

MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES IN TEACHING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract:

There is nothing more important to a professor than finding answers to the question “How do my students learn?” This is true because teaching cannot be separated from learning. Indeed, teaching is the “art and science” of helping students learn, and our success as professors depends on changing the minds and intellectual character of students. Ultimately, learners control motivation. Each individual decides at the beginning of the day to engage in activities based on interest, relevancy, difficulty, energy, choice and consequences. Helping students to understand motivation and to make good choices is the key to empowering them in the classroom. There are several strategies that can influence students’ attitudes and perceptions and their motivation for learning.

Key words: motivation, strategies, student, teacher, learning, teaching, etc.

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1. Introduction

Higher education, the same as education at all levels, has changed a lot recently. The fact is a natural consequence of the transformations and development of society itself. All of us can state that there are advantages and disadvantages of this development, we may even question whether it is really development (meaning evolution) or not. Among the advantages we can mention the easy access to information, the freedom of speech – and we refer here to former communist countries, as Romania was – facilitating communication and the modern teaching methods based on a student-centred approach.

It is certain that there are also disadvantages such as the incapacity to obtain all the existent information, but the main disadvantage is that education is currently perceived as a commodity. Not anybody attended a faculty in the past while nowadays almost everybody does. In the same way, those who decided to go to the university twenty or thirty years ago did it because they had the skills; most of those deciding to go to the university nowadays do it because they simply want to get a better job, but the problem is that few of them really get the job they dreamt and prepared for. In other words, professors in universities have to deal, on one hand, with few students who have the skills and, implicitly, the motivation to be there and, on the other hand, with many other students who need to be motivated and to understand that “Mecca” is not the diploma they obtain after they graduate, but the knowledge they are supposed to have after hard work and total engagement in their courses and activities as students.

2. What do we mean by “student motivation”?

Motivation is not an easy concept as it cannot be reduced to successful rule, standard or formula that can be applied to all the students equally. On the contrary, a certain method or approach which functions with one student may be totally useless for another student.

In his book, “Unleashing the Potential of the Teenage Brain”, Barry Corbin understands motivation as an emotional reaction in which the learner sees a benefit, reward or the possibility of a positive reward after having completed a task. He also considers that there are certain factors influencing motivation in learning:

1. *relevance* of the materials used in the classroom;
2. the student’s feeling of certain *control* over his/her education and the *possibility of choice* he/she can be offered in terms of projects, assignments, etc.;
3. the need of *challenge*;
4. students learn easier when there is *social interaction* (group-work, pair-work);
5. *the anticipated sense of success* offers results most of the times;
6. the student’s awareness that *he/she needs that information*;
7. the attraction of *novelty*;
8. some students may experience *cognitive dissonance*; this means that they reject those materials containing discrepancies between the information they offer about a certain topic and what the students already know about that topic.

There are lots of reasons that can explain why a student is not motivated, but our goal, as professors, is to understand that we need to develop and apply the necessary strategies in order to motivate our students to attend the classes willingly, out of the desire to learn and to become professionals in their field.

3. Motivational strategies in the classroom

One of the most important aims of university teaching is increasing the students’ motivation and wish to go on studying even after graduating from university.

There is a slight chance to be wrong if we state that planning our course is the first strategy we adopt in order to motivate our students. It is very important to design our course so that it can be interesting and attractive for the students who, at the end of the course, will be able to successfully accomplish the objectives that have been established by us according to the syllabus.

In Wilbert McKeachie’s opinion a teacher/professor needs to start planning his/her course three months before the first class and he mentions that the syllabus must be SMART:

S- Specific

M- Measurable

A- Agreed

R- Related (clear structure and connections between assignments)

T- Time frame

K. Adams in “Sources of innovation and creativity: A summary of research” points out how important to be creative is and mentions that motivation together with foundational knowledge and thinking skills is essential to creativity. The author describes creativity as a combination of

1. expertise (technical, procedural and intellectual knowledge),
2. creative thinking skills (how flexible and imaginative people are in approaching different problems) and
3. motivation.

