

## ***Teaching Tip***

# **Improving Students' Interest in Learning: Some Positive Techniques**

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### **ABSTRACT**

How can we stimulate student-learning experience? In this paper, I discuss some of the techniques that I have used in the classroom to promote students' interest in learning and that ultimately lead to successful learning. Successful learning is defined as satisfactorily completing a course that the student is able to apply the body of knowledge in a wide context of career and life experiences. The techniques have been found to be effective based on the evaluation feedback I have attained in my end of term students' evaluation. Creating a positive learning environment by encouraging creativity and communication is also rewarding in promoting students' learning.

**Keywords:** Teaching Techniques, Learning Outcomes, Active Learning, Lifelong Learning

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

To stimulate an interest in learning, there are several techniques that an instructor may be able to use. Students typically enroll in a course because it is required as a core, or as an elective in their academic program. Some enroll in the course because of self-interest, but find it uninteresting towards the end of the term. In either case, the instructor must treat each and every student with similar expectations to complete the course. Completing a course *successfully* is different than completing a course *satisfactorily*. Completing a course *satisfactorily* means having attained the minimum grade established by the university. In contrast, completing a course *successfully* does not mean merely passing with the minimum grade, but also includes that the students are able to carry the course contents throughout their lifetime and career goals.

In essence, as instructors, we want the students to *successfully* complete a course. By doing so, we will most likely be able to stimulate their interest in learning. At the same time, we want them to be successful in their life and career. Success is what they can be proud of throughout their lifetime. Success is defined as favorable or desired outcome (Merriam-Webster). As an instructor, I would remind them that completing the course *successfully* is our desire, not only for a satisfactory grade, but how we apply concept and learning activities throughout our career and life experiences.

Creativity is another important factor an instructor should encourage in the course to stimulate an interest in learning.

According to Evans (1995), creativity is the ability to discover new relationships, to look at subjects from new perspective, and to form new combinations from two or more concepts already in mind. Sweeney (2003) stated that in the discipline of information technology, there is a need of creative people to solve a myriad of problems and opportunities faced in this field on a daily basis. As a result, Sweeney (2003) suggested that an element such as fostering a creative climate might be appropriately included in all of the IT topic areas. Creativity is therefore an important factor in designing course requirements for successful completion.

I have had students coming to tell me that they have landed a job because of what they have learned in the classroom, both from the lectures and class activities. They thank me for helping them to successfully achieve their goals by learning deeply, and in their career path, by applying what was learned to solve complex problems and bring new ideas to their organizations. These were achieved by the several techniques that I have used in the classrooms. Many more students have fostered a deeper interest and understanding of the subject and chose to further their studies in graduate programs.

### **2. POSITIVE TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' INTEREST IN LEARNING**

#### **2.1 Understand the Learning Process**

The brain is the most complex organ that we all have. In understanding the learning process, we have to understand

and be aware of how the brain learns. How and what is it that makes human beings learn? Readings from psychology and sociology greatly help me in understanding the learning process. What triggers the mind to store information in the memory bank and to use it when needed? I believe that if we touch the students' a mind in a way that they care and understand the experiences, learning occurs. This is reflected in the assessment by asking them to write what have they learned in a broader context, and not in a memorization context on examinations where they reiterate or memorize for an exam. Ask questions such as how, what, and why to foster them to *think deeply* into the context of the learning experience both intellectually and personally.

## **2.2 Know Your Students**

Use a student information sheet at the beginning of term. This really works well. At the beginning term, I will provide a question sheet to gather the following information: Name, phone number, e-mail address (that they would check daily), MIS courses taken, MIS courses not yet taken but will take, experiences in web development (if the course requires that), database experiences (if the course requires that), practical work experiences related to MIS, what is (are) their expectation(s) of the course, how will they prepare to complete the course over the term, and how much time and effort will they put into the course. This tool is used for communication purposes and to help assign group activities. Pairing up individuals with different skills set and knowledge bases helps promotes a positive learning environment and an interest in completing the project with success. This also helps in sharing the knowledge base among the participants.

