

Philosophy of Teaching

I think one of the most important aspects of teaching is to make the material meaningful to the students. Expectancy theories of motivation tell us that motivation, or the more personal resources one commits, is a function of desirability and attainability. Consequently, to create an atmosphere in which the student is motivated to do the things necessary to succeed in the course, the student has to believe: (a) that succeeding in the course or learning the material will lead to something they value; and (b) that they in fact can succeed if they put forth the effort. Consequently, in my courses I strive to show how the material is, or will be, relevant to their future careers. This can be relatively easy with students in applied courses that are directly related to their expected career paths, but can be a bit more of a challenge in more theoretical courses or with students who are taking the course as a general education course.

The second aspect of creating an atmosphere in which the student is motivated is attainability. In other words, the student has to believe that if he/she puts forth the effort that he/she can succeed. I believe that this can often be partially achieved through the design of the course. For example, at previous universities in my undergraduate statistics course the students have multiple ways of successfully completing the course. Specifically, the course contained four quizzes and a cumulative final examination. Quizzes are graded on a pass/fail basis with a passing grade being 85% or higher. The final examination is graded on an "A" through "F" scale with a score 90% or higher being an "A," 80 – 89% a "B," etc. The student's final grade is determined by their performance on the quizzes *or* their performance on the final exam; whichever is higher. Passing all four quizzes equals an "A," three quizzes a "B," etc. I believe this design keeps students motivated for a number of reasons. First, the student who learns the material quickly is motivated to keep up with the course and pass all four quizzes so they don't have to take the final examination. On the other hand, students who do not perform well on the first couple of quizzes are motivated to keep trying to learn the material because they know they can still get an "A" in the course if they get 90% or higher on the final examination. Also, students who may be test anxious know that the final examination can only help their quiz grade so they are less anxious when taking it. For example, if a student has passed two quizzes they have a "C" going into the final. If he/she gets a 79% or lower on the final, they will still get a "C" for their final grade. If, however, they get a "B" or "A" on the final examination, that is their final grade. After spending some time here at Western Kentucky University, I have modified both my PSY100 and PSY370 courses to a similar structure in the hopes that this will increase student motivation in these courses. Obviously, a student's individual characteristics and situation will also play a role in their motivation levels, so course design cannot "guarantee" motivation. However, I believe that course structure can increase the likelihood of motivation.

I also believe it is important to include active learning in the course when appropriate. These activities should also approximate as closely as possible activities that they might encounter outside of school. For example, in my graduate seminar on training, I have the students conduct training need analyses in actual organizations and have them

prepare a technical report for myself and the organization. They also design and deliver training modules in the class. These are exactly the type of activities they might have to do if they ended up working for a consulting company or a human resource department. In my undergraduate industrial-organizational psychology course, the students participate in a labor negotiation exercise ("Wheelin' & Dealin'"). For this exercise, the students are randomly assigned to represent labor or management. They then have to negotiate a new labor contract with respect to several areas (e.g., wages, paid sick days, etc.). The exercise was one that I found in the supplementary materials for the course. I modified it, however, such that all of the dollar amounts are associated with extra credit. All "management" representatives start the exercise with two extra credit points, while all "labor" representatives start with only .25 extra credit points. Most concessions made by management come out of their extra credit. There are, however, some complications thrown in the rules such that if the students are creative they can increase the credit pool. They have only that class period to negotiate the contract, and the final rule is that they all have to agree on a new contract (and sign it) before the end of class or nobody earns any extra credit. It is very interesting seeing how their bargaining postures change as they begin to run out of time. It has also been interesting to see how students at time have come to impasses over differences of a quarter of a point. This is also evidence that the exercise is "real" for them and not just a paper exercise.

I do not believe in curving grades. Rather than curving the grades I would rather include ways that the students can earn extra credit. For example, in my introduction to industrial/organizational psychology course, I conduct a number of exercises that the students can earn extra credit through participation. In some of the exercises the student earns the credit for simply participating, and in others the amount of extra credit is determined by their performance in the exercise. An example of this second type is the labor negotiation exercise described above. As I do not usually announce when the extra credit exercises will take place, another strength of the exercises is that people are intermittently, positively reinforced for showing up for class.

Lastly, attending college is much more than simply learning information about various topics. One of the most valuable learning experiences that a college education can provide is the ability to take responsibility for one's actions. As such, I try to treat the students as adults and attempt to convince them that they should regard their coursework as their job.

In conclusion, I believe that it is important to make the material relevant to the student, structure the course so that it enhances motivation, include "real world" activities when appropriate, provide ways for the students to earn extra credit rather than curving grades, and treat them as adults.