



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Motivating the Unmotivated

Over the years, I've watched them collapse, falling hard into the vinyl seats of the faculty lounge, heard them grunt the "Oh, hell" and "damn" that came from the experience of working with students who wouldn't learn. I've listened to the long sighs of frustration and then the discussion of the "fact" that students are largely "unmotivated," unwilling slugs taking up their time and best performance.

And though I, too, have fallen into this occasional "locker room talk" about students, I find myself now regretting my ignorance. Over the past few years, I have tried to take time to get to know my students—to talk honestly with them about who they are and what they want from me, the institutions where I have encountered them, and their education. They have taught me a great deal. I no longer believe that their motivation is the real issue regarding the ways many of them perform or fail to perform in my classrooms.

Students have made it clear to me that they embody many sources of frustration regarding the learning process before I ever encounter them, frustrations that are difficult to set aside for 50 or 60 minutes at a time. And they carry in many problematic attitudes about the nature of learning. They come from diverse backgrounds. Some arrive immediately after graduation from high school, but many others come to me after years of involvement in the work force.

In general, today's students are likely to be older than the stereotypical 18- or 19-year-old. They are likely to be apprehensive about traditional classrooms—paper and pencil work and "book learning"—and they are likely to perceive themselves as being outsiders when they consider the teacher's world—my world. They are often uncomfortable with formality. They are often lacking study skills. And they are often struggling to work jobs, raise families, deal with financial responsibilities and limited funds, all while trying to better themselves by going to college.

If all that isn't enough, coming to college challenges their social identity and shakes their confidence; many of them come from worlds different from mine and have been shaped by experiences far different from

what they face in college. When I think about all that is going on with them socially, psychologically, and economically, it is no surprise that many students do not see my classes as the pivotal point of their existence.

Even knowing all the problems they carry with them, I always wanted to believe that my classes should be something they cherished and to which they would give themselves over. I wanted the best from students. If I could have had my way, they would have come to me as active learners, seeking assistance and insight at every opportunity. They would have thrived on academic challenge, and they would have challenged me to teach better than I have ever taught before. They would have questioned every aspect of their education and sought an understanding of the "how's" and "why's" of the factors that touch their curious minds.

Oh, what a wonderful experience that would be...but, let's face it, that's not what most students do. What a disappointment! How easy it is to blame them! And how easy it is to get frustrated...and how easy it is to fall into the belief that they are passive, uninvolved, apolitical airheads. How easy it is to assert that they shun responsibility, that they never question anything that relieves them of responsibility, and that they often drag other students down with them by using their social networks in the classroom to undermine the value of the lessons being presented to the potentially "good" students. How foolish I was to think I would not have to teach them how to learn!

The fact is—as I had to learn the hard way—classrooms don't have to be deadly, and students who seem unmotivated don't have to remain in the unmotivated stage for very long. Making a change required a great deal of soul-searching and rethinking on my part. And, most difficult to accept, it required that I accept some of the blame for what I—as a representative of the teaching profession—have been given in my students' responses to me.

I've learned that many of them don't know that they have the right to ask for anything other than what they are given. For the most part, they are the products of years of experience in schools where they were essentially told to sit down, shut up, listen, and learn—an experience that taught them that the teacher is the source of all knowledge and that learning is something



magically injected into them at some point without their awareness. They rejected that voodoo education then, and, I've learned, they will reject it again if I push it, even though they struggle with the internal desire to "make it this time" in college.

Contrary to the occasional lounge talk I've heard and been part of, students are in college spending their time and money because they want to learn and because they want a better life for themselves. Granted, they often don't know how to acquire what they want or how to make themselves learn what is presented to them. But, when asked for their opinions (often a new experience for many of them), they express that there are instructional areas that they have strong opinions about.



One of the most prominent comments from students regarding what they want from the college experience involves individualized instruction. They all want to have their individual needs met. They want to feel like they are more than part of a crowd, that their individual talents and abilities are respected and deemed worthy.

They want teachers who are real people, who recognize them as human beings—teachers who care about them—not just their test performance.

They want to be challenged, not decimated.

They want caretakers who check on them regularly, who support their individual learning, who inform them individually of their progress, and who assign a variety of tasks that give them the opportunity to learn in modes that fit their individual styles and that are designed to meet their level of learning.

They like teachers who talk at their level, who can joke and take a joke, and who let them talk and learn with other students.

They like clear, complete explanations and concrete examples, thorough (but brief) explanations of difficult concepts, and opportunities to have their questions answered.



When I think about what students want, I know that classes that deliver the same old message of "sit down, shut up, and listen so that you can memorize facts to dump onto a test sheet" probably are not going to motivate them. It seems clear that students are not necessarily unmotivated or unwilling learners; they are simply uninvolved in the depersonalization of the traditional classroom. They are willing to learn; they simply may not be able to endure the way they are taught. I now know that if I really want to see motivation in my students, I have to be motivated to rethink what it is I am doing to them.

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Celebrate!

The final program for NISOD's International Conference on Teaching Excellence and Conference of Administrators is complete.

Preliminary programs—titles for individual sessions and major addresses—will be mailed this week.

Plan to attend the celebration on May 20-23 in Austin!

Suanne D. Roueche, *Editor*

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