The Impact of Engagement on Student Learning

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Abstract

Colleges and universities are faced with ever-increasing pressure to improve student outcomes which ultimately impact retention, perseverance, and completion (Zepke & Leach, 2005; Astin, 1999). Literature suggests that student engagement may have an impact on these outcomes (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, 2009). Studies show students who are actively engaged in learning learn more, learn better, and actually enjoy the classroom experience (Park, 2003). This study, therefore, addressed the issue of student engagement through the lens of the student perspective. Employing semi-structured interviews and observations, eight composition students and their instructor from a small, private university in Western New York participated in this qualitative study. This research sought to understand how student identity, classroom practices, and intrinsic motivation impact student engagement. The results suggested that at the core of student engagement is a bond between teacher and students. A relationship of mutual respect and trust heightens student engagement, as does a variety of active learning experiences. Those personal, academic, and professional goals that many students bring to class also impact engagement.

Keywords: Composition, Student Engagement, Persistence, Motivation, Student Identity, Cooperative Activities, Vygotsky, Social Development Theory, Inquiry-Based Learning, Goal Theory, Involvement Theory

Introduction

Student retention has, for some years now, been an ongoing concern, especially in four-year colleges and universities. In 2006, Act (2006) reported only seventy-five percent of college freshmen returned for their sophomore year. In their 2012 report, those numbers had dropped to 65 percent. Graduation rates too warrant consideration. Four year institutions only graduate 53 percent of their students within a six year period (Carey, 2004). Colleges have attempted to support students' success, both in completing core classes and in reaching their individual long-term goals for college, through freshman seminars, remedial classes, academic support systems and expanded academic advisement. Still, many students either opt out or are asked to leave at alarmingly high rates. Of special concern are those students who struggle with foundational courses, mandated classes that teach the skills necessary for academic success – classes like freshman composition. These courses are gate-keeping mechanisms. Without passing these classes, students cannot move forward in their college careers. Here, students learn, not just to write different genres of essays, but to utilize objectivity and critical thinking skills. Perhaps more important, they learn that research and writing are valuable tools for creating knowledge. These skills are mastered by the time students complete freshman composition successfully, but not all students pass. These students are the focus of this study.

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[1]This research study was completed in 2013 for LAI 626, Advanced Qualitative Research, at SUNY Buffalo while Diane S. Halm was completing coursework for her PhD. in English Education. She is currently a Doctoral Candidate, and is hoping to successfully defend her dissertation in May of 2015. She has been teaching Writing & Thinking at Niagara University for the past 14 years.

This study attempted to gain understanding about why some students are unable to complete composition class successfully and, conversely, what composition instructors can do to positively impact student engagement and motivation, factors that relate to student learning and academic success. The research addressed student motivation and engagement through the lens of the student perspective. The purpose of this research study was to identify specific curricular methods and avenues that support students' emotional and academic needs, those that culminate in maximized learning and academic success for freshman composition students, and to further our understanding of student engagement and cooperative activities that lead to maximized learning for composition students, allowing us to implement those methods that impact students positively; enabling them to move ahead academically with the skills necessary for success.

Previous Research

While research on the impact of post-secondary student motivation and engagement in learning, those factors that impact retention rates, is far from abundant, some studies do exist. Allen, Robbins, Casillas, and Oh (2008) focused on third year college retention and found, "…academic performance has large effects on likelihood of retention and transfer" (p.647). Using a questionnaire, Kitsantas, Winsler, and Huie (2008) measured the learning, motivation and self-regulation of 243 first-semester freshmen at a large mid-Atlantic university. Researchers found a correlation between motivation, self-regulation and student GPAs. Student motivation yields self-regulation, the ability to work through assignments successfully, and this ability is reflected in higher grades. Additionally, there have been studies which investigated the relationship between factors such as self-concept and learning styles on student success. However, while research has established a relationship between motivation, engagement, self-concept, learning styles and student success at college, there are virtually no studies that start from this point and attempt to develop a model, especially for composition classes, that builds upon those methods and practices designed to overcome such obstacles.

