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Teaching Unmotivated and Under-motivated College Students: Problems, Challenges, and Considerations

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Abstract

This essay addresses a critical problem in today's college classroom: dealing with unmotivated and under-motivated students whose inclination toward learning stems from both academic and social factors that the faculty must effectively address to meet teaching-learning goals, meet course requirements, and his or her responsibility in contributing to student success as defined by the institution. The author discusses this problem and the teaching learning challenges it poses for faculty members in higher educational settings, explores how the challenge can be met through modified perspective on teaching and learning theory – multiple intelligences, differentiated instruction, and then communicates personal strategies and recommendations.

Introduction: The Problem

Annually, millions of students enter colleges and universities or higher educational institutions across the globe, some fully ready and motivated to learn, others marginally ready, and yet others simply not ready or academically and socially unprepared for post-secondary or tertiary educational studies. Many colleges and universities or institutions of higher education have strategies and programs designed to meet the learning needs of those who are marginally ready, or who traditionally, would not be considered ready or motivated for college. Some of these institutions lower academic requirements to accommodate these prospective students, while others simply admit them into college remediation and transitional programs. In fact, some universities and colleges across the globe specialize in targeting the sector of the prospective college population that consists of marginally and academically unready students, and make great profits and business out of this. There are several such colleges and universities operating in the United States and elsewhere, but it would not be politically correct to name examples here. These are most often proprietary educational corporations or private institutions belonging to an educational corporation owning institutions and education-based or related businesses at several levels. Most of these institutions cater to students who before, would never have the opportunity to acquire higher educational credentials due to what was traditionally a universal “weed-out” process. These students are now earning similar degrees; equally accredited and recognized as those earned by their academically prepared and socially motivated counterparts. Those who enter more traditional-based institutions must often meet higher entrance requirements that are based on standardized test scores and specific grade point average (GPA) and other academically-based requirements. These schools are perceived to have higher educational quality and value, and in some cases, accreditation, even though the industry of educational accreditation is seeing less and less distinctions in the accreditation of sub-marginal, marginal, and great schools. Students who are academically and socially unprepared, or who are not college-ready also enter the traditional, more academically tempered colleges and universities sometimes as diversity and other equal opportunity initiatives overcome stringent academic standards. The problem of dealing with the academically and socially unprepared learner is therefore not unique to proprietary institutions that capitalize upon this sector of the college student population across the globe. Thus, a unique problem exists for faculty members of higher educational institutions of all types and levels: teaching the unmotivated and/or under-motivated student.

The Challenges

There are two particular groups of students that are especially challenging to deal with in the college classroom setting. The first group is unmotivated students who simply seem to lack any drive or passion for learning and education. The second group represents under-motivated students; those with minimal drive for learning; they want to learn, but lack the deep passion to create the kind of enthusiasm that highly motivated learners seem to possess. Dealing with unmotivated and under-motivated students in the college classroom can be very challenging, and equally frustrating. Most faculty entering higher educational institutions are not prepared to be surprised by students who are for example, reading at grade-six level, lack the maturity to comprehend abstract concepts and ideas, do not know where the index or glossary of a book is located, or simply have no idea why they are sitting in class or attending college other than just to get a better job. However, this is the reality that thousands of faculty members across the globe face every semester, especially every beginning of an academic year, and it is not unique to American or Canadian institutions. As the factors of globalization and competition change the dynamics and standards of education, many institutions are competing to stay afloat, and private institutions are powerful change agents when it comes to educational standards and norms. While these private institutions - many motivated by profits - apply rigorous corporate-business models that are backed by market-driving ideas and customer-ownership conceptualization in the form of what the student-customer desires or wants, many of them are lowering academic standards in favor of increasing their student base or number of students enrolled. Regardless of the changes, it is indeed a challenge to teach students who lack academic preparation and motivation to learn.

