



From Teacher to Curator: The Power of Intrinsic Motivation in Students

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Research suggests that “we become more successful when we are happier and more positive” and studies show “positive [emotions] broaden the amount of possibilities we process, making us more thoughtful, creative, and open to new ideas” (Achor, 2010.) Yet, traditional college classrooms (intentionally or unintentionally) often use stress and “fear of failure” as motivation techniques for students. In this course I tried tapping into students’ intrinsic motivations to increase their excitement I and allowed them autonomy in the classroom to give them more positive emotions toward the course and the assignment.

Innovative Approach or Practice that Merits Sharing with Others

With this research in mind, I took my role as instructor one step further and became a curator as well. Rather than limiting the work of students to be seen just by their peers and instructor in in-class presentations, I opened their work up to the public at large by finding gallery space to exhibit their course projects. This small step changed the mindset of my students from “I have to produce this deliverable to pass this class” to “I get the opportunity to produce this work of art and show it to a public audience!” The items in the exhibition were products of an upper-level fashion history assignment based on a constructivist approach to learning. Constructivism holds that curriculum is not isolated from the rest of our lives; learning is contextually informed by our existing beliefs and knowledge. Consistent with this approach, the assignment allowed students to design and develop an interpretation of course material through projects related to students’ personal interests and career goals.

Purpose for Identified Audience

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss one way I was able to tap into students’ intrinsic motivations which increased student enthusiasm for the class and improved the quality of student work. It is my hope that this presentation will spark a larger conversation about how we can continue tapping into students’ intrinsic motivations to encourage high quality work and move away from point penalization.

Implementation of Practice Clearly Delineated

This exhibit began with an assignment composed of four deliverables during the semester. Students were encouraged to create a project that proved they had mastered the learning outcomes for the course. After students submitted their first project, it occurred to me that it was a shame only their peers and I would see what they produced. After negotiating plans with a local art gallery to exhibit the student work, I informed the students that the best projects would be on display at the end of the semester. The students’ excitement and enthusiasm for the class increased immediately. By the next due date, the quality and depth of the projects had

significantly increased. In addition, students reported having spent more time on the project and also having more fun with the project.

The exhibit itself required quite a bit of logistical work including collecting and storing the student projects, which ranged in size from a three square foot cube to a fully constructed garment to a small journal. Additionally, the exhibit needed to be advertised to students and the general public. A reception was also planned to celebrate the students, their work, and the opening of the exhibit.

Description of Success of Practice in Fostering Desired Learning Outcomes

Over 150 people were in attendance at the opening reception of the exhibit, of which about 75 were students and professors and the rest were from outside the college. Twenty-five student projects were on display representing about 30 students. In the final course evaluation, my highest rated question was in response to “how much did the instructor motivate you to do your best work?” with a 3.9 on a 4.0 scale, well above the department mean of 3.4 and the institution mean of 3.3. This clearly indicates that tapping into student intrinsic motivations increases their motivation to do their best work over the more traditional lecture/test method.

In addition, students responded favorably to the assignment. One student sent an email while she was working on her project saying, “I just was doing my crinoline research and wanted to let you know how great student- designed projects are. Looking back on my college experience I have retained so much more information on projects I had a role in creating than ones that were led for me and it makes doing research so much more enjoyable!!”

Indication of Plans for Continuation, Revisions or Follow-Up

I do plan to continue this teaching strategy of tapping into students’ intrinsic motivations, but I’d like to improve on three challenges I faced: the amount of time it took to organize the exhibit, the amount of financial and non-financial departmental support, and the amount of physical labor it took to set up the exhibit. I am following up with the director of the gallery space to see how they could better facilitate the display of student work. I am working with the chair of my department to see how the department could better support faculty members willing to plan and execute student exhibits. I am exploring other options, particularly online exhibit spaces, to reduce the amount of physical labor the exhibit requires.