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Author(s): Low Guat Tin
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How Come You Slept Right Through My Lectures?

Believe it or not, many students sleep right through lectures. Many have become such experts that they can sleep with eyes wide open. To stay awake, some students chew all kinds of tit-bits, others talk, doodle or fiddle with pens, rulers and erasers.

The lot of the student is to me quite difficult. Imagine sitting in a class for 4-5 hours a day with a couple of breaks in between. If a student has a lively teacher or one who believes in using a variety of teaching methods, and one who gives them some freedom, then the day can actually be quite enjoyable. But imagine being glued to the seat listening to a voice that drones on and on. Can we blame our students for sleeping through our lessons?

Research into this area of motivating students is plentiful. Brophy (1987) has compiled a synthesis of research on strategies for motivating students to learn. Motivation, to Maehr (1984), is a study of factors that "drives, directs and excites..." us towards a goal. The basic issue to me then in a study of motivation is "Do students see what you are teaching and what they are being 'forced' to learn as being in line with their goals?"

Why do so many children have problems with music lessons? To me it is their parents who want those lessons. All the child wants is to tinkle around, to create some noise and lo and behold before they know it, they are enrolled in some music classes! Motivational problems? I did not have any. My parents did not send me to music lessons, nor art, swimming, cooking or speech classes. I picked up what I want or need along the way!

Why do our students have motivational problems? If they are 'kiasus' (i.e. fear of losing out) as we have been told, then 'kiasuism' is a very motivating factor.

I believe pupils who are kiasus are okay; the problem rests with those who do not care. How is it that when it comes to organising a class party, this group of students would have many ingenious ideas? The problem at times seems to be curbing them from becoming over-enthusiastic, yet when it comes to school work they present motivational problems. Peter Drucker (1982) said:

In the study of motivation, we now know that we've been barking up the wrong tree...How not to quench motivation? We now know that the human being is a learning machine, and the problem is not to motivate people but to keep from turning them off. The quickest way to quench motivation is not to allow people to do what they've been trained to do.

I guess one way we quench motivation in class is not to allow our students to do the things they want to do. And you will rightly ask "How can we let them do what they want to do?" There's the syllabus to cover, the PSLE or the O-level examinations and so forth. My question is "Why not?" Can we marry the two? Must syllabus and examinations run contrary to what students want to do?

One way we quench motivation in working adults is not giving them opportunities to do what they have been trained to do. I have met frustrated adults who are doing things which they have neither the inclination, the aptitude nor the ability to do. There are many teachers who refuse promotion because they want to teach. They want to be in the classroom interacting with children. Many teachers complain and feel frustrated when they have to fill in forms, collect milk money and such likes because doing these jobs prevent them from teaching. They want to teach!

We are told that performance is a function of motivation X ability. I would like to suggest that motivation is a function of ability X interest. In-
terest is to me a very important factor.
As a teacher, am I excited about what I teach? If I am not excited about what I teach, how can I interest my students in the subject? For this reason, I actually spend time thinking not so much about the "what" (because that is something I should know) but the "how", i.e., the presentation. How do I "hook" my students into sharing the excitement I have for what I am teaching.
I realise that I may not be able to motivate students, but I believe I can create an environment that might spur them on. And part of that environment is myself.

Me - The Teacher

For a start, I must be excited about what I teach. Does my voice show the excitement? Do I show that I am interested in my subject non-verbally and verbally?
Secondly, what's my rapport with my students? Even in a lecture theatre, can I establish rapport with my audience? I have seen many great teachers who can hold a packed audience spell-bound. Each person in the audience feels that the teacher is speaking to him. Close rapport is established even though there are hundreds in the auditorium. (There are countless ways to do this.)
Thirdly, are we flexible enough to accept answers which are different from ours? Or do we have one-track minds? Are we prepared to accept answers other than what's in the textbooks?
Personally, the little knowledge that I have of Transactional Analysis helps. I aim first to "hook" my students' 'free child' - the spontaneous, excitable free child. And I do that with cartoons, jokes, puzzles and anything that is 'extra-ordinary' by classroom standards.
Fourthly, I talk or share with my students. I try not to talk down or talk at them. I laugh when they say funny things. I am not one of those who believe that "Teachers should not smile till Christmas".
I suppose it is much easier for me because I work with motivated adults and I am really excited about what I teach. Then again I am also very interested in the adults I work with. As a teacher it is most gratifying for me to see people's faces lighting up with the "Aha" look.

Me - My Method

I am a firm believer of humour (See ASCD Review, Vol 1 (1) 1990). Let me quote from Highet (1977):

One of the most important qualities of a good teacher is humour. Many are the purposes it serves. The most obvious one is that it keeps the pupils alive and attentive because they are never quite sure what is coming next...the real purpose of humour in teaching is deeper and more worthy. It is to hook the pupils and the teacher and to link them through enjoyment.

I believe in the use of humour. I believe in "hooking" my students to the subject I teach and I find that often as I search for cartoons and humourous materials to use in my lectures I become "hooked". The Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER) has a page on "Travellers' Tales" and if you plough through them, you can find great gems for teaching purposes. Let me share with you a couple of items from the FEER (these are signs put up in hotels and places of interest):

In the lobby of a Moscow hotel across from a Russian Orthodox monastery:

You are welcome to visit the cemetery where famous Russian and Soviet composers, artists, and writers are buried daily except Thursday.
We now know that the human being is a learning machine, and the problem is not to motivate people but to keep from turning them off.

In a Bucharest hotel lobby:
The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable.

At a Budapest zoo:
Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty.

In a Paris hotel elevator:
Please leave your values at the front desk.

I try to use novel ideas. I also try to create dissonance. When there is dissonance, we are told that people will strive for consonance, they will strive for balance. In that process they learn. That is why I believe that "My greatest service as a lecturer is to upset you, for in that process you will LEARN" (Baruch and Low, 1992) and "When you experience dissonance - relax you're about to learn new things" (Low, Cheong and Baruch, 1990).

I try to say the same old things in different ways, i.e., put old things in new light. One of the benefits of doing this is that it helps me to get out of my mindset. Having to look at an issue or problem from different angles helps me to appreciate its complexity and the difficulties that some of my students could experience in trying to come to grips with it.

The issue of empowering students is important too. I encourage them to work on projects which they are interested in, projects which they want to do. I remember a 9-year old who was so interested in insects that he poured through any book on insects that he could lay his hands on. Then he built an ant-town. He collected ants of sorts that could survive in such an environment and he fed them and took care of them. He knew so much about ants but that knowledge was never shared with classmates in school. Why?

Conclusion

I have just discussed some of the strategies I use, yet I do not feel comfortable about strategies. To me there is no one strategy that one can turn students on. People differ and different things/different subject matter excite different people. We cannot therefore look for a single cause in motivational problems nor a single most workable strategy. To go in search of the best approach and then "turn it on" and expect our students to be suddenly motivated will be futile.

I often share this with my students:

God put teaching into my life, I will put life into teaching!

References


Low Guat Tin is a senior lecturer, Division of Policy & Management Studies, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.