While there is much research on the effects of active engagement on student motivation, satisfaction, and achievement at the primary and secondary level (Gardner et al. 1994; Pratton and Hales 1986, Sesen & Tarhan, 2011; Swiderski, 2012; Southern Regional Education 2011), literature focusing on students at the post-secondary level is far less abundant. Much, though not all of the research which does exist, seems to point to active engagement as key to both maximized learning and student satisfaction (Marmolejo, Wilder, & Bradley, 2004). One quantitative study, conducted by Smith and Cardaciotto (2011), enlisted 1,090 students in an introductory Psychology class, and required active participation from half of the students, while delivering the standard, passive homework assignments to the control group. Active participation was shown to both engage students in the task at higher rates and heighten the level of material retention. However, anonymous responses yielded far less promising results in the area of student satisfaction. While students learned more, they didn't feel more motivated.

Many freshmen are surprised by the amount of didactic instruction they receive in college, and their response is boredom. One study out of a UK university polled 211 students, and while over half the students found the typical lectures boring 50 percent of the time, another 30 percent found most or all of the classes to be a good time for a nap (Mann and Robinson, 2009). "For students, boring connotes something missing in their education, conveys a deep sense of disappointment, and casts class cutting as a coping mechanism for classes that fail to engage" (Fallis & Opotow, 2003, p. 108). Fiske and Maddi (1961) attribute boredom to lack of stimulation, but classes need not be monotonous.

Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory maintains that learning occurs socially. Community plays a decisive role in the process of "meaning making" for a child. Learning is constructed socially, and points away from the traditional instructionist model of education; where teachers transmit information, and students act as receptacles. In opposition, Vygotsky's theory maintains the need for active learning, creating a classroom environment in which teacher and student act as collaborators, facilitating meaning construction for the student and yielding reciprocal learning for both parties. While the teacher's task is altered, the part they play in the learning process is of paramount importance.

Vygotsky (1978) also believed that "more knowledgeable others" (MKOs), including teachers and "more competent peers", can aid in student development (p.86). This belief underlies Vygotsky's principle of the ZPD, the zone of proximal development.

"What a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (p.87). This is an important concept in regards to writing ability, even at the college level. Bearing in mind the number of freshmen who lack the skills and training necessary for utilizing and composing scholarly research that informs, encouragement and guidance from more skilled partners has the potential to assist in cognitive transformation and knowledge expansion.

Confucius (450 BC) is credited with the proverb, "Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand". This seems to mirror Dewey's rationale for inquiry-based learning which focuses on learning-by-doing rather than rote memorization and instruction. Predating Vygotsky by some thirty years, Dewey (1902) envisioned the classroom as neither entirely child-based nor entirely curriculum-centered. Instead, he maintained, "The child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction" (Dewey, 1902, p. 16). It was this line of reasoning that propelled Dewey to become one of the most famous and vocal proponents of hands-on learning (Dewey, 1902, p. 13-14).

Although goal theory dates back to the early 1980's, Ames and Archer (1988) were among the first to extend the theory which is utilized today. Originally focused on internalized learning as a primary motivator of academic success, the theory evolved, and a distinction began to be made between mastery goals and performance goals; the former interested in developing knowledge and the latter more interested in exhibiting proficiency through competitive testing. Although scholars originally believed a mastery orientation to be superior for achieving educational benefits, especially for struggling students (Dweck, 1986), later research supported the merits of a performance orientation in some instances (Harackiewicz, Barron & Elliot, 1998).

Astin's theory of involvement explains how and why involvement impacts the educational experience for college students. He defined "involvement" as, "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin,1999, p. 518), and maintained that student learning is precipitated by direct involvement in their own learning (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, 2009). Actions, he believed, more than feelings, would dictate the student's educational experience, and in this respect, involvement theory does embrace a behavioral component.

Research Questions

Research questions that guided this study included: 1.) What methods, practices, and activities motivate and engage students? 2.) Conversely, especially for those students who struggle, what methods and activities, if any, detract from student engagement and motivation and limit learning? 3.) What part, if any, does student identity play in engagement?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology and Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) constructivist-interpretive approach to provide insight into "…the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). A case study approach seemed appropriate as, according to Creswell (2007), "…case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system" (p.73).