## **2.3 Know What Your Students' Care About**

It is by far the most challenging and perhaps the most emotional context of learning. Students' come into a class with a mindset of what they think the course would be and what to expect based on past experiences. As teachers, we must be able to know what it is that they *care* about in the course. In the first week of classes, I would ask them to write down and discuss what they care about in the course. Do they care about the learning objectives, the course requirements, the expectations of the course, the intellectual development that they will achieve (the subject matter), the personal development that they will experience in the classroom (such as interaction with peers in group activities, awareness of cultural and social issues, etc), and finally, the grade for the course. From gathering the information, I will transform what they think they care about to what they should have cared about. The forefront of learning is to achieve both intellectual and personal development so that they can carry the learning experiences throughout their lifetime. I want them to care in the context as a whole, for the long term, and not because it is a required course in the program, for a job or because my parents say I should have a college degree and expected to achieve an A in the courses. The point here is to understand what motivates them intrinsically and extrinsically and how we can transform the extrinsic motivators to intrinsic motivators that they care about. It can be difficult to change a person's thought but it can be achieved if we show them what they care about may

not be worthwhile in the context of lifelong learning. The change of thought can only occur if they *care* to learn.

## **2.4 Know Your Students by Name and Their Experiences**

Some instructors expect their students to address him/her with Professor John Doe or Dr. John Doe. People feel important when someone remembers them. From class introduction and the student information sheet, I make an effort to remember their names and about their experiences by the first few weeks of the term. It can be difficult if you are teaching four classes with over 80 students. However, keep calling on their names in class whenever you can especially if you are looking for comments, and answers during class activities. I am able to remember names easily and students have told me that they want to do a good job in the course because I will remember them and what they have done over the term. They remarked that they feel as part of a learning group and are not unnoticed in class activities.

## **2.5 Show Students You Care About Their Success**

Building a relationship with your students is important. As a consequence, education research reveals that if a teacher and a student build a relationship, the student learns (Soloway, 1996). In this technique, relationship is referred to as an agreement with the students to complete the course requirements with satisfactory results, for the least. Tell them that you want them to complete the course successfully and apply them to their career and life. Tell them that you will always be there as a facilitator and encourage communication off and on campus. Tell them about plagiarism (Born, 2003) and how it affects their academic goals. Remind them of the educational goals, evaluation strategies, learning outcomes and assessment of the course. Apply theoretical concepts to class activities such as project completion requirements. Encourage them to ask questions so that a deep understanding of the subject matter is achieved.

## **2.6 Remind Students of Life-Long Learning**

Apply course materials to work, career, and life as much as possible. Students may not necessarily envision the applicability of course materials to their career or in their lifetime. It is, therefore, the instructor's role to apply course contents to real life experiences and translate them to what was learned may be applicable in the future. With class activities integrated, role-playing becomes an effective means of learning through engagement. As a result, students will most likely become interested in learning and learn beyond the requirements of the course and extending the application of concepts to other courses throughout their academic goals. This is what constitutes good teaching from the eyes of the students.

## **2.7 Be a Storyteller**

It has always been interesting to hear from someone who is a good *storyteller*. As an instructor, we can apply course materials to experiences in the work place either through self-experiences or from literature studied. Tell them what works at Company X and what doesn't. What could have been done and what shouldn't have been done in Company Y? Story telling stimulates learning and enables students to

apply course materials to real world problems. Story telling enhances curiosity as well as participation. Story telling also can be entertaining.

### **2.8 Engage Students in Class Activities To Promote Creativity**

In all of my classes, I have included term papers, cases and projects as requirements for course completion. Term papers allow students to investigate on a topic and to present their findings as an expert in the area. Make them an expert in a topic they are interested in investigating. Cases allow them to analyze a given scenario of real world problems and how they can best approach a workable solution or a recommendation if they are participant in that scenario. Cases help stimulate critical thinking skills and discussion activities. Projects (such as designing databases, building an e-commerce site, network analysis, deployment of information systems) require extensive knowledge in the subject matter. This is usually due at the end of the term. Students may be grouped into teams and act as a group of consultants. Group projects foster team-building experiences, making consensus, encouraging communication, sharing skills and expertise among team members, and to be creative in their ideas and solutions to the given problems. Project-based learning is suggested as a means for increasing skills, as well as applying conceptual material, thereby forcing students to verify their understanding (Dougherty, 2002). These role-playing experiences help build confidence, skills, knowledge and creativity through problem-based learning. Reiterate to students how they can apply such learning activities in their career, work and life. Lim (2002) introduced a course project in his web development course. "The purpose of the project is to allow students to see 'Programming in the Large' so that they are more prepared to join a project in a 'real world' situation. This also represents an opportunity for the students to gain group experiences as part of their undergraduate studies" (pp.122).