Adams considers that the intrinsic motivation is more effective than the extrinsic one.

According to the same author, some faculty behaviours that may enhance creativity are:

- modelling, meaning that the professor should share his/her thinking with his/her students and explain to them how ideas are combined and created;

- communicate expectations, meaning it is good to announce the students that their creative ideas are expected and appreciated;
- reinforcement, meaning the professor should applaud creative thinking even when some ideas do not succeed.

Professors know it very well that in order to be successful they must vary their teaching methods to suit their objectives. Related to this idea, we remind you of the Universal Design for Learning by which we understand:

1. Multiple means of representation
2. Multiple means of action and expression
3. Multiple means of engagement

We can easily provide at least one reason for this need of “multiple means” if we think about Howard Gardner’s theory on multiple intelligences according to which there are different types of learners – the musical, the logico-mathematical, the bodily-kinesthetic, etc. – based on the cognitive abilities that students possess.

We will focus in this article on the motivational strategies related to assessment. Here we must mention the CATS (Classroom Assessment Techniques) which represent methods of evaluation helping the professor to assess the degree to which the students understand the content of the course. CATS also inform the professor about the effectiveness of his/her teaching methods.

It is highly recommended that CATS be used frequently as they have results both for faculty and for students. The impacts on faculty are:

- Offer day-to-day feedback
- Provide useful information regarding what the students have learned
- Give professors the possibility to address students’ misconceptions or misunderstanding on time
- Help to establish good relationships with the students
- Help students understand that teaching and learning are interdependent

The impacts CATS have on students are:

- Help students develop self-assessment and learning management skills
- Minimize the feeling of isolation and inability
- Increase students’ understanding and capacity of thinking clearly

CATS perform different kinds of evaluation such as:

- course-related knowledge and skills;
- student attitudes, values and self-awareness of their learning process;
- reaction to instruction methods (<http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/cat.html>).

What all teachers have witnessed lately is a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred education. Thus, the teacher’s role has changed from that of a dispenser of information into that of a facilitator of learning. On the other hand, student-centred does not require a certain teaching method and does not diminish the teacher’s/professor’s importance. Thus, the teacher/professor also becomes a mediator between the content of the course and its understanding by the students. Whether the professor succeeds as a mediator or not is also a matter of strategy which will eventually contribute to student motivation.

As we have agreed at the beginning of this article, there are more and more students who come to attend the faculty not out of a “burning” desire to excel in a certain profession, but to obtain a qualification for a job. In his book written together with Catherine Tang, “Teaching for Quality Learning at University”, John Biggs considers that stating about these students that they are unmotivated is not sufficient. He also understands that the teachers’/professors’ main challenge is to teach these students so that they become motivated. In other words, he says that good teaching is

when the professor makes most students use the level of cognitive processes necessary to achieve the intended results that the more academic students use spontaneously.

Biggs identifies three levels of thinking about teaching. The first one focuses on **what the student is**. The idea is that whenever the learning process fails, it is the student's fault because he/she is either incapable or unmotivated.

The second level concentrates on **what the teacher does**. There is a lot of variation in the teacher's techniques, but the method is entirely teacher-centred. This is a "deficit model" because the teacher should not concentrate on the skill itself, but on the effect this skill has on student learning.

The third level is related to **what the student does** and this represents the student-centred model we have mentioned above. Consequently, the teacher/professor needs to take into account two aspects:

1. what it means to understand a topic according to the intended learning outcomes and
2. what sort of teaching/learning activities are needed in order to achieve those levels of understanding.

4. Conclusions

No matter how much we would like to believe that all our students love to come to our classes and learn what we consider that is essential for them and for their future careers, we have to admit that times have changed, university is not what it used to be and there are lots (maybe too many) young people who are not motivated to learn due to various reasons. Our duty, as their professors and, why not, their models, is to change their perspective on what higher education means, find the right strategies and motivate them to study.

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