelter, and warmth; 2) safety needs such as protection from elements, security, and stability; 3) social needs such as belongingness and love; 4) esteem needs including self-esteem, achievement, and mastery; 5) cognitive needs including knowledge and meaning; 6) aesthetic needs such as appreciation and search for beauty and balance; 7) self-actualization needs including realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, and seeking personal growth; and finally; 8) transcendence needs which involve helping others to achieve self-actualization. Learning occurs at

level five, cognitive needs. Thus, until the needs of the prior four levels are met, engagement and motivation in learning are beyond the grasp of students.

Biological and Physiological Needs

How a student feels about the learning experience is the determining factor in the probability of that student being engaged in the lesson. Whether a student is engaged in the learning at hand can be directly tied to the emotional state at that time. Maslow (1943) states

If all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply non-existent or be pushed into the background . . . the urge to write poetry, the desire to acquire an automobile, the interest in American history, the desire for a new pair of shoes are, in the extreme case, forgotten or become of secondary importance. (pp. 373-374)

According to Maslow, biological and physiological needs are essential to the basis of human existence. The need for food, water, and shelter take precedence over all others. “Obviously a good way to obscure the ‘higher’ motivations, and to get a lopsided view of human capacities and human nature, is to make the organism extremely and chronically hungry or thirsty” (Maslow, 1943, p. 375). Maslow is not, of course, advocating for withholding these necessities, on the contrary, he is clearly maintaining the importance of meeting those basic needs. Students who are overly tired or perhaps have not been eating regularly or nutritiously are not as likely to be engaged as learners than those who have had these needs addressed.

Although we have limited control over the sleeping and eating habits of our students, Marzano and Pickering (2011) address another topic that focuses on the “How do I feel?” question that is completely within the control of the instructor. “If emotions are negative in that moment, we are less likely to engage in new activities or challenging tasks” (p. 3). Perhaps not surprising, negative emotions such as boredom, disinterest, and frustration lead to lack of classroom engagement while more positive emotions such as enthusiasm, enjoyment, and interest lead to higher levels of engagement. If students find the lesson interesting, exciting, or relevant, they are much more likely to participate in the learning process.

Marzano and Pickering (2011) identify a positive demeanor on the part of the teacher as the second greatest influence on student emotional engagement. They state that a teacher can demonstrate a positive demeanor through enthusiasm, intensity, and using humor. “We know the classroom teachers have enormous power over their students for good or ill – that a powerfully engaging instructor of botany, could turn 30 botany hating students into botany lover/learners” (Axelson & Flick, 2011, p. 43).

I find that enthusiasm in the classroom can be quite contagious. If I am excited about the content I am covering, the students generally will become more interested in it as well. The energy of the classroom environment directly relates to Marzano and Pickering’s (2011) question, “Am I interested?” I tell my teacher candidates if you are bored with what you are doing; your students are likely to be bored also.

When discussing the topic of teacher liveliness with my college learners, I was given immediate feedback by the smiles on their faces as they began sharing stories. One student mentioned a particular professor who, even though the subject was not her favorite, really caused her to be interested in the topic because he was just so “passionate” about it. Another student indicated that she was not at all excited about taking certain classes because she did not see the relevance. However, because the instructor was so excited about the material and brought it alive with his own stories and experiences, she loved the courses.

There are many things instructors can do to help address their students’ biological and physiological needs. First, get to know your students so you may notice when there are issues with basic needs, and then you can refer the students to offices on campus where they can receive help. Use advising time to discuss the importance of eating breakfast and getting sufficient sleep. Learn to recognize signs of substance and other types of abuse and make appropriate referrals. Finally, utilize classroom activities that encourage physical movement and conversation to counteract fatigue and boredom.

Safety Needs

Maslow discusses the second level of needs, safety needs, as those that cover topics such as security, order, limits, and stability. “We may generalize and say that the average child in our society generally prefers a safe, orderly, predictable, organized world, which he can count on...” (Maslow, 1943, p. 378). Students who have concerns with safety are not likely going to place much emphasis on their education at that time. This prioritizing will result in a lack of positive response to the question posed by Marzano and Pickering (2011), “Is this important?” Obviously, safety and security needs are going to take precedence over intellectual needs for that student.

I recently called a student to my office because of concerns over numerous missed classes in one of my evening courses. The student was appreciative of my concern and shared that she was nervous about being out after dark due to something that had recently happened to her. I offered to contact campus police to ask an escort to walk her to the parking lot, or even walk her there myself after class if that would make her feel better. The student accepted my offer and did not miss another class after our conversation.

Instructors can help meet the safety and security needs of their students by assuring classroom civility is a priority in word and deed for both student-student **and** teacher-student relationships. Students feel more secure in classes where expectations are clear and consistent; thus, structure classes and assignments so students understand expectations. Instructors should create their office environment to be “safe zones” for students so they feel comfortable asking for help or advice. Finally, be aware of campus safety policies and protocols and share that information with your students.

Social Needs

Social needs include a human's desire for belongingness and love. We have an innate need to feel we are part of a group or family. We need to show, and be shown, affection and we value relationships with other people. Maslow (1943) states that a person "will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal" (p. 381).

