

POD —IDEA Center Notes

J U L Y 2 0 0 4

Michael Theall, Youngstown State University, Series Editor

IDEA Item #13: “Introduced stimulating ideas about the subject”

Michael Theall

Youngstown State University

Background

Capturing students’ interest and getting students engaged are critical to successful teaching and learning. Research on the dimensions of college teaching (1) shows that *stimulating students’ interest in the content of the course is the most powerful predictor of the overall ratings of the teacher, and the fourth most powerful predictor of student achievement*. From a motivational standpoint (2), it is important to remember that students may not enter your class with prior knowledge of or appreciation for the subject. Instead, they may enter with some anxiety about their skills or performance (“I can’t do math.”), with a degree of resistance (“Why do I have to take a history course? I’m in engineering.”) or with predetermined, negative attitudes (“Economics is boring.”). Remember too, that the ideas you find stimulating may be at a level above students’ understanding. Your enthusiasm for the subject can be motivating, but students can become discouraged if what you value is not apparent to them. They may need to hear about your experiences or real-world applications of the material in order to become more involved.

Also, introducing stimulating ideas allows you to challenge students intellectually. If at the same time, you provide ample opportunities for them to rise to the challenge and to succeed, you will have completed an important motivational cycle. As additional information, look at your scores on IDEA items #2 (helped students answer own questions), #4 (demonstrated the significance of the subject), and #6 (made clear how topics fit). Item #13 correlates strongly with these items and with all of the IDEA learning objectives except item #25 (building team skills).

Helpful Hints

Here are a few things you can do to reduce fear or resistance. You might *begin with a real-world problem* that students can attack and possibly solve through small group work. The solution is less important than the fact that the problem demonstrates the importance of the content or concept, that there is immediate engagement in an active learning process, and that the group work helps to reduce anxiety about “getting the right answer.” If students do solve the problem, so much the better, because you will have demonstrated that mastering the content is possible. You can devise more complex problems as time goes on.

A second way to stimulate interest is to *use examples that clearly connect with students’ backgrounds*. Doing this allows you to ask students to draw on prior learning and personal experience, and helps to demonstrate the relevance of the content. Since learning is the sum of each person’s experiences, and since success in meeting a challenge is a powerful motivator (3), *blending experience with new content helps students to incorporate the new content into an organized structure*. When students succeed, they want to learn more, and they realize why learning is cumulative rather than just the memorization of bits of information. Stimulation comes in part from the realization that their success resulted from effort, the application of previous learning to new material, and the construction of new meaning.

A third strategy for stimulating students is to *use humor*. Though it takes time to develop materials and skills, the use of humor can create interest, reduce anxiety, and provide images and other connections that allow easier recall of information (4). Anecdotes, humorous examples, humorous

games, or other techniques can all be used to good effect without fear that one's teaching or position in the classroom will be jeopardized, and indeed, most successful humor in the classroom centers around the use of common understandings, uncommon events, or unusual twists of expected outcomes as the basis for the humor. Rarely if ever, does the use of humor mean simply trying to tell jokes, and in fact, such an approach can be dangerous. Rather, the point is finding opportunities to point out incongruity, or to provide examples of various kinds of errors is more often a rich field for exploration. These kinds of topics can be presented in ways similar to David Letterman's "Top Ten" lists or Jay Leno's "Headlines." For example, a "top ten" list of factors related to lowering gasoline prices could begin a serious discussion of the economic and environmental impact of over-reliance on fossil fuels. Likewise, headlines or other published material with errors in spelling or construction could be the basis for a short, but effective assignment or group task in writing. The intent is to use humor to make a point and hopefully as a result, to elicit a response. In a similar approach, many teachers introduce new topics by beginning with a contradiction, a paradox, of some kind. While such "openers" are not necessarily humorous in intent, the contradictions they pose may be humorous because of the images they suggest or the illogic they contain.

In sum, the introduction of stimulating ideas does not always mean presenting the most elegant, complex, or newest content. Students are most stimulated when they can connect new materials to existing knowledge and experience, even if the connection is humorous. The main point is to make that connection. Doing so demonstrates that there is something valuable and interesting within the subject matter. That realization provides its own motivation for further effort and engagement.

Assessment Issues

Whatever strategies are used to stimulate students, it is important to monitor the engagement and learning that result. The most traditional way to assess interest is to pay attention to the behavior and body language of students. Are questions asked and/or answered by most students? Do students interact with the teacher and other students? Is the environment passive or active? Are different modes of instruction used and are there opportunities for

students to use different learning strategies and styles? Simple techniques like "minute papers" or "muddiest points" (5) can provide regular information about student progress. Course management systems like BlackBoard and WebCT have the ability to capture information about the quantity and quality of participation as well as student performance on tests. A student spokesperson or committee can be established to provide feedback to the teacher on a regular basis. Students can be challenged to devise new problems, alternative strategies, and original solutions, and to contribute to learning by sharing their strategies and successes with each other. Stimulation will come from active student participation as well as from teacher created or designed questions, activities, or tasks. The most stimulating environment is one in which there is synergy and shared responsibility. When students and teachers challenge and motivate each other, then learning will occur.

References and Resources

- (1) Feldman, K. A. (1989). The association between student ratings of specific instructional dimensions and student achievement: Refining and extending the synthesis of data from multisection validity studies. *Research in Higher Education*, 30, 583-645.
- (2) Keller, J. M. (1983). Motivational design of instruction. In C. M. Riegeluth (Ed.) *Instructional design theories and models: An overview of their current status*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- (3) Zull, J. E. (2002). *The art of changing the brain: Enriching the practice of teaching by exploring the biology of learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publications.
- (4) Berk, R. A. (2002). *Humor as an instructional defibrillator: Evidence-based techniques in teaching and assessment*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- (5) Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. See pp. 148-158.

IDEA Paper No. 1: [Motivating Students](#), Cashin

©2005 The IDEA Center

This document may be reproduced for educational/training activities. Reproduction for publication or sale may be done only with prior written permission of The IDEA Center.