

Workshop: Motivating Students

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2 hours

In this workshop we were presented techniques for how to create a motivational classroom environment and what factors contribute to students being motivated to learn. We reviewed strategies of how to motivate students and practiced with case studies.

SUMMARY

I believe motivation is essential to learning. Every time I teach or present a topic I pay very close attention to my audience. Are they interested? Do they care? When I deliver a presentation I try my best to make it as relevant to the audience as I can. However, this can be more difficult in a university classroom compared to other presentation settings. When delivering a scheduled presentation I usually roughly know who my audience is (e.g., at conferences or professional meetings). Also, since people chose to attend my presentation, I know there was some motivation already (otherwise they would not attend my talk). With students in a classroom setting some of these factors can be very different. Although students have some flexibility in which classes they take, many classes are compulsory. In addition, weekly classes are easily perceived as chores and inconveniences rather than exciting events.

I always had the perception that motivating students would be much harder than motivating other audiences. This workshop helped me to review some of my concerns about motivating students and how to address them. We learned strategies and practiced them with case studies which really helped me formulate ideas on how I could apply this in my classroom.

APPLICATION

Here are some of the strategies for motivating students that we learned in this workshop and how I have implemented them in my class *BIO 295 Islands & Evolution*:

- **Connect Material to Students' Interest – 1)** After the first class period I gave students a take-home assignment targeted at engaging their interests. I asked students to find an example of an organism with an island or island-like distribution. They could choose an organism that was interesting to them and briefly present it to the class. This helped establish a connection between the class topic and something they were interested about learning about and it helped me to learn where their interests are (e.g., plants vs. animals). **2)** I used minute papers to summarize class content at the end of each class by asking them two questions (What was the most important thing you learned during this class? What important question regarding what you learned remains unanswered?/What would like to know about next?). I used these minute papers not just as a summary but also as feedback. I followed up on questions students asked and often tailored class content to interest that was expressed in these short papers. **3)** For the independent class project, I asked student to make a movie about a paper from the primary literature and to include three theory concepts from class. I am giving students complete freedom in how to implement the directions I have provided in order to offer the opportunity to select a paper on a topic they are interested in and to put their personal spin on it.
- **Provide Authentic, Real-World Tasks** – During the first lecture I decided to include a section on how evolution is relevant and present in their daily lives, i.e. why studying evolution is important. I

presented examples like the evolutionary significance of morning sickness during pregnancy, the evolutionary reasoning behind lactose intolerance and evolutionary programming (which is used to create animated cartoon movies).

- **Show Relevance to Students' Current Academic Lives** – Most of my students were majors so it was easy to establish relevance to their course of study. However, I still tried to present recent and interesting research examples from a variety of fields (e.g., behavior, genetics, chemistry, morphology, microbes, animals, plants, humans) to capture their interests.
- **Demonstrate the Relevance of Higher-Level Skills to Students' Future Professional Lives** – Whenever I invited guest speakers to my class, I asked students to read a publication from the primary literature as preparation and to prepare 1-2 questions for the speaker. Here is what I told students to demonstrate the relevance of this assignment: “Whenever you read, hear or think about research, you should always do so critically. This does not mean that you should criticize and question everything but this is the way science advances: through questions. A practical example for when this skill will come in handy is when a journal editor asks you to do a peer-review for a paper that has been submitted for publication.”
- **Identify and Reward What You Value** – While designing this class I carefully thought about what I value and what is important to me. I wrote the syllabus in a way that reflects this and explains it clearly to students. I included specific directions for how to submit assignments and which elements needed to be included for full credit.
- **Show Your Own Passion and Enthusiasm for the Discipline** – My passion are ants and aside from presenting some of my own research in class I also frequently gave examples from ant research. In addition, I am teaching a class that relates to a lot of my broader research topics and I frequently used examples I find particularly exciting.