[W3] Creating and sustaining motivation in first year biosciences and health students

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Introduction

At Leeds Met University in the Faculty of Health we deliver a degree course in Biomedical Sciences with specialised routes in Microbiology and Molecular Biology, Physiology and Pharmacology and in Human Biology. As is the norm we have a welcome (induction) week for our students that is delivered as a series of workshops. The aim of the workshops is to facilitate the transition into HE and to introduce students to Assessment Learning and Teaching (ALT) strategies utilised generically in HE and specifically on our courses. In addition we encourage our students to discuss their expectation and goals and to identify their support needs. We also emphasise the importance of engaging in personal and professional development planning throughout their time with us.

Participation and engagement in all of these activities is very high and enthusiastic and students typically comment that although they have anxieties they are mainly very much looking forward to HE study and are excited at the prospect of studying science and health.

However within a few weeks of the beginning of formal teaching attendance has perceptively dropped at all sessions and within a few more weeks failure to engage in formative and summative assessment tasks and submit within deadlines has occurred. For some students, failure to engage on a day to day basis is almost total whereas with others it is intermittent though still worrying and problematic particularly in group learning situations. It is almost exclusively younger students (18-20 yr olds) rather than our more mature students who fail to attend. It is also noticeable that some students who do attend are passive at best or appear disengaged throughout the teaching session.

As our students belong to a Faculty of Health an ALT strategy designed to create WELL students seems appropriate. A WELL student is one who not only attends but:

- Wants to attend
- Engages when they do attend
- Learns stuff that they need to learn for future employment and wants to learn
- Likes learning

It therefore becomes extremely important to try to identify all of the factors that may influence motivation to learn in this critical early period of transition in HE and to develop strategies that create and sustain motivation to learn.

Explanations for this lack of engagement highlight a culture in HE that occasionally blames the student. It is often assumed that their failure to attend and engage is because they are too absorbed in social activities and a desire to explore the limits of new found freedom without parental constraints. For students on Bioscience courses it is easy to add further blame for their inability to persevere with subject material that may be inherently hard to grasp. Tutors often label students who do not engage as intellectually inferior to students who do.

The tendency for blaming the student negates the responsibility for tutors to have to reflect on the extent to which teaching methods in Biosciences impact on creating a conducive learning environment. These methods traditionally involve the didactic delivery of large amounts of content that is presented as factual information in large lecture theatres. Learning is defined as the ability to absorb all of this information and regurgitate it on demand in examination based assessments (Hughes and Wood, 2003). These methodologies very strongly encourage and reward students who are surface learners (Biggs,1987 and 2003) but will actively prevent learning for students who need to make sense of information by using it to problem solve or in reasoned debate. There is at least a possibility that our disengaged students are simply turned off by outdated teaching practices that do not meet the needs of the modern bioscience professional.

In addition the language, practices and processes that tutors see as routine in day to day academia may be impacting on student engagement. On closer examination it is relatively easy to see that many of these practices wrapped up as they are in academic ritual and language may be mystifying and unattractive to many students. (Sanderson and Johnson, 2006).

Although there is a very extensive literature that explores theories of motivation and their application to learning (e.g. see Eccles and Wigfield, (2002) for an excellent and comprehensive overview) and an equally extensive one exploring the learning process itself (e.g. Race, 2005) there is also a need for a much more pragmatic approach.

I wanted to find out from students what had to be in place in a teaching situation to grab them and motivated them to want to learn. What do they have to say about what turns them on and turns them off to learning in a particular context? Which of these motivational and demotivational factors do they perceive as being under their control? Whose responsibility do they think it is to provide the motivation to learn?

These issues were explored with students in focus groups and workshops and these discussions generated interesting data (Sanderson, in preparation). Whilst highlighting a range of situational factors that impacted on motivation, teaching style and the dynamics of the tutor student interaction were ranked as the biggest influence. What turned them off learning were tutors that seemed demotivated, didn't involve them and presented information read from slides. What turned them on to learning were interactive session that focussed on checking understanding and skills development.

There is therefore a need for Bioscience tutors to examine their own approaches to teaching in different contexts and to consider the range of factors that affect their capacity to facilitate learning for all students. Whilst this can be viewed as normal reflective practice, busy days may not allow full absorption in the reflective process. Following reflection of this nature we may be better able to help students through the use of active learning techniques to stay engaged and focussed in situations that don't instantly grab them.

References

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