VOLUME XII, NUMBER 18

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

Moving Students Toward The Role Of "Active Participant" In Their Educational Experience

How can we as teachers create an environment in which a student recognizes the necessity of becoming an active participant in his or her own education? Most of us who teach have arrived at the same frustrating conclusions. It is not possible to motivate someone. It is not possible to "inject" a student with a sense of responsibility. These are truths that we encounter daily.

We have been teaching our "student success" course for one year and have experimented with many methods to create a classroom environment in which the student will recognize the necessity of becoming an active participant in his or her own education. Students frequently attribute failure in a course to events outside their control. The emphasis in our Master Student classes is that grades measure an expenditure of time and energy. When we use this definition, issues such as goal setting and values (priorities), time management, and effective as well as efficient study skills are all addressed. Metacognitive issues such as how the student learns and how to motivate himself or herself are emphasized, as well. We pre- and post-test each student with the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) and feel it is an extremely useful diagnostic and prescriptive tool.

Ask a roomful of students to "assume the student position" and they immediately and intuitively sit back in their desks, cross one leg over the other, lift their chins, let their eyelids drop to half-closed, and lay one relaxed arm across their notes and textbook. This is a waiting posture—waiting for the teacher to do something that will give them the information they need, waiting for the teacher to do something that will "educate" them, waiting for the teacher to do the work.

Anything involving "work"—the expenditure of energy and effort—seems to be disassociated with college. Traditionally, "work" has involved digging ditches, washing dishes, scrubbing floors, and other types of physical labor requiring energy and effort. A college degree is supposed to provide a way out of this trap. When students have difficulty with a course, they usually explain this difficulty as events beyond their control; i.e., just not smart enough; genetically incapable of doing math (or whatever); the teacher can't teach; etc. OR, perhaps the worst (or the best) excuse—this is too hard, this is work.

These beliefs are expressed in pervasive and subtle ways—work is bad, work is hard; college is good, college is easy; college is a way to spend time without having to work; college is the alternative to work. Students frequently attend college because if they were not in school, their parents would insist that they "go to work."

Many of our students spend 40 or more hours each week at a job. Many of these same students blithely announce they will be taking 12 or 15 credit hours, as well as working, because of their beliefs that school is not work; school is something you can do in your spare time and still have time left over. As the drop date approaches and their grades are poor, they report that the teacher made it too hard; the teacher wanted too much work. As an advisor, I have been told more than once, "that teacher acted like I didn't have anything else to do."

Many students say they want a college education but are unwilling to change a lifestyle that requires substantial amounts of money and/or leisure time. They consistently find themselves trapped by conflicting demands—they "have to" leave town for two weeks because of their job but get angry when the teacher is unwilling to reschedule an exam or excuse the absences.

I have not ever met a student who consciously and deliberately started college with the intention of dropping out or flunking out. A small percentage of students are looking for a way to put off growing up and the responsibilities of being grown up. However, for most, poor and failing grades come as a surprise. For another large group, those grades are proof of an inadequacy that they had long suspected and feared.

It is important for instructors to communicate that making good grades is not a result of having good genes and a high IQ. Good grades are not the result of luck or easy teachers; and (the biggest surprise and

greatest relief of all) that making good grades is something that anyone can learn how to do.

A college degree is a measure of motivation and endurance/persistence; and grades measure an expenditure of time and energy. This is the foundation for a belief system that will allow a student to acquire what most of them say they want—a college education. Going to college is not a way of putting off growing up or taking on responsibility. Going to college is not a way of getting out of work. On the contrary, going to college is taking on a full-time job.

Learning requires energy. Learning cannot be passive—it must be active. Most students intend to do well in college. They do not know, however, that they will have to do something in order to succeed.

As an introduction to the discussion about how much energy it takes to learn, I write on the board: "Everything has a price tag." "You can't get something for nothing." "There's no such thing as a free lunch." We spend classtime talking about how much energy it takes to learn new things. For many students, this is an entirely new concept.

Not only does learning something new require an expenditure of energy, but it requires a focus of that energy. Learning will use so much energy a student may not have a lot left over to "party." This surprises many. They didn't know that the energy was finite—or—they knew at some intuitive level because they saved what they had and used it for something besides studying/learning.

Quite simply, learning has a price tag. It is that focus and expenditure of concentrated energy. Learning can be hard work. Difficulties in college are more than a time-management problem. They are, instead, results of a belief system that says: "College shouldn't take much time or energy. It is only a matter of sitting in class and reading a few books." Again, how hard could it actually be? You're "sitting," not working.

The real message—the one to be emphasized over and over again—is that different amounts of time will be needed for practicing/learning/using or perfecting a skill for different people. Not everything comes easily to everyone. On the other hand, not everything is difficult for everyone. Some subjects (and unfortunately—it is that subject that I hate the most) are absolutely going to require more time to learn than others. And "time in" is the key—not IQ.

A Strategy

I have my students bring three tennis balls to the classroom each day. The course objectives include "some degree of skill in juggling." I start class with music and five to ten minutes of juggling practice.

Some students "forget" to bring their tennis balls to class; and some students do bring the tennis balls and practice during the time I provide in class but never practice at home. Some students stand and hold the tennis balls and talk to one another. They tell me they will juggle in front of everyone else after they have learned how to do so in the privacy of their own home. Some folks acquire the skill of juggling fairly quickly. However, the majority realize quickly that this skill is going to take some hours of practice and is definitely an expenditure of energy and effort (you have to bend over a lot and pick things up). It becomes apparent that learning something new requires time, energy, effort, and a willingness to appear unskilled, inadequate, silly, or foolish; and that learning is a lot more fun if you approach it in a joyful manner.

And, of course, there are always some students who just get better and better. Each class day, they are a little more skilled than they were the time before. When asked, they tell of how many hours they stood and practiced, and how they got into a competition with their kids, and how they thought they could never do it, and how delighted they are with themselves that they actually learned how. And I (of course) get a chance to talk about studying and how some subjects seem to take forever to learn; but—it really is like magic—if you put in the time and the effort and the energy, "all of a sudden," one day, you can do it. The amount of time spent in learning to juggle provides a concrete example of the kind of energy it takes to learn something new. Juggling also provides a welcome "right-brain" relief to the intensity of studying for hours at a time. It becomes a skill that is relaxing, enjoyed, and enjoyable.

We must work to create a classroom environment where students can experience a world in which learning is a joyful process. Hospitals are full of people who expended time, energy, and effort but who did not feel joyful while doing so or feel pleasure with the results.

Teaching our "study skills/student success" course has become an enjoyable experience for the instructors and has provided useful tools for our students, and a can of tennis balls has become a trademark on our campus.

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September 7, 1990, Vol. XII, No. 18

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Subscriptions are available to nonconsortium members for $40 per year. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms and once during the summer. ISSN 0199-106X.