Research Site

All research, multiple observations and interviews, was conducted on the campus of a small, Catholic, liberal arts university in Western New York. Undergraduate enrollment includes approximately 3,300 students. Of the roughly 800 freshmen who began in 2012, approximately 120, or 15 percent, were identified as in need of remediation in composition. 5 percent of the freshmen who enrolled in freshman composition in the fall of 2012 failed to complete the class successfully. Demographically, the University is comprised of approximately 65 percent Causcasians, 5 percent African Americans, 10 percent International students, 15 percent who fail to identify themselves, 2 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent American Indian or Alaskan Native (College News, 2012).

Participants

Eight native English (L1) students who were currently enrolled in freshman composition (Spring 2013) participated in this study. Participants included five females and three males. All five females were freshmen, as was one of the males. The other two males were sophomores. Two of the eight participants, a female in her freshman year and a male in his sophomore year, had unsuccessfully attempted this class prior to the study.

Upon admission to college, four out of the eight participants, all females, were identified as in need of developmental assistance. Therefore, all four students enrolled in and successfully passed Critical Reading Literacy (CRL) in the fall of 2012. CRL is one of the mandated courses required of students who are deemed inadequately prepared for college reading and writing tasks, and approximately 15 percent of entering freshmen are mandated to complete CRL based on a number of factors including low SAT scores, English Regents exam scores, and their final grades in English class. All eight students were Caucasian and none of them were designated as special needs. Students ranged in age from 19 years, 3 months, to 20 years, 10 months.

A freshman composition instructor at this same university also participated. As the classroom instructor, he allowed me access to the eight participants during class, which met three times per week for 55 minutes on each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. He had been teaching freshman writing at the school for over five years, and was highly regarded by both other faculty and administration. Because of my long-standing affiliation with this University as a composition instructor, gaining access to both the instructor, Mr. P., and his class was expedient and pertinent to my focus. The students who agreed to participate represented both those students who arrive at college with foundational skills and those who do not: Four of the eight student-participants required developmental assistance and two had attempted composition class unsuccessfully. Data provided by the Department of Education's National Education Longitudinal Study reports that developmental students in four-year institutions suffer from substantially lower graduation rates than their non-developmental peers; 52 percent versus 78 percent (Brock, 2010,p.115).

Data Collection

In recognition of triangulation, data was collected by three different means: Students participated in private, semi-structured interviews twice; once at the beginning and then again, at the end of the study. These students will be referred to by pseudonyms. Student-participants were also asked to spend between 5 and 10 minutes after each class reflecting on their daily writing experiences in electronic journals. It prompted reflection and self-examination on not just classroom tasks, but their own strengths and weaknesses – participation, attendance, commitment, strategies, and work habits. It also encouraged more active cognition and metacognition - attention to what was really being communicated and learned in classes. Student-participants were observed in class once a week over the course of the study.

Data Coding

The first cycle of coding utilized an affective coding method because this study sought to better understand student motivation and engagement – things impacted and reflected by personal feelings and emotions (Saldana, 2013, p.105). Values coding (Gable & Wolfe, 1993; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) was used to determine, "…participant motivation [and] agency" (Saldana, 2013, p.111). When I originally began this project, the research attempted to ascertain the impact of educational methods on student engagement. During the research process, however, several issues arose that caused me to re-examine my data. What analysis pointed to was far more complex; to wit, an examination of not just the impact of activities and practices but the impact of the instructor. The roadmap created by later analysis led me to consider the relationship between knowledge acquisition, and both the "who" and "how" of mediation, on engagement and motivation.

Findings

The Relationship between Student Identity and Writing Experience

In my first conversation with each student, we discussed their previous writing experiences and feelings about the act of composing. While the responses covered a wide range of emotions, from "Happy!" to "Annoyed", to "Stressed out", one thing became glaringly obvious; for these students, creative writing and research writing were two very different animals and therefore, elicited very different reactions. One student, who we'll call Regan, had no trouble differentiating for me:

> When it's more research and academic writing, I start feeling so much pressure
> I think I over-think it, like, "OMG it's got to be perfect", like I try to make
> it so perfect on the first time where it's almost overwhelming. However, when
> it's more creative writing, narrative writing, telling a story, making up fiction or something, then it just
> flows (Feb. 12, 2012).

