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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Helping Students Value Challenge and Hard Work

In postsecondary classrooms, we should help students move beyond the "empty vessel" model of learning to a model that encompasses self-directed, strategic learning. For many years, I struggled to identify ways or approaches that help students to see the power of learning, to think critically, and to appreciate and enjoy the learning process. I soon realized that, sometimes, it is difficult for students to value challenge and working hard during the learning process because they don't understand how to move from a passive learner to an engaged participant in their own learning experiences. My students were not academically tenacious, as described by Carol Dweck and Gregory Walton, who suggest academic tenacity is not about *being* smart, but *learning* smart. Through research, I discovered various instructional practices that helped to transition students from passive learning to mindsets in which students appreciate academic rigor, thereby helping to facilitate productive classroom experiences.

Frustrations and Developmental Dilemmas

In 2002, I was a student at the same college where I now teach. During that time, I worked many part-time jobs while also raising two young children. Consequently, I should have been able to appreciate the challenge of being a student while juggling several responsibilities and have adapted my curriculum accordingly. However, one of the most important aspects of my bachelor's and doctoral experiences was *learning how to learn*. I found that developing an understanding of how the brain learns helped me complete my educational goals. Unfortunately, most of my students don't naturally learn this information.

Not being taught how to learn causes students to become frustrated with their college experience and with their teachers' instructional practices. This frustration is due in part to the "hidden curriculum" students encounter in college. As Buffy Smith explains in her recent book, *Mentoring At-Risk Students through the Hidden Curriculum of Education*, the "hidden curriculum" suggests that students must learn to navigate the unwritten norms, values, and expectations that unofficially govern interactions among students and faculty. Richard Mayer uses the term slightly differently, suggesting that in a "hidden curriculum" we expect students to have knowledge about something without that information being taught. Student frustration is a problem when trying to impress upon them the value of being challenged and of working hard in the learning process.

William Perry's developmental stages for college students are characterized in terms of students' attitudes toward knowledge, with respect to their intellectual (and moral) development. Perry describes the initial stages of his developmental structure through the terms "dualistic" and "multiplicity," meaning students see the world as right, wrong, or unknown. Some first-year students assume the instructor is the "sage on the stage" with all the right answers, not realizing how they can contribute to the academic conversations taking place. Struggling students may not seek help when they lack the understanding to complete a task or know how to persist and find solutions to learning problems they encounter, which leads to their frustration. There are many reasons students may be frustrated and not value challenge as part of the postsecondary experience, including:

- Some students want to succeed in school without really learning.
- Low-achieving students deny the importance of learning and withhold effort.
- Students find assigned readings difficult to digest and assimilate into their other assignments.
- Many students want to get grades with the least amount of effort.
- Students have a narrowly defined conception of knowledge and learning.
- Students lack prior knowledge to complete some assignments.
- The writing assignments differ from the expected task.
- Students lack an understanding of the grading policies and practices, and/or don't understand assignment rubrics.
- A class they are required to take isn't part of their program of study, but is considered a degree requirement.
- The ideas and concepts presented in the course may differ from their personal beliefs.
- Students have a lack of intrinsic motivation and are generally bored.
- Students have an overall dislike of the class and/or the instructor.

Through reflection, I realized many of my assignments asked students to do something they

may not have been developmentally ready to do. For instance, my assignments required students to express points of view or consider their own values and beliefs on a subject; I didn't realize they may not have reached the developmental stage to accomplish this task without frustration. To compensate for the dilemmas above, I sent students the wrong message by communicating what *I* valued and expected. Sometimes I would make accommodations—not lowering standards, per se, but assisting students to complete assignments. For example, I provided students with summaries of content, but I did not require that they do anything to develop the information. Also, I would provide students with my PowerPoint slides to review with their assigned reading because I knew students wouldn't complete or understand the textbook or supplemental material they were assigned to read. Making these types of accommodations sends the wrong message to students about tenacious behavior.