Teaching undergraduate students is perhaps sometimes more challenging than teaching at the graduate level, because this seems to be where the problem of motivation as a challenge predominantly exists. The majority of graduate students are generally more socially mature and exercise greater self-responsibility over their learning, motivation, and education compared to undergraduate students. Thus, the problem seems to prevail more at career-vocational-technical and junior colleges or undergraduate levels rather than at graduate and research-level studies. There are two categories of students that are of particular concern: those who are unmotivated because they lack any motivation or inclination at all to learn and because they seem not to want to learn; and those who are under-motivated because they value learning and want to learn, but do not apply themselves and display minimal drive or effort. The problem becomes even a greater challenge when perceived characteristics or attitudes and behaviors of both the unmotivated and under-motivated student occur simultaneously in the same mind and body - a student who is unmotivated (lacks overall drive toward learning) and under-motivated (not motivated enough to develop the needed drive despite efforts invested by faculty members). This student has an unpredictable tendency toward learning, and efforts by the faculty to motivate this kind of student will constantly be wrestled between the under-motivated and unmotivated tendencies of this student. Dealing with the unmotivated and under-motivated student can take up more than enough of faculty time inside and outside of the classroom, lead to disruptive student behavior [DSB] (Seidman, 2005), the development of a narrow learning curve, interruption of planned sequence of assignments, readings, lectures, and sometimes incompleteness of planned course agenda, complaints from other motivated students and even resentments for the under-motivated and unmotivated students who take up an unequal amount of faculty time and attention, among other problems. Beach (2010) understands the impact of dealing with the unmotivated and under-motivated or otherwise challenging college student as she remarks:

Many teachers are being faced with difficulty teaching academically diverse students grouped together in classrooms of 20 or more students. These classrooms may contain students who have no interest in the subject or students who are disrupting class because they are not being stimulated. All this can take valuable minutes away from those students eager to learn (p. 1).

When students in the college classroom are unmotivated or under-motivated the faculty's job becomes much more difficult, especially as the pressure for student academic success rests heavily on instructional faculty. Faculty must try to reach each of these unique students and categorically design an approach that can effectively communicate the subject matter to students from such vast social, cultural, intellectual-academic and educational backgrounds, and this is not an easy task. When the unmotivated and under-motivated students emerge, "All this can take valuable minutes away from those students eager to learn" (Beach, 2010, p. 1), and the faculty must now curtail his or her teaching-learning ambition. Now, a twelve week course originally designed to cover 10 chapters, 10 multiple choice quizzes and three major essays could possibly become one that accomplishes merely half of this. This is the reality that faculty at colleges and universities

or higher educational institutions must face each semester, and the challenge is there even without the under-motivated and unmotivated students to deal with. Faculty members are already dealing with issues such as budget cuts that affect the quantity, quality, and types of learning resources they have access to, disruptive student behaviors (DSBs), and increase need for involvement in issues of institutional change and politics, among other issues. Thus, the presence of the under-motivated and unmotivated students poses more than a significant challenge to teaching and learning. Another factor which makes dealing with unmotivated and under-motivated college students difficult is that faculty members are already dealing with individuals with differing learning needs and levels. In today's multicultural classrooms with individuals from differing socio-cultural backgrounds, college instructors must now deal with what appear as non-traditional "behaviors, values, and attitudes" as major factors that define motivation and determine level of motivation present in students. For example, college faculty must now address many controversial issues and topics such as abortion, homosexuality, and accommodate individuals' relative views and lifestyles, etc.

Characteristics of the Unmotivated and Under-motivated Student

The unmotivated and under-motivated student sometimes shares some characteristics and can be very difficult to distinguish. A faculty member might question and think quietly: "Is this student simply under-motivated or unmotivated?" Figuring out the answer might be a challenge itself and how the faculty arrives at this will help to determine how effectively he or she can attempt to address the problem. Some of the cues that might prompt faculty to categorize students into these two groups include students who generally do not speak in class or participate in discussions, students who are frequently late with assignments, those who fail to direct attention towards the faculty and teaching monitor, or the blackboard or whiteboard (Seidman, 2005). Other cues include focusing on non-class activities such as cellular phone texting, browsing the Internet on their laptops, frequently leaving the classroom for what seems to be excess breaks, being disruptive by talking to other students on personal non-related course issues while the faculty is teaching, and generally performing poorly on quizzes, assignments, and examinations (Mishra, 1992). Any or all of these factors can be observed in the unmotivated or under-motivated student. It is the role of the exemplary instructional faculty leader to manage classroom effectively to gauge teaching and learning for success. Attempting to "diagnose" and "categorize" students as unmotivated and/or under-motivated can be the first difficulty step for faculty who must deal with these behavioral and social distractions.