She was far from the only student who saw the tasks differently. Abby voiced much the same opinion on the subject:

> Well, when I can write about what I like to write about, not just what a teacher
> wants me to write about, like write about a person who inspires you, or a story
> about your life or an influence, something you like to do., then I love writing,
> but when it's like, oh, "Write about this article", and you're just not really interested,
> I mean you'll like do it but you're not as vested (Feb. 11, 2013).

The reality hit me immediately; these kids didn't hate writing – they hated writing about things they had no interest in or knowledge on. Quotes from the students indicated writing to learn was, for many, "painful" and "restrictive", causing them to feel, "tongue-tied" and "insecure", and research essays apparently were not necessarily tasks meant to encourage learning, " In high school, it was just like, "Write about this"; writing but not much thinking, more summarizing than analyzing" (Jason, Feb.12, 2013).

It would be a mistake to assume students who expressed dissatisfaction did so because they suffered at the hands of overly-harsh or demanding ELA teachers. Edward graduated from high school with an English grade of 91, but held similar beliefs about academic writing, "Well, I've never been, I never knew how to write well. I guess I just never paid attention in English. I never thought it was going to be important" (Feb. 14, 2013). Despite a grade most would envy, he felt ill-prepared for the task of academic writing at the college level. And then there were those who saw academic writing as a task imposed by teachers, with guidelines meant to minimize teachers' workload. Jeremy, who disliked guidelines, offered the reason instructors use rubrics, "I'm actually an Education major so it's not that hard to answer this. It's so they don't have to grade a million different papers that are on a million different subjects" (Feb. 13, 2013). Tamara put it plainly, "This is boring, I don't care, it's a paper, for Eng. Specifically". From those who couldn't actually remember doing research in high school to those who felt it a waste of time to those who believed that more should have been required of them, virtually none of the students had anything positive to say about their prior experiences with academic writing. It wasn't a reflection of the grades they had received; they ranged from 71 to 95, and it wasn't about the level of difficulty; none of the students could remember exactly what the task actually called for. Not one student could recall WHAT they wrote about, and perhaps that's what speaks the loudest. These assignments were forgettable, leaving no conscious remnants of gained knowledge at all.

The Impact of Learning Modes on Engagement

Many factors impact student attendance. This is college after all, and sometimes the thought of getting out of bed is just plain painful. Long nights of studying or partying make it tough to get up. Even the afternoon classes can seem unpleasant, inconvenient, or unnecessary. The participants in this study were no different. These kids did, however, make it to the majority of classes, and the reason is, "It's relatively fun" (Edward, Feb, 14, 2013). Abby went further, "I particularly love writing class" (Feb. 11, 2013), and, according to the students, it's because of both what they learn and how they learn. That being said, you can't please all the people all the time. While Peggy enthusiastically offered, "I really like watching videos", Edward confided, "I don't get why he does that. I think it's meaningless really". According to the instructor, offering Youtube videos conform to student expectations and experience – delivery in a mode that students embrace, and he's right; more students seemed to agree than disagree. Maybe it has something to do with individual learning styles. Abby casually mentioned "I am a very visual learner" before noting, "I love the videos and we're learning while we watch them". Like the rest, Leslie told me, "I really like watching videos", and while I can't say I was shocked about the popularity of videos, I was caught off guard by another very popular classroom activity – grammar exercises.

You read it right; the students enjoy testing their prowess and increasing their aptitude by completing exercises in "the blue book", as Jason called it. Edward believed, "… working in the blue books is worthwhile", and Jeremy offered a potential reason, "I love doing this. I thought I was pretty good with grammar. Apparently I didn't know how to use a semi-colon and a colon correctly. Now I know how to use punctuation correctly. I think maybe we went over these things for a day or two in tenth grade, but that was it". It wasn't just the males who embraced grammar exercises either. Tamara told me, "correcting sentences and the grammar" was her favorite class activity, "So a big thing that I worked on was reading it and making sure that all the tenses matched, and I never would have thought about that" (Feb.15, 2013), but, as was true with the videos, there was dissension from one of the participants – Abby, who identified herself as a visual learner. As far as she was concerned, improvements could be made, "If he were to like go into grammatical, like a little grammatical video, like he could do both – a five-minute video and the book".

