



Faculty Forum

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Beyond Motivation: Engagement, Mindfulness, and Learning

With more than 50 years of combined classroom teaching and observation between us, we have long noted that only a few students, primarily upper division undergraduates, ever get beyond what is called lower level learning. For example, in one of our courses we see students spending time and effort writing group cases, but case three is little better than case one. Most students are motivated to invest the time and energy but are unable to write a substantive case after several tries and considerable feedback. Why is that? What is missing?

The easy explanation is to blame student laziness, lack of time-on-task, and/or ability. While these are sometimes true, are laziness and lack of time-on-task cause or effect? Students may be getting frustrated because they do not know what to do to be successful at the assigned task. They spend the time and energy, they are not successful, the feedback does not help them be successful on a subsequent task, and they quit trying. A student comment that we then hear is "If you would just tell me what you want I will do it." Students who are experiencing this frustration often believe the teacher knows the right answer but just will not give it to them. They think the source of the problem is external and since they believe that the expert is supposed to tell them the answer, they blame the outside source who they perceive as making things more difficult rather than easier. They do not seem to see "learning how to learn" as significant.

What students do not recognize is that to develop into thinkers and problem identifiers/solvers they must do significant higher order thinking. While the teacher can set the stage with a variety of approaches, if higher order learning is to take place the student herself/himself must go beyond the immediate task and use the assignment to explore and develop that which is not obvious. Two classic educational researchers, Bloom (1956) and Perry (1970), discuss these higher levels of learning in such terms as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In thinking through what is going on and what is missing in the students' learning process, we offer this linear and admittedly recursive model:

Motivation → Engagement → Mindfulness → Learning

We believe that the motivation to develop higher order thinking skills must be intrinsic rather than extrinsic or dependent on external sources. The student must step out from behind all teachers' voices and begin to develop her/his own voice. This responsibility is threatening and difficult, but if the student is not self-motivated there will not be sufficient drive to overcome the inherent discomfort of learning. As difficult as it is to get to self-motivation, it is only the first step.

Engagement and mindfulness are therefore essential to our thinking about teaching and learning. Students must learn to engage their intellectual abilities with the task at hand and its context, making sense of facts and theories at their disposal, engaging in critical thinking.

But engagement is not simply physical presence. Students are not engaged if they simply show up at some activity. Engagement is exploration, confidence, purpose, and taking responsibility for learning. We believe that engagement entails active reading and playing with the hypothetical. It is enquiry, questioning, comparing and contrasting, and distinguishing subtle differences. It is about persistence.

Mindfulness, according to Langer (1989) is creativity, openness, awareness of multiple perspectives, a process orientation rather than an outcome orientation. It is attentiveness and contextualization. The learner must go beyond the "rules" and not accept them as constraints. Mindfulness is also paying attention to one's own role in, or impact on, the context. The mindful learner is self-aware and does not allow himself/herself to be caught up in his/her perceptual biases.

Learning is change, mostly changes that the learner makes in him or herself. The learner knows more about what, how, and why regarding a particular subject. This is not something that one person can do for another; teachers can only facilitate the process by which the learner does it for him or herself.

What can faculty at Western do to increase the likelihood that students will become more engaged and mindful? We must start by asking the right questions. There will be no easy answers and the solution is not in technique. Robert Leamnson, in Thinking About Teaching and Learning, is very hopeful about educating college students but he insists that "people cannot be educated against their will. . . .learning will only start when something persuades students to engage their minds and do what it takes to learn." You can begin this crucial process at Western by responding to this Forum piece and offering your suggestions for persuading students into engagement and mindfulness.

Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane (Emeritus), Management and International Business

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Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Beyond Motivation: Engagement, Mindfulness, and Learning" by Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane, 9/1/05

I applaud Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane's invitation to begin a conversation on engagement, mindfulness, and learning. Dr. Kane and Kinnear have challenged us to start "asking the right questions." I reflected on this charge as a faculty member and came up with some questions for myself. To what degree do I . . .

Accept responsibility for what happens in my classroom?

Make my expectations clear through examples and rubrics?

Move beyond knowledge and comprehension to assessments that require students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate?

Continually work with my colleagues to examine my own practice?

Convey a tone for students of what Ted Sizer calls "unanxious expectation" – "I am here to support you but I expect much of you"?

Anna T. McFadden, Educational Leadership and Foundations

I enjoyed reading Terry and Bill's article in the Forum; many of their comments "struck a chord," i.e. they were consistent with my experiences here at WCU as well as at other universities. I've posted on my office door a quote by Joshua Reynolds, an English painter: "There is no expedient to which a man will not resort to avoid the real labor of thinking." Many students don't seem self-motivated to "overcome the inherent discomfort of learning." I especially appreciated the comment about learning as something that can't be done for students, i.e. teachers can facilitate the process, but students must learn for themselves. Many students at both the undergraduate and graduate level seem more outcome-motivated (what grade will I earn?) than process-motivated (what will I learn?). More importantly, they think that grades have a one-to-one correspondence with amount of learning. Their engagement in learning (as defined in the article) is lacking, particularly in terms of taking responsibility for both successes and failures.

If I had an answer to the question about what faculty can do to increase the likelihood of students becoming more engaged and mindful, I'd be a rich woman, i.e. I'd charge five bucks a head to share such wisdom. I don't have an answer to that question; however, I think one of the right questions to ask is how students who demonstrate engagement and mindfulness can be evaluated and rewarded for taking those first steps that reflect self-motivation for learning. I don't know the answer to that question either, but apparently neither do those who have far more expertise than I have to offer. What I do know is that during my many years as a student I had great teachers who facilitated my learning and some not-so-great who didn't; however, learning occurred in both instances. I guess that reflects the comments that "the solution is not in technique" and "learning will only start when something persuades students to engage their minds and do what it takes to learn."

