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Motivating Students: Should Effort Count?

AUGUST 13TH, 2014

Motivating Students: Should Effort Count?

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD

(<http://www.facultyfocus.com/author/maryellen-weimer-phd/>)

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I've always said no, effort shouldn't count. When students pleaded, "but I worked so hard," or "I studied so long," I would respond with the clichéd quip about people with brain tumors not wanting surgeons who try hard. Besides if students try hard, if they do their assignments, come to class, take notes, ask questions, and study on more nights than the one before the exam, that effort will pay off. They will learn the material, and their grades will reflect that learning.

That's what I've always believed, but here's what's troubling me. Most students want to get grades with the least amount of effort. If they can get an A or B with an hour or two of studying once a week, or by doing nothing until the night before the exam or paper is due, that's how much effort they'll make. Unless students fall madly in love with the content, most won't expend any more energy than they need to.

Then there are those students who aren't well prepared for the rigors of college—the ones who need to exert a lot of effort—and who really don't believe that effort will make a difference. They think learning is all about natural ability and maybe they just don't have what it takes.

In both cases, the question is the same: how do we motivate students to put forth the effort—to go beyond the minimum in the first case, and to try, multiples times and in multiple ways, before concluding that effort is always trumped by ability in the second.

A small institution with open admissions and a student body with low graduation rates instituted a unique grading system for first- and second-year courses. Students got two grades in each of these courses: one for content knowledge (measured in the traditional ways with exams, papers, projects, etc) and one for effort (measured by things like attendance, meeting deadlines, participating in class, etc).

Content knowledge was weighted at 40% of the course grade and effort at 60% for first-year courses. Those amounts were reversed for second-year courses and no effort grades after that. Professors were allowed to define effort so long as the definitions were clear and communicated directly to students.

The paper reporting on the system analyzed the effort-learning-grade relationship differently than previous research (more robustly, according to the researcher who offers justification for that claim). The finding is as we'd expect: "the effort grade affects the knowledge grade positively and significantly. This is strong evidence that more student effort does lead to increased learning." (p. 1182)

That's not surprising to faculty, but it probably was to these low-achieving students who discovered that effort did make a difference. When they tried hard, they got results.

Of course, a system like this is using grades to motivate effort, and that's much like trying to cure obesity with more food. Students are already way too grade oriented. I used to try to challenge those students who were doing the minimum by trying to make them aware of how much more they could do. "If you put the pedal to the metal, how fast could you go? You've got a big brain motor why are you always running it half speed?" I'd suggest really studying for an exam in a course with content they cared about or spending time on a paper for three days instead of one evening. I'd try to make them understand it was about something beyond the grade. "You get decent grades without a lot of effort so you're not doing this for grades. You're doing this because you need to know what you can do." Some took me up on this; a lot more shrugged shoulders and smiled, albeit somewhat sheepishly.

Every now and then, a student excels – or maybe it’s a handful of students who surpass all expectations. They write a truly memorable paper, get a perfect exam score, or produce an amazing project. We are stunned by their success and even more importantly, so are they. They can’t believe what they accomplished. But this doesn’t happen nearly as often as it should, and the challenge remains as to how we can get more of this kind of success in the classroom. Should we try grading effort?

<http://polldaddy.com/poll/8228418/>

Reference: Swinton, O. H., (2010). The effect of effort grading on learning. *Economics of Education Review*, 29, 1176-1182.

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