Teaching Students to be Tenacious

One way to help students overcome their frustrations and to improve their approach to academic rigor is to teach them how to be tenacious learners. Academic tenacity is the ability to rise above immediate concerns and respond to academic setbacks with resilience. However, teaching students to be tenacious, engaged learners also means teaching them how to learn the subject at hand. I was focusing on teaching the content, not accounting for how students would learn it. Tim Riordian of Alverno College suggests that we should not only study our disciplines, but study our students as well, taking "active measures" to elicit from and be attentive to ways in which our students learn most effectively. Research suggests tenacious students demonstrate specific behaviors and characteristics, described as:

- Having a belief they belong in school academically and socially;
- Engaging in learning, viewing effort positively, and can forego immediate pleasures for the sake of schoolwork;
- Not derailed by difficulty, either intellectually or socially—they see a setback as an opportunity to learn or a problem to solve rather than as a humiliation; and
- Knowing how to remain engaged over the long haul and how to deploy new strategies for effectively moving forward.

One of the most promising aspects of tenacity is that these mindsets, skills, and intelligence can be taught. Building academic tenacity has significant implications for postsecondary education. Teaching students that intelligence isn't a fixed trait and can be developed helps students view struggles as an opportunity to grow and learn. In a study conducted with students at an Ivy League institution, Angela Duckworth discovered that students who are not as bright as their peers compensate by working harder and with more determination. Results indicated the "grittiest" students—not the smartest ones—had the highest GPAs. Students need to understand that they can develop their intelligence in order to appreciate being challenged and hard work.

Teaching Students That Intelligence can be Developed

At the beginning of the semester, I have my students read about tenaciousness, mindset, deliberate practice and grit, and other non-cognitive behaviors, as a strategy to help them learn about learning. I also incorporate strategies that ask students to review research that discusses what third- and fourth-year students know and use in preparation for their academic work as a result of maturity—to overcome the intellectual development dilemmas. Other disciplines can use similar strategies, having students research and read about what it means to learn in that discipline. Helping students understand the connections between subjects and courses creates a sense of relevance, which is important in the learning process. For instance, having students think like a mathematician, historian, philosopher, politician, etc., can help them understand the value of what the course or subject has to offer. This type of review or introduction to a course can take either 15 minutes or an entire class period, but the benefits outweigh the time needed for other subject requirements.

Another non-cognitive strategy is to have a peer mentor or former student talk with current students during class for five to ten minutes. The instructor leaves the room, allowing current students to freely ask their peer questions about the structure of the class and how they might approach learning in class. Researchers have conducted various studies on this concept in postsecondary classrooms and have found that increasing students' sense of belonging can have sustained growth in academic performance and persistence over time. Strengthening students' sense that they belong in the learning environment can alleviate their fears about performance, especially among at-risk minority students.

Carole Barrowman, also of Alverno College, describes a faculty workshop she conducted in which a work-study student provided video support by recording the information presented. At one point in her presentation, the work-study student commented, "If I had known what I was supposed to learn, I might not have failed so many classes." Many of my students say the same: "Why weren't we taught how to learn sooner?"

Challenge: Setting and Defining Expectations

If instructors want students to value being challenged and hard work, they must set expectations at the beginning of each semester and stick with them

throughout the semester. Continually circling back to expectations shows students that you, their instructor, are serious about their learning experiences, and that you want them to succeed. Create expectations in which struggle and risk-taking are valued more than just getting the right answer. These expectations should allow students to experience success and provide explicit feedback. For instance, feedback in my classes takes several forms, including pre- and post-tests that show students what they've learned as a result of completing the work. I have also gained feedback through explicit verbal and written feedback identifying specific behaviors that target the expected outcomes and not close approximations.

The strategies that I use to facilitate acceptance of challenging work include:

- Explaining what success looks like by providing exemplars;
- Reviewing how to read, annotate, and take notes using the textbook or supplemental reading material;
- Discussing how to work with evidence in responding to writing assignments;
- Teaching students to pose questions, because questions are key to the learning process and lead to new or deeper understandings;
- Explaining the purpose of practice and that practice is about making mistakes, correcting mistakes, and learning from them; and
- Finally, reminding students that emotions affect the brain's ability to think, learn, and remember, so they should replace self-doubt, fear, etc., with confidence and ideas that are intrinsically motivating.

Research suggests that responses to rigor can have powerful effects on students' grades and persistence. However, the suggestions above aren't magic. They are not worksheets or phrases that will universally or automatically raise grades and help students accept the challenge of college. The suggestions outlined here will help change how students think and feel in school. Investigating ways that allows us to present opportunities in order to help students realize their goals, their potential, and their sense of agency should be a part of our instructional practices.

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Join Dr. Wright next week as she continues the discussion on academic tenacity in NISOD's September 22 webinar, "Helping Students Value Challenge and Hard Work." Sign up or learn more here.

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