The third activity that students mentioned frequently was peer-response. Some, like Jason, voiced lukewarm approval. "I don't mind it. It kinda helps me", and others, like Leslie, were initially dubious, "It made me a little nervous at first", but then she began to understand the worth of the exercise, "I feel like, while I'm writing, if I know someone else is gonna read it, I need to write it a little bit different". When I asked about the most engaging class activities, one student, Regan, responded with, "Of course peer response", as if it were a given. And there were those who voiced hearty approval, and they didn't just favor peer-response, they understood the benefits:

> I like peer response because I like to get people's opinions on my work, like he [the instructor] makes us write the pros and cons on the back of the papers so it's like,
> maybe I need to change this 'cause it's confusing to other people, so if it's confusing
> to them, it'll probably be confusing to someone else (Peggy, Feb. 12, 2013).

Several of the other students told me that working and discussing with classmates was generally both enjoyable and fruitful in the revision process. Perhaps just as important as their thoughts on activities they enjoyed was the fact that, aside from Edward's disapproval of videos and Abby's views on the way grammar was taught, not one student had a single criticism of what was being taught or how learning was occurring in writing class. This group of eight students came to class because they believed they'd be actively engaged to some degree. Tamara expressed students' feeling well:

> [The Critical Reading Literacy instructor] Her class was dreadful. I had it at 9:05 in the morning every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I love her but it was boring. All she did was lecture, all she did was lecture. That woman talked for 55 minutes. And it was like, "I can't do this". She didn't engage us at all! And that's what I love about Mr. P.
> He's keeping us awake. We need to do things. We're not listening to him lecture
> (Feb. 15, 2013).

One reason for students' espoused enthusiasm about class activities seemed to be what they perceived to be their conceptions of lesson importance. Those who participated in this study felt certain core skills to be worthwhile for them, both for success in other classes, and, looking forward, to job requirements. Students preferred spending time to wasting time:

> [In high school] Like we would read a book in class together, and you would take
> a test - you would write about it, you take a test that way. Or you do like a report
> on it and it wasn't fun. Like people dreaded it, ya know? And it was like, who
> cares? (Abby, Feb. 11, 2013).

It's not just the tedious nature of some assignments or the insignificance of the lesson that students took exception to. Some students, like Regan, felt angry about her high school experience:

> …in some classes, you'd spend an entire class just making a poster on a book we read… It wasn't actual writing… When they graded an assignment, they wouldn't read it. They just checked that you did it and you'd get 100… So I feel like I never got response, like actual feedback on my papers… It's so hard to relearn … in my high school, I'd just get the check and the "good job". This one, like my entire paper's red, even if it's a good grade, everything is red marking, and I never actually got that feedback, and it's kinda like relearning how to write properly. Looking back, at the time it was great b/c easy A, but in the long run, I wish my teachers were harder on me and did pay more attention because it wouldn't have been such a hard change when I got to college (Feb.12, 2013).

This sort of reflection from students led me to consider what they were hoping to learn. What were the skills they prioritized, and if they had goals, either college or career goals, how did they impact students' motivation to actively engage in learning?

The Connection Between Perceived Worth of Skills and Engagement

I was gratified and just a bit surprised by the number of students who, in their freshman year, had set goals, started planning the future, and saw college classes as the opportunity to learn the things they wanted or needed to know in order to succeed, both academically, and professionally. The goals students set for themselves seemed to be driving their academic ambitions. Regan informed me, "I would like to either become a general manager of a hotel-resort or a country club". She'd already taken the first step in completing a short internship at a local country club, and seemed to understand what the job entailed. She was hoping to learn:

> More critical thinking because not only do you have the day-to-day operations that
> you really have to think through … you really have to think – to problem-solve. And I know there's a lot
> of writing, like reports and all that… I had to do that in the country club for about two weeks when I was
> interning.

She looked to the instructor for help with the shortcomings she saw in her writing, and told me she felt good about class because it was filling in the blanks for her:

> For my first paper, on the article, I knew what I wanted to say, but I didn't know exactly how to say it,
> and Professor P. would write things and try to help, like, rephrase this, or it's too wordy, or, and this class
> almost makes me say what I want to say in less words but have it more meaningful in less words, as
> opposed to more. So I think that helps (Feb. 12, 2013).