### **2.9 Encourage Students to Ask Questions and Participate**

Create a learning environment where it is fun, open and interesting. There are no studies that say learning cannot be fun in the classroom. By encouraging students to ask questions and to participate opens up communication with the instructor and their peers. Tell them that participating in class activities is highly related to successful learning outcomes resulting in successful course completion. Leong and Petkova (2003) provided several active learning techniques that they have used in their e-commerce course. Remind students that constructive criticisms and negative feedbacks help build confidence and character. It is better to make mistakes in the classroom than to make them in the real world. Remind them that criticism and negative feedbacks should be used for improvement in the learning outcomes.

### **2.10 Respect Students' Opinions and Comments to Course Materials**

To encourage participation and learning experiences, respect their opinions and comments about the subject. If student X made a comment or provided an answer that you think is incorrect, you should follow up by asking related question(s)

that may encourage student X to rethink again. This form of analysis through critical thinking helps them to focus on the issue and to the answer that you are looking for. As stated in Soloway (1996), "children need adult models; they need adults to care about them and to see the value in their ideas" (pp. 11). It is not to agree with everything they say when it is incorrect, but to give them a chance to open up and analyze situations with values in their answers, opinions and comments. Avoid embarrassment and praise good discussion to students.

### **2.11 Be a Role Model**

Exemplify good ethical behavior, as we would expect of them. We demand a lot from our students as they demand of us. Students would look up to us as an expert in our field. They will want to know if we are interested in the subject, as we would demand from them. We can show them our interest in the subject by the various perspectives we bring into the course either through past work experiences or through research and how those experiences apply to the course. Students will want to know that we are *on top* of things. These include being punctual to class session, preparation for lectures and activities. If we are prepared and show an interest in the subject, so will they.

### **2.12 Assess on Deep Learning**

The ultimate learning outcome is where the students' learned deeply. Deep learning occurs when a student can comprehend the subject matter with deep understanding, promote a higher level of interest in the subject matter, the ability to view the subject matter as a whole and how it relates to the other areas and issues of life. For these reasons, examinations must be given in a reflective form. This allows them to *think* through what they have learned and understand what, how and why it relates to the other concerns of the subject matter and beyond. Students' should be informed in the early weeks on how assessment of learning would entail. Memorization of facts and passing the exams for a grade are highly discouraged. Teachers should not *curve* an exam because by curving an exam, in reality, someone inevitably should fail or receive the lowest grade. Interest in learning, henceforth, will not take place.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

Improving a student's interest in learning can be achieved. I have used the techniques as outlined above in my courses and have found them to have a positive impact on students' interest in learning. These I have found to be true from the end of the term evaluation from the students. However, these techniques must also be aligned with the curriculum of the course. These techniques must be incorporated into the steps of the general approaches suggested by Gunter et al (1991) which describe the educational goals; determine the learning outcomes and evaluation strategies; organize the content; and select the instrumental tools.

Active learning techniques (Leong and Petkova, 2003) or group learning activities (Benbunan-Fich, 2002) are one of the most common implementations of the constructivist approach. In these activities, knowledge is constructed by

formulating ideas into words, and building upon these ideas through discussion, reactions, and responses of others (Alavi, M.,1994, Leidner, D. and Jarvenpaa, S.,1995). It is, therefore, important that instructors include class activities in their curriculum design of MIS courses.

Furthermore, communication between the instructor and students needs to be improved. Positive communication creates a healthy learning environment and ultimately promotes interest in learning. Communication through the use of technology should be used in a timely manner in responses and feedbacks. Harasim et al (1995) stated that new information and communication technology introduces powerful environments that enhance social and intellectual connectivities. Communication technology should be used for information exchange, supports peer-interaction and faculty-student interaction, and overcomes time and space barriers. (Benbunan-Fich, 2002). With the added use of communication technology, students' interaction with the faculty and among students promotes an interest in learning. When an interest in learning is present, *successful* completion of the course is achievable.

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