Students' perceptions of acceptance is unquestionably a determiner of how emotionally engaged students will be in the classroom. "Certainly, the relationship teachers have with students is one of the most powerful determiners of how a student answers the question 'How do I feel?'" (Marzano & Pickering, 2011, p. 6). Hu's (2011) research discovered positive correlations between social engagement and college persistence. Marzano and Pickering (2011) find that "It is not what a teacher thinks and feels about a particular student that forges a positive relationship with the student. Rather, it is how the teacher speaks to and behaves with the student that communicates respect and acceptance" (p. 36).

Throughout my years in higher education, I can unequivocally state that when students have come to me in distress about some aspect of their college lives, it has generally been because of a negative interaction with an instructor. I often say to my teacher candidates, "Your students won't care until they know you care." I have found this also to be true in college students. I have had many students, moved to the point of tears, complain they went to an instructor because they were struggling with some part of his or her course to be met with indifference or even slight hostility. Statements such as "we covered that in class" or "you can find that information in your book" were reported as common replies without any further effort toward assistance.

In my discussions with students, I have often heard statements that many professors do not care if the students fail. The students indicate they feel they were bothering the instructor or that the instructor acted as though he or she did not want to spend any time helping the student. One student's impassioned comment was "they need to show compassion in teaching us and not just teach to a room." Conversely, another student who really struggled with a particular course indicated she had an instructor who really did try to help. As a result, she found herself working even harder. She said that because he cared, it made her care more and she worked harder to be successful for that instructor.

The ways instructors can fulfill some of the social needs of students are not difficult. First, learn and use the students' names. Recognition of students as a people and not just as faces in a classroom goes a long way toward showing students that you recognize them as individuals. Second, provide students with a variety of office hours so they have access to you. Third, show students you are concerned about helping them be successful by responding to emails and phone calls in a timely manner. Fourth, assure that all students are given opportunity to speak and participate in class activities, and create a classroom environment where differing opinions are welcome. Finally, utilize in-class group activities, which can help a classroom become a supportive community conducive to group learning, support, and belonging.

Esteem Needs

“Satisfaction of the self-esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world. But thwarting of these needs produces feelings of inferiority, of weakness, and of helplessness” (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). A student’s sense of self-efficacy has a profound effect on engagement. As Marzano and Pickering (2011) indicate, if students believe they can accomplish the task, they are much more likely to become engaged in the activity.

The answer to the question, “Can I do this?” is fundamental in identifying the impetus behind human intention. Regardless of how strongly a goal might be desired, if it is believed attaining that goal is an impossibility, it is unlikely that much time or effort will be directed toward pursuing it. “If the answer is yes, students are more likely to engage. If the answer is no, students might lessen or abort their involvement” (pp. 15-16).

I often pose this question to my own teacher candidates, “Which comes first - experiencing success or belief that you can experience success?” This is where I see the biggest division between public education and higher education when addressing student engagement. In public education, teachers are taught to help their students by providing whatever assistance is necessary until a student is able to experience success. This type of assistance is not as common in the higher education setting. Ownership and responsibility falls more predominately on the student, and the instructor takes a much less accommodating role in helping students achieve success. The college atmosphere is much more of a “sink or swim” approach.

I believe for there to be a significant change in how esteem needs are met in the higher education setting, there must be a fundamental shift in college instructors’ views of their roles in the learning process. They will have to step down from the proverbial “sage on the stage” role and adopt the “guide by the side” mentality. This is by no means to indicate that expectations should be lowered. Our profession calls for high standards for our students, and those standards should not be compromised. However, the path that we take to achieve those expectations is not the same one that has been travelled by those who have gone before us.

Instructors can help meet students’ self-esteem needs by treating their students with respect. Become aware of campus support services such as academic success centers. Utilize advising time to identify weakness, but also provide suggestions that could help lead to success. Advise students to seek tutoring and perhaps even course changes if prior knowledge is not in place to assure success in certain courses. When grading papers, provide positive feedback in addition to marking mistakes, and provide explanations for grades earned on assignments.

Conclusion

So whose responsibility is it to see that our learners in college classrooms are engaged in the learning process? Taylor et al.'s (2011) research collected data on this particular question. They found student respondents (particularly from non-major courses) felt that class engagement "was largely a purely faculty responsibility to ensure engagement by being 'cool' 'knowledgeable', and most of all – 'entertaining' " (p. 78). Axelson and Flick (2011) clearly point out that it is the combined effort of both the students and the institution. "Students need to put forth the effort necessary to develop their knowledge and skills, and institutions need to provide the appropriate environments to facilitate student learning" (p. 42).

Axelson and Flick (2011) recognize this topic as potentially flammable and wisely suggest that we focus on the broader issue:

But if we define engagement in a more limited sense – i.e., student involvement in a learning process – we can move past the issue of who is responsible to a more productive question: 'what are the factors affecting student engagement in a particular type of learning process?' This could lead to less politically charged, more locally based, efforts to identify and illuminate barriers to student engagement in classrooms and educational programs. (p. 42)

When one accepts the fact that until the needs at the biological, safety, social, and self-esteem levels are met, level five, cognitive needs (the level where learning occurs) cannot and will not be reached, a paradigm shift occurs. The implication is that the students who are experiencing engagement issues in college are not broken. They do not need fixed. However, they do have needs and until those needs are addressed, engagement is not going to occur.

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