Why Did Student Achievement Go Up While My Teaching Evaluations Went Down?

Have you experienced this scenario or something close? You redesign a course, making it more learning centered, shifting from a predominately lecture-and-exam format to (a) students completing reading assignments outside-of-class;(b) students taking an online assessment of reading assignments; (c) students receiving only short mini-lectures of confusing points from the readings; and (d) students applying their readings in-class through problem solving activities and small-group discussions. After which you see these results: (a) increased classroom activity, energy, and fun; (b) student achievement improves and grades go up; and (c) student satisfaction and evaluations of your teaching go down! What?

Gary A. Smith (University of New Mexico) writes about this baffling situation in his article First-Day Questions for the Learner-Centered Classroom (The National Teaching & Learning Forum, Vol. 17, No. 5, September 2008, 1-4). He offers the following explanations and some suggestions for building better student understanding about our learning-centered practices.

The Problem

Students may be content to take lecture notes, cram the night before for exams, and quickly forget memorized facts because it is less work. Moreover, they may not understand how they learn and why we might teach in a more learning-centered way. Because of this, we need to discuss learning with our students in order to seek their buy-in if we are planning to ask them to construct deeper meaning at an application/problem-solving level.

The Experiment

The following semester, Professor Smith projected the following questions on the screen, not knowing if this buy-in activity would work:

“Thinking of what you want to get out of your college education and this course, which of the following is most important to you?

1. Acquiring information (facts, principles, concepts) [2]

2. Learning how to use information and knowledge in new situations [21]

3. Developing lifelong learning skills (pg 2) [13]

Next, he polled students and counted the number of responses for each goal. The numbers they gave are shown in brackets above. Class discussion followed with advocates for each of the three options stating their case.

Next, he posed the following question:

"All three of these goals are clearly important. However, let's think for a moment of how best to accomplish these goals. Learning is not a spectator sport—it takes work; that includes work in the classroom and work that you do outside of the classroom. So, of these three goals, which do you think you can make headway on outside of class by your own reading and studying, and which do you think would be best achieved in class working with your classmates and me?" (p. 3)

Students concluded that reading to acquire information was the easiest for them to do independently as homework, and that pursuing goals 2 and 3 could not be achieved by listening to a lecture. Hence, the students were now beginning to understand why they had to actively do things in class, work harder in class, and do the reading before class, in a learning-centered classroom. Would they do it? Yes. The results: The increased student achievement continued this second semester, as evidenced by assignments and exams, and Professor Smith's teaching evaluations "rose to their highest levels." (p. 3).

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