

June, 2006 — Dr. James Clayton, Education

Teaching Tip

Maximizing Instructional Time

In a perfect world all of my students would arrive to class on time. Many do...but several do not. They just do not all appreciate the value of teaching time. Calling on my experience as an educator over the years, I humbly share the following idea for consideration by my fellow professors (several of whom were on staff when I was a student at Saint Peter's).

As a secondary teacher, then later as a supervisor, one of my first concerns was the utilization of instructional time -- we only have so much of it. Now, as I teach both graduate and undergraduate students, my concern is elevated. No matter how effective he or she may be, the teacher cannot create a single extra second of the day, a minute more for class, or an additional session. As an effective teacher I can certainly control the way instructional time is utilized. Effective teachers systematically and carefully plan for productive use of instructional time. But how do I get my students to show up for the beginning of class?

I am delighted to find students waiting at my classroom door when I arrive before class. Generally, they are motivated and organized and ready to learn. I am perplexed by those who occasionally or perpetually arrive late. Ten or fifteen minutes missed from several class periods quickly accumulates to the equivalent of the loss of one or more class sessions. It is a challenge to conquer such apathy.

There is research indicating that good everyday teaching practices can do more to counter student apathy than special efforts to address motivation directly (Ericksen, 1978). It has been shown that most students respond positively to a well-organized course taught by an enthusiastic instructor who has a genuine interest in the students and what they learn. Thus, I attempt to plan engaging activities commencing immediately. A joke and/or a cartoon set a positive feeling tone and indicate to all that class is under way.

Unfortunately, there is no single magical formula for motivating students, no magic wand to bring them to class and to task on time. Many factors effect a given student's motivation to work and to learn: interest in the subject matter, perception of its usefulness, general desire to achieve, self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as patience and persistence (Bligh, 1971; Sass, 1989). Certainly, not all students are motivated by the same values, needs, desires, or wants. I am still searching for that magic wand.

Nonetheless, I try to capitalize on my students' needs at the beginning of class and throughout the session. News items, sample Praxis (licensing) questions, examination questions, even job interview suggestions are useful topics to

engage students from the outset. If the word spreads to latecomers that they missed a discussion of immediate value to them, they may be motivated to promptness in the future. Just maybe... Whenever possible I attempt to plan activities, assignments, and discussion to address such practical needs and interests of students (McMillan and Forsyth, 1991).

Finally, to optimize time utilization I attempt to engage my students actively as much as possible throughout each session. I make every effort to model good teaching. At all ages students learn best by doing, thinking, writing, discussing, solving, etc. Passivity undermines curiosity and motivation (Lucas, 1990). And activity makes time, that most precious commodity, "fly."

References:

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