Considerations

According to Armstrong (2010), dealing with the unmotivated and under-motivated student can simply be a matter of understanding and approach, and this lies in the idea of multiple intelligences. Armstrong (2010) argues that if a faculty is having difficulty reaching a student in the more traditional linguistic or logical ways of instruction, the theory of multiple intelligences suggests several other ways in which the material might be presented to facilitate effective learning. While Beach (2010) believes that offering each student the chance to learn the subject material in ways that address each student individually can benefit students in retaining information that will later be necessary to become thoughtful, productive citizens, the great question is: "How exactly do faculty or professors achieve this in a classroom filled with 20, 30 or more unique learners?" This is indeed a difficult question, especially when we consider that students who are simply not motivated are sometimes far outside of the problems that faculty can reasonably expect to address and handle in an eight, twelve, or sixteen weeks course. Beach proposes dealing with this challenge by utilizing a combination of methodologies and strategies to foster and create an environment that caters to each individual student. This is achieved through differentiation combined with curriculum layering, where faculty can create a student-centered classroom that is supportive to each student by providing choice and immediate feedback in a wide variety of activities and assessments. This sounds really great and can work to a certain degree depending on the course level, materials, and contents to be taught. In classes where discussion forums are possible, this is usually a very successful approach as even the under-motivated and unmotivated students can become stimulated by passionate discussions based on self-experience. For example, a professor or faculty teaching a course titled "Cross Cultural Human Relations" may want to use a Dialogue Approach where discussions, debates, individual viewpoints and ability to understand and express one's perspective on social issues become part of the learning and assessment-grading method. In such a case, the under-motivated and unmotivated students, especially those whose motivation stems from academic ability, will become or feel more equal or capable as their academically-more inclined and capable counterparts. After all, everyone has a voice and the ability to express or use that voice can act as a common

denominator –stimulant in the classroom to promote motivation and success.

The theory of multiple intelligences by Gardner (1983, 1993, 1999) could be applied to address the learning problems and challenges of dealing with what appears as unmotivated and under-motivated students in the college classroom. Gardner believes that we learn in different ways and that individuals have characteristically unique and dominant mode of learning; those who are not excellent cognitive learners might be excellent psychomotor or visual learners and so on. This is what Beach (2010) means by using “differentiation instruction”. Differentiated instruction allows the college professor or faculty to address the multiple intelligences that affect students’ learning styles as he or she designs course syllabus or course outline that offers a variety of activities that cater to all learning styles as an option for students to learn the standards being taught. George (2005) believes that this is the most applicable option available to address differential motivation and abilities for learning in the classroom. The faculty will need to also be as creative as possible and understand each student’s motivational level and learning need and in doing so, must create multiple options for assignments including discussions, case studies, verbal presentation, among other credit-based learning activities (Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

Faculty facing the problem of student motivation in the college classroom must seek to understand more about students’ behaviors and values and how these affect learning, and in doing so, must build into their course activities, different strategies that can potentially affect these values and behaviors. After all, instructional leadership is what faculty members are expected to apply in the classroom to effectively guide students to meet learning goals and meet and deal with any challenge that emerge. Through focusing on their ability to influence and inspire, faculty members can model the way and challenge students to learn by presenting themselves and their experiences as examples. This means seeing themselves as exemplary instructional leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2003) and not as mere textbook or disciplinary pundits, but as transformational leaders who must first change students’ attitudes and behaviors to set a strong foundation for effective teaching and successful learning.

Personal Approach and Recommendations

In today’s global society we all have to embrace diversity in many forms, and must consider the difficulty of teaching academically and socially diverse students as simply a diversity challenge and an opportunity to improve our existing teaching strategies, learn new ones, and build on our knowledge of pedagogy and learning. My personal approach in dealing with unmotivated and under-motivated students is to build my course syllabus or outline with contingencies; meaning, recognizing that my planned teaching and assignment agenda can change and often does change. Therefore, student-participation becomes a key in classroom instructions where major term projects are often voted on. For example, asking a question such as “what would you prefer for a term project: writing an individual research paper or doing a group presentation, or visiting a local business to examine the diversity practices?” gives students options and caters to diverse interests. In addition, my courses frequently carry at least two extra assignments to meet contingencies such as student absences, illness, or to allow a kind of customizing option in assessment methods where learning challenges pose as disadvantages to students needing extra accommodations. It is recommended that faculty seek to understand the factors that affect student motivation to learn, how they can address these learning challenges, and most of all, engage in continuous education and professional development that address these issues and challenge themselves to recognize that a diverse classroom requires diverse teaching strategies.

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