

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF
STUDENT MOTIVATION TO LEARN

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This paper summarizes results of a 3 month (one academic quarter) group phenomenological investigation into student motivation to learn. The project culminated in a better understanding of the classroom learning process for the investigators, as well as a diagnostic instrument that any instructor can use to access the motivational climate of his or her class.

Background

Prior to this research, I had been working for several years using phenomenological methods to investigate human motivation in general. That research indicated that human motivation comes out of the experience of growing. Since growing is just learning in a holistic sense, this led to the question of why students are so often de-motivated while being in a university environment that is entirely dedicated to learning. Accordingly, I wrote a small grant proposal to the Educational Development Program at Montana State University while I was a faculty member there, and obtained funds to support an experimental class aimed at investigating this question.

Research Design

The project was conducted at Montana State University during the Winter Quarter, 1981. Three faculty were involved, Dr. James Brock, Dr. Ronald Lundquist, and Dr. Mel McKnight

Students were then recruited by being told about the experimental class and asked to join the investigative team by enrolling in the class. They received 1 quarter academic credit for the course, evaluated on a pass/fail basis. The class met for 1 1/4 hours each week, Monday from 7:00-8:15 PM for 10 weeks during Winter Quarter, 1981.

Research Methodology

The research methodology involved a process of guided phenomenological inquiry led by myself. In general, this involved peak-experiencing research along the lines described in some of my earlier work (McKnight, 1980). It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe the method and its rationale in detail, however I will briefly summarize it in what follows. In general, it involved four distinct phases

Phase 1: Participants were asked to think of concrete experiences they had, in an academic setting, in which they found themselves to be highly motivated, excited, turned on, etc.. These were recorded on newsprint. This was followed by similar questioning for concrete experiences in which they had found themselves to be non-motivated, bored, etc. These were also recorded.

Phase 2: The lists developed in phase 1 were explored much more thoroughly by an in-depth reflection upon them. In other words, for each and every motivation or de-motivating experience, respondents were asked to describe the characteristics or attributes of the experience, and in particular, to try to define what about it made it highly motivating or de-motivating.

Phase 3: After phase two was completed a process of phenomenological reduction or

experience to be truly motivational. This is the "essence" question, where essence is defined as the "necessary condition for the existence of the phenomenon" in question--motivation to learn in a classroom setting in this case.

Phase 4: The model developed in phase 3 was then elaborated by asking, for each motivating situation, what the faculty member had done that facilitated that experience. The goal here was to identify the things the faculty member does, or does not do, that create or get in the way of student motivation to learn. Based on this phase of the research, a 42 item paper and pencil diagnostic questionnaire was created that can be used to evaluate the motivational climate in any class and provide information as to how to increase it.

Results:

I. The "Essence" Statement:

Learning is motivating when it results in real growth for the students: such growth is experienced by the students as meaning, and is always transformational for them. On the part of the student, such growth requires the acceptance of responsibility, which in turn requires that teachers create an atmosphere which facilitates such acceptance.

II. Overview of Student Motivation to Learn:

In this section, we will look at each part of this statement at the level of the project findings as a whole and briefly indicate what each requires

Seeing the value of the knowledge

Experiencing success/my power/expansion of mind/awareness

Experiencing closure/completion

B. Real growth is transformation and occurs on two levels:

Process: skill acquisition--ability to think, perceive meaning, use intuition, etc.

Content: knowledge goes from being external to me (something I attend to) to

internal (something I can attend from), and thus becomes a basis for

intuitive, confident judgments. Outcome is an improved/refined tacit map of reality.

C. Real growth requires effort by the student, which means the acceptance of responsibility. A major goal of any class should therefore be the transfer of responsibility for learning to the student. This results in:

willingness to confront decisions/accept a challenge

a spirit of adventure and discovery

doing--creating an experience for oneself

searching and exploring on one's own

commitment and effort

using the imagination

And it requires:

to risk and fail

to make mistakes

Security:

of guidance and direction

an example/role model

An atmosphere or climate which facilitates growth is characterized by:

human interaction/sharing

humor/laughter/lightness

enthusiasm from the teacher

teacher is learning too (with us)

III. Achieving a Climate that Creates Student Motivation to Learn

In what follows, we will expand the above statements in detail, while also presenting findings regarding what the teacher can do to facilitate student motivation with respect to each.

