

Motivating Students to Come Prepared to Class

As an instructional designer, I am a voracious reader on how people learn and what instructional designers can design INTO their instruction that will increase the chances that learners will not only learn, but also apply what they have learned when provided the opportunity. Of course, this means influencing human behavior, which is a complex and challenging process all teachers face! Recently, I read the book *Design for How People Learn* by Julie Dirksen which got me to thinking again about motivation to learn and motivation to **do**, and the teaching behaviors which can influence motivation of our students. Knowing that there are many factors that influence motivation which we do *not* have control over, it is important to be aware of the ones we *can* control.

Let's use an example of teaching behaviors (things we *can* control) that can motivate students to come prepared to class, a problem I hear often from faculty. Which teaching behaviors might influence this in a positive way (tips adapted from Dirksen book above)?

Design "prepare for class" learning experiences in which students can unlearn old habits (of not coming prepared) and develop new/better ones.

Q1. What to do before releasing them to do class prep, so students are motivated and able to do the work?

...be perceived as one with "what's in it for me?" value (to the students)

- Using stats, a story/case study/testimonial or learning outcomes that they care about, present the learning experience as something *they* will want to do instead of something *you* want them to do.
- When possible, involve the students in planning the tasks so they have input on the types of tasks and effective methods for doing them.
- It is not about controlling the learner or tricking them into compliance. It's about enlightening them about why they might care about it and building buy-in.

...be perceived as compatible with the students' values, prior experiences or current needs

- Invite students to identify how coming prepared to class is incompatible with other competing priorities (work, family, community obligations) or established habits that have "worked" in the past (no prep? teacher reviewed in class, accepted late work, allowed study hall time during class, did not plan class activities that depended on them being prepared).
- Invite students to brainstorm how to make it more compatible with their current priorities, needs, values, such as their goals for this course, the student role-modelling they are providing for their children, challenges in their own lives, etc.
- Invite testimonials from other students/peers about how coming prepared improved their learning, performance in class, learning beyond the course or development of needed skills.
- It is not about you preaching to them about relevance or value, but their own buy-in to why it might be important to themselves.

...be perceived as do-able, even easy or that the students will have plenty of available support and minimal negative consequences for mistakes if it is going to be hard

- Identify the task's similarity to skills or procedures the students already know.

- Invite students to identify critical situations that might come up (triggers in their environment) which could interfere with their ability to successfully prepare for class (e.g., a different immediate consequence is compelling); brainstorm specific "if X, then Y" plans to overcome temptations (e.g., check Facebook or text messaging every few minutes) or environmental issues. Write them down!
- Demonstrate out-of-class preparation support systems/resources and how to use them for immediate help or guidance. (See Q2 below for examples.)
- These strategies serve as training wheels and guard rails while practicing new habits and unlearning old ones, plus they build confidence in students' own abilities to control their student life.

...make positive results visible

- Provide an opportunity to see someone they respect or trust do the task and experience success, such as a testimonial in class or via video clip, a mentor or tutor demonstrating the task or anyone modelling the task. Choosing a person they respect often makes the task more appealing too.
- This approach can boost student confidence and help with visualizing what they are to do.
- Provide opportunities to try it (new behavior or task) out on a limited basis first.
- Offer opportunities to try out a complex task in stages, with informal feedback, guidance and encouragement (from instructor or each other) available after each level (in class).

...praise for effort, more than correctness.

- If their own tryout is not feasible, observe others doing it so they can see a real example or two.
- This helps them get over the getting started hurdle by negotiating any rough edges, questions or issues ahead of time and helps them visualize what is expected.

Q2. What to do during the time the students are doing the work to help with persistence, effort and developing the new habit?

...provide easy-to-find help physically *near* the "prepare for class" assignment for timely access, such as:

- relevant FAQs,
- reference charts of information to consult,
- video tutorials on specific tasks,
- a job aid for procedures,
- a decision tree or flow-chart demonstrating a problem-solving process to use,
- a template that models an expected format,
- a resource for challenging aspects of the assignment (e.g., grammar checker, APA format checker, etc.).

...provide easy-to-use success-checking options such as checklists, rubrics, sample assignments to compare to their work to prior to turning it in.

...remember, most daily assignments are more about recognition and practice than raw recall. Or they are about content exposure prior to working with the concepts in a flipped class situation.

Q3. What to do afterwards to reinforce the new habit?

...provide an immediate consequence if they do it and if they don't. Preparing for some delayed consequence, such as a midterm exam, is not sufficient for most students. That's why it is also difficult to not text while driving, stop smoking, maintain weight loss or save for retirement – the positive consequences are too delayed! A more immediate consequence has much more power; for example, a short online quiz before class, a small group activity when they arrive in which they must be prepared to share the load with their peers, an in-class problem/scenario that depends on class prep to solve.

...review class prep processes if they are similar for each class period. What habits are you building? It is easier to follow old habits than to change. You want them practicing so that they learn positive habits from experience. Without guidance and help, students may practice poorly and develop new, non-productive habits! You want the training wheels and guard rails you provide to support your students until behaviors are automatic! This coaching and encouragement is important.

...invite class members respected by others to share tips or tricks that they find helpful when hitting the wall or slogging through the hard stuff. Effort is everything!

Resources

Dirksen, J. (2012). *Design for how people learn*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders.

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