She was not the only student who formed an opinion about the worth of composition class based on how well it met her needs. Peggy knew exactly what she needed to accomplish in order to be successful:

"My goal is to become a law guardian, so I'm in the pre-law program. I think completing research papers helps a lot because before you do any case, you have to research it, dig into the case before you go to court, maybe find previous precedents to help you support your argument kind of thing" (Feb. 12, 2013). Tamara told me she was thinking about law, and Jeremy hopes to teach, although he couldn't offer any goals for learning. Full disclosure compels me to admit that this sophomore had missed several classes and seemed fairly sure that writing class had little to teach him. Edward was torn between biochemistry or nuclear engineering, but the one thing he did know was, "I want to walk out of that classroom feeling that I can write a paper well", "If I work in a lab, [writing skills] it'll definitely help me with lab reports, writing up reports, and um, say, if I have to give a presentation on something". Jason is exceptionally goal-oriented as is double-majoring in Marketing and Communications, and while Leslie's not sure about life after college, she had a pretty good idea about writing skills she'll need the next few years, "I'm taking history and psychology just this semester so I have to do two research projects along with this one, so what I learn [about academic writing] will definitely help me write them" (Feb. 13, 2013).   It was interesting to hear students proclaim, one after another, that basic writing and thinking skills make a difference. For any who might wonder about the sincerity of their comments, join the club. In each interview, I very purposely reminded students that my research focused on how to engage and motivate students, and to see what they thought about how improvements might be made. In other words, I wanted to know what the issues were – not to hear a whitewashed version of life in the classroom. Tamara's response left little room for interpretation, "When I care about what I'm learning, I pay attention and I get it. I take the time to understand it".

The Interdependent Relationship between Students and Teacher

Most teachers care about their students. This concern drives professionals to teach students what they believe will help them succeed in school. Teachers teach curriculum, and the focus is academic. This is good; necessary. Many students also prioritize learning, but it's not just about academics. These students, aka young adults, also have emotional needs that, when addressed, seem to increase student motivation and engagement. Students, not unlike the vast majority of people, like to be recognized as individuals, people with opinions worth hearing, voices to be heard. Consciously or unconsciously, the instructor, Mr. P, seems to address these needs, and the students' responses reflected both their appreciation and reciprocal respect given to them by Mr. P.

We all know what the literature says about didactic methods of educating – and it's not good. To the contrary, Mr. P tries hard to involve students, and the students rise to the occasion. Peggy told me what she thought about the instructor's teaching style, "I like that he calls on people, you have to do the work because maybe he'll call on you". Tamara also responded to the class discussions enthusiastically, "He encourages discussion", and Regan seemed to appreciate the accessibility of the instructor, "It's helpful to have class so you can go in and talk face-to-face with the professor". Abby, having had negative experiences, especially appreciated what Mr. P brought to the classroom:

> The teacher gives us a variety of topics we can talk about, he gives us ideas. He makes learning fun… I
> actually felt bad for missing one… he's very understanding and that's what makes humans want to learn…
> when a teacher's passionate and it's obvious they want you to grow. He is very positive and I think that
> encourages kids to want to come to class, want to try, 'cause if you're constantly telling a student "You're
> wrong, you suck, you're stupid" who wants to be there? (Feb. 11, 2013).

From the positive comments, it was clear that the teacher made students feel worthwhile and empowered. Rather than a focus on the deficits, he concentrated on the strengths. Students felt good about themselves, and it culminated in engagement; genuine interest in learning. To some extent, students showed improvement because they believed they could improve and that the teacher cared about them improving. Leslie beamed as she proudly announced, "Professor. P gave an example for everybody and he used mine so that made me feel really good". Regan has had some academic and emotional hurdles to overcome, and admitted this was her second attempt at composition class, though not with the same instructor. The difference in teacher attitude was, in her mind, worth noting:

> There was this disconnect, where it was more of a job for her [previous instructor], and she had her favorite students that she would call on… it made the rest of us feel like bad… it wasn't fun. But this time around I just feel more like what I'm saying in my writing actually matters, which motivates me more to do better because I want to be heard. I want my thoughts to be better because someone is actually listening… when he lectures, you can tell how into it he is, which… makes you listen because it's not that monochromatic voice… I think a lot of it has to do with the professor (Feb. 12, 2013).