A. Real growth is experienced by students as meaning:

1. Seeing the whole (patterns), and understanding its parts and structure. Instructors

can achieve this by:

- a) Courses and the whole curriculum need to be holistic: need to give a framework up front so students can relate the pieces as they are presented.
- b) Instructor creates the whole through communication/student has to listen

be brought into the classroom by:

- i. Cases/simulations (much better than tests)
 - ii. Outside speakers
 - iii. Models: systems approach
 - iv. Autonomous projects
 - v. War stories/sharing of experience by prof.
- c) Professor must believe in the value of the knowledge. He/she needs to commit himself/herself and let me make decisions.

3. Experiencing success/my power/expansion of mind & awareness. This occurs when:

- a) I can see the direction I need to grow.
- b) I know the professor is taking me seriously/I have influence.
- c) Professor lets students experience success by:
 - i. encouraging comments
 - ii. putting expectations at the appropriate level
 - iii. being open enough that I feel comfortable asking questions.
 - iv. positive feedback
- d) I participate--am taking power. **THIS IS NECESSARY!**
- e) Working as part of a team.

4. Experiencing closure/completion

- a) Things are too broken up. Need better integration or one class for a longer period of time.
- b) It is a matter of how much I put in/become absorbed. A real project helps.
- c) Classes I really like never end because they prepare me.

B. Real growth is transformation & occurs on process and content levels.

1. Process is skill acquisition--ability to think, perceive meanings, use intuition. This requires for its development:

- a) Psychological health--courses need to deal with this.
- b) Practice--skills can be developed only by using them.

2. Content: knowledge going from external (attended to) to internal (can attend from it). This requires a situation where one has to attend from the knowledge by applying or using it.

- a) case analysis
- b) projects
- c) essay exams
- d) teaching the knowledge to others.

Comments relevant to achieving this:

- a) Papers imply both process and content--it is really mine so I get more

- d) Teaching is learning, therefore students should be seen as resources. For example, you might have us read other student's papers and critique, then grade on both the paper and the critique.

C. Real growth requires the acceptance of responsibility by the student, and therefore a basic goal of any class should be the transfer of responsibility for learning to the student.

Transfer is successful when:

1. I am given Direction and Guidance:
 - a) I know what I am responsible for.
 - b) I know what I am supposed to learn.
 - c) I see/am shown the whole at the beginning.
 - d) The instructor is an example/role model.
2. I am given Freedom & Acceptance
 - a) I move at my own pace. I have a goal and a reward for achieving it but I have time freedom.
 - b) I am not penalized for mistakes. They are learning opportunities rather than evidence of my failure. Nothing turns us off from learning as much as being punished for trying to learn.
 - c) I am not over-protected. You must permit failure.
 - d) I have to figure it out on my own/I decide the direction--a guided but flexible

freshman. The difference at the graduate level is that students are given more opportunity to accept responsibility and therefore perceive themselves as having more at stake.

Real growth requires an atmosphere or climate which facilitates growth. This is a product of relationships: (a) between instructor and students, and (b) among students.

1. Characteristics of a facilitative relationship with instructors:

- a) Instructor has high expectations as an expression of confidence in the students.
- b) Instructor has personal power.
- c) There is a personal relationship between instructor and student.
- d) The instructor is truly knowledgeable.
- e) The environment is interactive.
 - i. the instructor is open to questions
 - ii. I feel I can ask a dumb question
 - iii. feedback to questions is positive
 - iv. the instructor learns from us/communication is two way
- f) Professor respects us/our intellect.
- g) Instructor forces students to think for themselves.
- h) Professor is enthusiastic.

2. Characteristics of a facilitative peer relationship:

- iii. need training in how to make groups work.
- b) there is a lot of interaction and sharing
- c) presence of humor/laughter/lightness
- d) older students helping younger ones, e.g. advisory board of Sr. students.

IV. Summary Of Things The Instructor Does That Are Motivating For Students:

This section gathers together, from the preceding section, the things an instructor can do to create a motivational climate.

