The Development of a Motivation Based College Course

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Sabbatical leave provides a unique opportunity for professional development. I was able to use this time three years ago to reflect on more than twenty years of community college teaching, and to engage in intensive reading of material devoted to teaching and learning strategies. During this time, a few books stood out as especially challenging and provocative. One of these volumes, *Why We Do What We Do* by Edward Deci (1995), was particularly intriguing. Deci combined experimental research and observation to distinguish between the power of intrinsic motivation and the limitations of extrinsic motivation.

Upon joining the Carnegie group the year after my sabbatical, I decided to focus on the theme of motivation for my individual project. As the group read and discussed a number of educational topics, the issue of student motivation seemed to be relevant to the group as a whole and was chosen as our group theme, with the Deci book providing insight and research based guidelines. In addition, we reviewed other theories and research related to student motivation.

After a semester of immersing ourselves in some of the literature on motivation, I decided to attempt to put a number of the key ideas to the test by creating a new course which would incorporate these concepts. Supported by a summer minigrant, Educational Psychology (a course which focuses on the processes of teaching and learning), designed with motivational concepts in mind, seemed an appropriate fit for the task at hand. There were five principles derived from the Carnegie Group's research that formed the focus for the course's design:

1. **Active Learning** - Students learn most effectively when they are actively engaged in a variety of learning experiences.
2. **Meaningful learning** - Learners demonstrate greater learning and motivation when the material is perceived as relevant to their interests and needs.
3. **Choice** - When students have choice in the process of learning, they tend to feel more involved and empowered, thus increasing their motivational levels.
4. **Relatedness** - Course structures and processes which facilitate the students' ability to relate more effectively to each other, their teacher, as well as the course content appear to increase motivation levels.
5. **"Orchestrated Immersion"** - A term borrowed from Caine and Caine’s *Making Connections* (1994), a key work in the field of brain based learning, this concept refers to the creation of a learning environment that encourages students to become fully involved in the learning process at hand. This environment is one that is highly stimulating with variety of learning tools and opportunities for interaction. It incorporates all of the motivational principles previously described.

**Course Design**

My challenge was how to begin to make these ideas come to life, so I decided to employ several strategies:

**A. Choice**

In the two semesters that the course has been offered in the classroom, students have been provided with a number of opportunities for personal choice and group decision making. These have included the choice of text chapters to complete through oral testing, choice of topic for a teaching presentation, choice of focus for a research paper or completion of the "Self as Learner" project.

**B. Teaching Presentation**

Each student in Educational Psychology is responsible for a teaching presentation designed to provide the class with new knowledge or skills. They are challenged to incorporate the concepts of effective teaching into their presentation. This experience allows for active, experiential learning, and an opportunity to connect areas of interest and expertise with the classroom experience.

(Concepts emphasized include active learning, meaningful learning, and relatedness.)

**C. Oral Testing**

While written communication is given an appropriate emphasis at the college level, oral communication, which rep
resents a significant portion of communication in a variety of work and life settings, receives attention in only a few courses. Teaching clearly involves effective oral communication, and a course in Educational Psychology should provide opportunities for students to demonstrate and develop their oral communication skills. In addition to the teaching presentation, students are given oral exams on a number of the text's chapters.

For each chapter, students are provided with a study guide listing several key terms and four or more essays related to the subject matter. When ready, a student meets with the instructor and describes the terms and responds to the essays orally. A discussion follows many of the students' responses which allows the instructor to clarify the extent and depth of their knowledge. This interchange also provides further opportunities for instruction, thus enhancing student understanding of the material.

Students who are able to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of chapter material can be "certified" for that chapter and given the opportunity to function in the instructor role with other students seeking credit through an oral discussion/evaluation. Students receive credit for the number of chapters they are able to complete in this fashion and for assisting others in this process.

(Concepts emphasized include active learning, relatedness, meaningful learning, orchestrated immersion, and choice.)

D. Self-As-Learner Project
This assignment consists of a paper or project which represents a review of each student's experience as a lifelong learner. It includes but is not limited to the following topics:

a. Reflective responses to previous schooling experiences
b. Areas of strength and weakness as a learner
c. Analysis of one's individual learning styles
d. Analysis of the effectiveness of learning environments and teaching approaches they have experienced.
e. Plans for future learning both within and outside of the classroom (lifelong learning)
(Concepts emphasized include active learning, relatedness, meaningful learning, and choice.)

E. Research Paper
Students can choose to complete a research paper on a topic of interest in lieu of the Self-As-Learner project. The subject for the paper is chosen from among the topics covered in class or in our text.

(Concepts emphasized include choice, active learning, and meaningful learning)

F. In-Class Activities
During the semester, students participate in a number of interactive discussions and exercises which attempt to help them relate their own ideas and experiences to the course content. These include discussions of early school experiences, a culture creation activity, a problem solving activity focused on redesigning Freshmen Seminar, a Freedom to Learn activity, and a discussion of the future of learning with a focus on the role of technology.

(Concepts emphasized include active learning, meaningful learning, relatedness, and orchestrated immersion)

Evaluation and Concluding Thoughts

Student response to the course and its components, both informally and formally (through an end of semester evaluation form), has been quite positive. Students have reported that many of the principles learned in the course were in evidence in the course structure. It was also interesting to note that although many students expressed that they initially experienced anxiety regarding the oral assignments (teaching presentation and oral testing), almost all indicated that they believed these experiences were ultimately beneficial and should be continued.

My personal observations about the course have noted the following two unique features:

The students seem to develop into a very cohesive group over the course of the semester. Both the student teaching presentations and the opportunity for students to work with each other during oral chapter testing seem to contribute in a significant way to this factor. I find myself looking forward to the student teaching assignments as the class members seem to have an intuitive sense of what types of presentations will produce a positive and active response on the part of their peers. From them I have learned new recipes for cooking, how to change the oil in my car, how to count
in Korean, two new forms of dance, how to create a PowerPoint presentation, techniques for resolving arguments, increased understanding of the Bill of Rights, and strategies for counseling autistic children. The energy of the course increases significantly when the students have the opportunity to share the teaching stage with me.

The second feature of the course that has been perhaps the most noteworthy is the oral chapter testing. I’ve found that I have a much greater sense of student learning when I’m engaged in an active dialog with each of them around course concepts and material than has been the case with other assessment strategies I have used over the years. I have also found these sessions provide a great opportunity to further student learning while still performing the assessment function.

Educational Psychology is a course that has been a unique experience to design and teach. As opposed to a more traditional approach to course design which often evolves from standard course content, this class was organized around research based educational principles designed to enhance student motivation and meaningful learning. These principles formed a framework around which course content and skill development were organized.

Currently the classroom version of Educational Psychology has a fluid structure, which should readily allow the incorporation of new activities and strategies in future offerings. In addition, an online section of the course was offered for the first time during the spring 2000 semester. I look forward to being a part of this course’s continued development.

**Reference**
