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Accessing and Engaging the Extrinsically Motivated Learner

In my twenty-two years of teaching college courses, I have repeatedly noticed that some students come to the classroom clearly more engaged than others. I was intrigued, then, to read of the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in Svinichki and McKeachie's classic book on *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, which was provided to me as a part of the Spring Adjunct Faculty Learning Community course at the Rochester Institute of Technology, in the spring quarter of 2010.

The passage that caught my interest is in chapter 11, on Motivation in the College Classroom. Citing Pintrich and Garcia (1991), Svinichki and McKachie note that "extrinsically motivated students", whom I will call "extrinsic learners," are those who are matriculated in the course "for reasons of external rewards." While the authors cite grades, recognition, and the approval of others" as such motivating factors, I find that for many of my courses most of the students are drawn because the course fulfills a general educational requirement, and "anthropology" sounds exotic and vaguely interesting. Intrinsically motivated learners, whom I will call "intrinsic learners," come to the class with a genuine interest in the topic, "learn for the pleasure of learning," and are

self motivated (11). These students are the ideal in many ways; they are most likely to have performed the reading before lecture, easier to engage in class discussions, perform the best on exams and write the most interesting papers. While these intrinsic learners take responsibility for their own education, the extrinsic learners are a bit of a problem and, if not managed properly, can be quite a drag on a class.

In my experience teaching courses in writing and in the social sciences, I have developed many skills that have helped me to engage and inspire the extrinsic learners, but there is always room for improvement. The first thing that I have learned to do is to have each student fill out a 4x6 index card where they list their major, their educational goals, and their career goals. I then paste their photo on the upper right corner of the card and immediately set out to memorize their names. I keep track of their grades and attendance on the obverse side of these cards, and several times over the term I will review the information they provided to remind myself of their goals and needs. When possible, I consult them in class discussions as “experts” in a particular area and encourage them to research aspects of anthropology that dovetail with their career goals. This has been the most successful way I have of reaching all students but most importantly, this allows me to identify and target the extrinsic learners in ways that I would not otherwise be able.

While researching this topic, I was fortunate to find a recently published text on *Self-Study Teacher Research*, by Anastasia Samaras (2011). Samaras encourages instructors to continually assess and improve their teaching methods by always being aware of the the goal and purposes of each assignment and the course overall. She provides many practical methods and strategies we can use to “conduct and assess

classroom-based research” that pays close attention to the instructor’s role in the process and engages students in the assessment process. She points out that “students appreciate working on something that matters to them” and their studies, and self-study is a great way by which an instructor can make sure this connection is happening (xx).

While Samaras does not use the terms “intrinsic or extrinsic,” and nor does she cite the work of Pintrich and Garcia, she does evoke many of these ideas. Samaras points to studies that indicate that males and females learn in different ways and seem to be interested in different topics. For her purposes, she treats males as extrinsic and females as intrinsic learners. She begins her class with a presurvey, where, while she surveys everyone, she tried to “decipher the reading habits of male adolescents in [the] classroom (36). Similar to my strategy of the note cards, this gives her insight as to each student's reading habits and provides her a baseline from which to gauge her future progress. Believing that males are more action-oriented and enjoy learning through technology, she devised a “kinesthetic lesson plan” that involved motion and movement and used computer-based reading tools. She thus engaged her extrinsic learners (i.e., the males) through designing active, interactive methods that she supplemented with online study guides and mini quizzes, to “determine if males comprehended literature when it is introduced through this new medium (37).”

Using a line graph, Samaras plotted each student’s grade point averages in two periods of English 2 to document to establish a baseline, before she implemented her new strategies. Then she devised surveys that she administered at the outset of the course. These surveys were key to Samaras’s strategy and were modeled after the simple Likert scale, with five responses to select from. In her presurvey, for instance,

Samaras asked students how many hours they read per week: 0–1, 1–2, 2–3, 3–4, and 5 and beyond. She also asked if they read for pleasure and what type of reading material they preferred (38–39). Samaras was shocked to find that 72% of males only read one hour or less per week, and that 70% never read for pleasure. Clearly, these are extrinsic learners! (39–40).

Samaras then devised several exercises designed to engage these learners. First, she selected reading material that she felt would appeal to them: *The Catcher in the Rye*. She posed questions based on themes that she felt the males in her class could relate to, in which the student was required to form an opinion and then support it using outside materials such as websites, newspapers, or magazines. Not surprisingly, at the end of the project she found that all of the students complained about having had to have done this work, yet Samaras also noticed “a raised level of consciousness and understanding concerning the themes” that she had presented and asked them to reflect upon. Every student completed the assignment, and her male students were “eager to share their sports article, lyric, or newspaper clipping” with others in the class (41). On the surface, her strategy was working.

To better assess the success of the project, Samaras posed a simple Likert survey at the close of the assignment. Two simple questions were all it took, each rated from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5). The questions were, “I liked this activity,” and “I have a better understanding of the class reading/discussion after this activity.” At the end of the class, she sampled her course grades and compared these against her baseline data, and she found that the ending GPAs were indeed higher, her strategy a notable success (44).

While I feel that in targeting the extrinsically-motivated male learners she may have bored or disengaged the others, I can clearly see the advantage of her system. I can also see how the use of clickers in the classroom can be very effective means by which the self assessment strategy can become integrated into the teaching process in a simple, nonintrusive way with immediate results. In my future classes, I will continue to try to identify the extrinsic learners as soon as possible, using my notecard system. And I will, like Samara, seek ways to engage these learners while not being too obvious or boring the intrinsic learners. I think that one great way by which I could do both of these at once is by having both sets work together, designing small group projects that would pull them together in a collaborative endeavor. Samaras, in designing a kinesthetic lesson plan, asked her students to work in groups to write, create, and record core scenes from *Catcher in the Rye* using a video camera and then edit them into their own videos that were played for the class. In anthropology, I could easily assign such tasks for students to work together to create ethnographic videos in a similar manner. The key would be to get the intrinsic and the extrinsic learners to work together, so that the students themselves would help each other to engage the learning process and create something tangible, together.

There are many creative ways, now, in which I can coordinate and motivate all students to work together. In an ideal situation, the passion for learning would catch, and the extrinsic learners would become more intrinsic. Such a dream is not all that farfetched. In my experience, the first thing to realize is that many if not most students are extrinsically motivated. And can you blame them? Most were not taught early on the wonders of literature, they were not read to as I was every night before bed, and words

on a page never materialized as wondrous visions in the mind. Many teachers, intrinsic learners themselves, expect their students to be just like them, and this makes it hard for us to understand, let alone engage, the extrinsic learners in our class room. We focus on teaching the material whereas we could perhaps be spending more time inspiring our students, turning them on to the process itself, converting them from disengaged observers to the engaged participants. It is indeed possible, and strategies such as those proposed by Samaras can go a long way to making this transformation happen.

References

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