Discussion and Conclusions

The Relationship between Student Identity and Writing Experience

According to Schutta (1993), "Boredom stems from the situation where none of the possible things that a person can do realistically appeal to the person in question. This renders the person inactive, and generally unhappy. Thus, boredom is the result of having nothing to do that one likes". Student responses seemed to indicate that writing in high school was boring; not because they were incapable but unmotivated. Lack of motivation seems to have been directly impacted by the total lack of engagement. The unfortunate outcome was students' misinterpretation of cause and effect. Many walked away believing they were simply incapable of composing worthwhile essays. Gute and Gute (2008) conducted research on the college level in an attempt to heighten engagement and eliminate the kind of boredom that experts say often permeates classrooms (Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Higher Education Research Institute, 2001; Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000; McDougall & Granby, 1997; Sacks, 1996; Trout, 1997). This quantitative study enlisted students to participate in reflective writing, and the choice of topics was theirs. Little guidance or guidelines were provided. The researchers found that, "As students use writing to become more responsible for their own learning, instructors become more knowledgeable about students' actual level of preparedness and how to best engage students at the level their existing skill will allow" (p.219). These findings reflect Dewey's theory of inquiry-based learning, and Mr. P's methods of teaching. He helped students discover their abilities using similar methods, while simultaneously assessing their strengths so he might better serve them. In line with Vygotsky's theory of the more knowledgeable other (MKO), Mr. P seemed willing to step in when necessary while alternately allowing students room to explore. His first assignment focused on reflective topics; engaging and empowering students by giving them voices. He built upon this newfound confidence throughout the semester. The happy reality was students lost, at least to some extent, their natural aversion to "research". Writing tasks became less splintered and defined, and allowed a measure of engagement and edification formerly so elusive to students.

The Impact of Modality on Engagement

Active learning, espoused by both Vygotsky (1978) and Dewey (1902), were present in the classroom and it reliably brought students to class. It wasn't just that activities invited creativity and socialization – it was the multiple means of learning used in concert. According to students, Mr. P might ask students to take notes while he lectured, but it didn't occupy the entire 55 minute period. Some of the activities students believed worthy of note included: Youtube videos, peer response, and grammar exercises. There seems to be two pertinent lessons here: The first is to read your students; flexibility is key, and that means that when attention seems to wane, it's time to change it up. The second lesson to be learned is that variety really is the spice of life. Not everyone enjoyed the same activities to the same degree, but the instructor planned lessons which utilized potentially passive modes of learning and transformed them into active learning experiences through dialogic means. Students seemed to inherently understand the worth and necessity of the varied lessons and acquiesced to participate as requested by the instructor.

In "A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education", Barr and Tagg (1995) considered the need to move away from the traditional instruction paradigm to a learning paradigm. The outcome, they believed, would be the construction of knowledge rather than the receipt of pre-existing knowledge.

This envisioned evolution seemed to be at play in Mr. P's class. Students became actively engaged in creating knowledge, and that transformation is far from easy for many students. "Their experiences have taught them to focus on the grade and the degree rather than on learning and individual development" (Schuster, 2008, p.164). In my conversations with students, it was obvious that they had traditionally been given to believe the goal, rather than learning, was the grade. Mr. P seemed to unconsciously work towards redirecting this goal by channeling Moon (2008) who saw the most import indicators of learning to include teaching materials and classroom atmosphere. These two factors were reflected in students' positive responses about their classroom experiences. Using various modes and methods of engaging students moved the focus away from the grade. Instead of the end product, students learned to enjoy the journey, in large part, due to the formative evaluation offered by both Mr. P and classmates. The students made it very clear that their prior writing experiences included only summative evaluation which, to a large degree, would account for their predisposition. Formative evaluation, the constructive criticism and suggestions offered by instructor and peers, worked to highlight their strengths, just as Boyd (1989) wrote it would. Potentially, another reason students embraced peer response was the dual outcomes: Through discussion, they not only received valuable feedback on revisions, they learned that they were not alone in the composition process. Durham (2005) explored the impact of peer response on both student writing and student identity. One of the participants in her study said it well, "I am learning that we are all struggling together" (343). The responses I received from my participants reflected a similar sense of team effort and camaraderie.