1. Creates the whole
2. Gives us a framework up-front so we can relate the pieces as we go along.
3. Creates a need for the knowledge--shows us how and why the stuff is valuable.
4. Helps us relate the knowledge to our experience.
5. Shares his/her experience.
6. Believes in the value of the knowledge/ is committed to it.
7. Helps me see the direction I need to grow.
8. Takes me seriously/I have influence.
9. Lets me experience success through encouraging comments and expectations.
10. Lets me participate/gives opportunity for genuine input.
11. Gives feedback in a way that lets me learn from my mistakes.
12. Gives assignments/exams that let me use knowledge, not just memorize it

17. Is an example/role model.
18. Is truly knowledgeable.
19. Is really open to my questions/I feel I can ask one that might seem dumb.
20. Respects us.
21. Forces us to think for ourselves.
22. Is enthusiastic.
23. Smiles/laughs/is positive.

V. The things that most get in the way of real learning and growth:

This is a summary of the things that were going on when a de-motivating climate was created

1. In general, all the opposites of the above list.
 - a) Don't see a benefit in putting out effort
 - b) Confused—not sure what I should be doing
 - c) Instructor is bored
 - d) Fulfilling instructor's agenda, not my own
 - e) Being put down
 - f) Learning is isolated from my experience/not relevant
 - g) Getting behind
 - h) Being overloaded

- m) Having to learn something I can see no use for
- n) Having to listen to something where I see no significance
- o) Having to memorize something I don't need/can look up
- p) Not being able to provide input
- q) Don't get any reinforcement/encouragement
- r) Being told I'm wrong, but not what is wrong

2. GRADES: they are not necessary for those who want to learn/if we are involved.
 - a. Why not have proficiency tests instead/ a list of skills we need to demonstrate.
 - b. Written and verbal feedback is far more important than grades--it lets me now
what I've done well and not well and why.
 - c. Subjective assignments/tests are far better than objective: I feel powerful in
responding to open ended questions--in showing I can use the stuff.
 - d. We always get more when the instructor takes a personal interest in us--grades
often block this relationship.
 - e. Contests can make us anxious to learn the tools.

Evaluating the Motivational Climate of a Class

Based on the above results of the investigation, the instrument attached to this paper was developed. It can be used to measure the extent to which any class meets the criteria set forth here as necessary to the creation of a truly motivational climate for students

reward them for learning, and that necessarily means rewarding them for *learning from mistakes*.

They said that we have the whole system set up, from grade school on so that we always *punish them for making mistakes*, which means essentially for trying to learn! They felt the fact that feedback is negative is the most important reason why students are so often poorly motivated. As one student put it, “you never measure how much I learn, but rather only by how much I fail!”

Subsequent to this project I performed a simple, informal test of this idea. Specifically, I was teaching a management course that had a significant writing component in it--ten short papers in an eleven week quarter. I told the students on the first day of class that the only grade I would put on a paper or record in my grade book would be an A, but if their paper was not an A, I would give them written feedback as to why it was not, and they could redo them and submit them as many times as they wished. I also told them that the way grading would work for the course was that they would receive an A in the course if, by the end of the course, they had at least 8 A's. If they had 6 A's they would get a B, 4 would get a C, 2 would get a D, and none would fail. Notice that when we structure a course in this way, we do turn the grading system around so that it now rewards students for trying to learn rather than punishing them.

It was quite remarkable what happened. The motivation of the students and the amount of learning that took place accelerated greatly, which resulted in high, but well-deserved, grades. It convinced me that we had identified the central reason for poor student motivation to learn--the fact that we essentially punish students for trying to learn. In fact, this project generated a

The second insight that changed my teaching significantly was the notion that all true learning of content becomes empowerment only when it is transformation--from something that we attend to, as external to ourselves, to something that we can attend from to a problem situation, and that such a transformation never occurs *unless teachers require it!* For example, when we begin to learn accounting it is a knowledge that is external to us, and it becomes empowerment only when we become capable of attending from that knowledge, and thus using it, to problems in the world that need that knowledge for their resolution. But that transformation never happens if students are just given objective tests that ask if they know, but never require them to use that knowledge. Since this research, I have always made sure that students are required to use the knowledge they are learning; if I give an objective test, I usually follow it with a take-home part of the test that requires application.

The third insight that impacted my teaching was that learning includes a skill component and that this requires practice. This was the beginning of the work that I have done in the management skill movement (McKnight, 1991 & 1995), and also led to the first management skill class at NAU in 1985.

In summary, I feel that this project did succeed in identifying the essential attributes that result in a motivating classroom situation for students. By using the attached questionnaire and the results of this research, faculty should be able to increase the motivational aspect of their classrooms

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