Beverly Jacobs, Communication Sciences and Disorders Program, Speech and Hearing Center Director

Responses to “Beyond Motivation: Engagement, Mindfulness, and Learning” by Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane, 9/1/05

I'd like to thank Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane for their thoughtful essay on learning. I like their proposed model that leads from motivation to engagement to mindfulness to learning, but it strikes me that motivation is still the major hurdle. Well, it's the first hurdle, anyway. It may be that engagement and the rest are just as difficult, but we (that is, I) so rarely get beyond motivation that we (again, I) never know for sure. So, I can't get “beyond motivation” just yet.

Maryellen Weimer addresses the issue of motivation (and beyond) in Learner-Centered Teaching when talking about faculty vs. student responsibility in the learning process. She quotes a colleague from agronomy who had his own twist on the proverb about leading a horse to water: “He said that it was the teacher's job to put salt in the oats so that once the horse got to water, it was damn thirsty.” Weimer has her own assessment of current practice, based on this concept:

In general, our instructional policies and practices do not make students thirsty. Rather, we tell students that they are thirsty – that they should be drinking. They remain unconvinced and so (mostly out of concern for them), we force the issue. We use rules, requirements, and sticks to try to hold their heads in the watering trough. Most do end up drinking, but a lot of them never figure out why water is so important. A few drown in the process. (p. 103)

This begs the question, though. We still need to know how we can motivate our students. I think that Terry and Bill are right that techniques are not the answer. There isn't a panacea. That isn't to say that new pedagogical approaches aren't helpful. They're just not enough. From my summer reading on student learning, one thing is clear to me: whatever we do, we need to be transparent. We need to explain why they need to do group work. We need to make them understand the importance of practice through homework. We must be explicit in our reasoning for that writing assignment. If we try a new technique (and I am willing to try anything that might work), we should explain to them why we think this will enhance their learning experience.

This applies to content as well. As Weimer says, we also need to be clear about “why water is so important.” This means that it's not enough to teach my computer science students about different types of data structures. I must also tell them why they need to know about these data structures. The same is true in any academic discipline.

I'm guessing that this sort of transparency will be helpful in engagement and mindfulness as well. For the time being, though, I'll be happy (and I hope my students will be, too) if I can just solve the motivation issue. Then maybe I'll see if engagement is yet another hurdle, or if it falls in place easily once I've been able to move beyond motivation.

David R. Luginbuhl, Mathematics and Computer Science

Perhaps one reason for the lack of student engagement is because the goals of our classes are typically the goals of the instructor. The criteria or rubrics for an assignment are those of the instructor as well. When the instructor owns the goals, students adopt a performance orientation (what do I need to do to get an “A”) rather than a learning orientation. Performance orientations tend to manifest in lower levels of learning and students who do just what they have to in order to get by. Perhaps a start to increasing engagement, mindfulness and learning would be to engage students

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in identifying their own learning goals through an examination of why they are taking a course and what they hope to get out of it. I am not suggesting that instructors engage learners in only what the learners deem important. Rather, I am suggesting that instructors guide students in reflection regarding what they are learning, to allow students to put that in their own words and explore the importance of their own learning goals to their success in college, their intellectual lives, and their careers. Additionally, learners could collaborate in the development of rubrics for the grading of course assignments. If they are engaged in this process, the assignment may become more than what the instructor wants rather what the learner wants.

Lisa Bloom, Human Services

What can faculty at Western do to increase the likelihood that students will become more engaged and mindful? Read the classic, Classroom Questions by Norris Sanders. Create a WonderWeb or WonderWall display to which students are required to post and respond to each others' authentic questions and monitor to determine if students can generate the full range of higher order thinking questions themselves, absence of which may require modeling on your part. Use journaling to develop private voice; use blog postings to develop their own public writing voice; use wiki's to develop collective team voices. Engage students in using course content to address real questions that emerge from the WCU region (a form of service learning). Cheers!

Bob Houghton, Birth to Kindergarten, Elementary, and Middle Grades Education

Thanks so much, Terry and Bill, for raising the radical matter of motivation in learning. It's one of the most frequently raised and unresolved issues in discussions I have with past, present, and future teachers. You ask, what can faculty do to increase the likelihood that students will become more engaged and mindful? We can create a learning environment conducive to people finding intrinsic motivation and developing themselves through mindful engagement. That's not just people=students, either. In a learning environment, teacher and student both learn. We cannot motivate anybody because, as you note, learning is motivated intrinsically. We cannot persuade students to be motivated; that's just another way to say we can motivate others. Yet, again, we can design contexts in which motivation can breathe and learning occur. Your essay suggests several questions we can frequently ask ourselves to ensure we are doing engaged, mindful teaching and learning. For instance, do assignments require “playing with the hypothetical”; does feedback encourage it; does evaluation value it? If so, then we have liberated ourselves and our students from the mindless, disengaged behavior that many of them have adopted during mindless, disengaging school experiences.

Here are a couple of questions I ask myself: If I expect students to explore a question and yet am not willing to explore answers other than my current one with them, then am I asking them to fake mindfulness? If, when I evaluate their work, I could just as easily throw them a dog biscuit or a job application for a good performance, am I destroying the authenticity of engagement? Am I trying to motivate extrinsically with gold stars?

Marsha Lee Baker, English