The Connection Between Perceived Worth of Skills and Engagement

Of the eight participants, six discussed, some at great length, their career plans and goals. Another participant, while less sure about their future, felt confident writing skills would be essential to their academic success. This could explain why they seemed engaged in class and motivated to learn what the instructor had to teach. The connection between intrinsic goals and academic engagement has been the focus of many studies (Wolters, 2004; Al-Emadi, 2001; Pintrich, 2000). Achievement goals relate to reasons for students engaging in academic tasks (Maehr, 1989). According to Ames and Archer (1988), goal-driven mastery orientation perpetuates deep engagement which is intrinsically motivated learning as opposed to learning which is externally driven by grades. These student-participants seemed to be driven by this sort of internally motivated need to acquire knowledge, and the end result appeared to be class engagement.

The Interdependent Relationship between Students and Teacher

The kinship between students and instructor was evident throughout my research. During class observations, there was candid discussion, and a comfortable feeling permeated the room. Students, time and again, commented on Mr. P's warmth and concern. This one, fundamental component appeared to lay the essential foundation, making everything else work smoothly. A virtual cornucopia of research on the subject of the student-teacher relationship exists, but at the primary level (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavel, 2003; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson, & Reiser, 2008). There is an inverse correlation between grade level and study in this area; as the grade level increases, the number of studies decrease. Still, these freshmen seemed to rely heavily on the instructor for moral support and guidance. Students spoke of other, less vested instructors in uncomplimentary terms.

Kuh (2001) and Pascarella (2001) posited that a quality undergraduate education included essential elements such as quality teaching and interactions with peers and faculty. These things were touted as necessary for maximized student engagement and learning, and although much has been written about how post-secondary teachers spend their time, how engaged they are, and how satisfied they are (Menges, 2000), little is known about the impact these factors have on student satisfaction, engagement, and learning. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) attempted to extend the research and found, "faculty attitudes and beliefs and behaviors can play a role in creating a culture that fosters student learning" (p.174). In addition to attitudes about students and the subjects they teach, studies show students identify good teachers as those who have particular attributes such as "…truthfulness, compassion, dedication, empathy, attentiveness, and love" (Schwehn 2000, 5). Students used many of these words to describe their instructor, and they seemed to be engaged not just by the curriculum or modes of learning but by the teacher who exemplified characteristics they found engaging.

Implications

Our goal, first and foremost, needs to be engagement. Students who are actively engaged in learning learn more, learn better, and actually enjoy the classroom experience (Park, 2003). Our biggest challenge, then, is how to encourage our students to actually engage in the learning process. Offering a variety of methods, ones which stimulate knowledge creation as opposed to simple acquisition of pre-existing knowledge, is one way to engage students (Dewey, 1902); Vygotsky, 1978). Giving students the freedom to pursue projects that elicit both curiosity and satisfaction also encourages the kind of active learning we hope to cultivate (Barr and Tagg, 1995). However, what is perhaps most imperative for active engagement is creating a bond between teacher and students, a bond based on mutual respect and shared goals. Such a bond creates an atmosphere of trust and freedom. This research study supported the many theorists who believe that student engagement is impossible without teacher engagement (Kuh, 2009). Special attention was paid to the two students who had previously attempted this composition class unsuccessfully. I was interested in their perspectives about repeating the process as well as what engaged them. While one of the two students was doing B work and had a spotless attendance record to date, the other had missed five classes and had failed to complete essay assignments. When I asked about these things, he told me he liked the teacher and activities well enough, but really did not believe he needed improvement, and therefore, felt disinclined to attend.

Further, larger studies on engagement at the post-secondary level should be conducted. Because of constraints, only eight students participated, allowing only limited insights into student perspectives and perceptions. Additional research focusing specifically on the relationship between teacher engagement and student engagement would also prove potentially enlightening.

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