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TOPICAL ARTICLES

Setting Course Goals: Privileges and Responsibilities in a World of Ideas

Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr.
Texas A&M University

Teachers and students come to their classes with quite different goals for the course. This article discusses the importance of knowing what student expectations are for a course and of giving students some shared role in the content and conduct of a course. Such investment on the part of students is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is to encourage students to accept more responsibility for their learning.

University faculty members work in a privileged environment of lifelong learning. Arguably many college teachers chose their vocation because of a fascination with learning. Much of the pleasure of academic life comes from self-discovery, whether from reading, creating, writing, or research. Yet as faculty involved in directing our own intellectual growth, we too often seem reluctant to offer our students that same opportunity. Instead, we relegate them to a role of passivity.

What are our obligations as professors? What is it that we owe our students? Are we meeting our academic responsibilities? Consider the following quotation from a report on the state of higher education:

Effective teachers care passionately about their subject matter and their students. They are concerned with getting their students to hone their skills in writing and speaking, to extend their abilities in critical thinking and analysis, and to develop their capacities to synthesize, imagine, and create. These capacities are the truly enduring effects of higher education. (National Institute of Education, 1984, p. 17)

I can think of no better creed for a university professor: to be passionate about our discipline and about our students and to strengthen the development of higher cognitive skills in our students, ensuring a lasting product of their higher education.

In this article I describe one way in which we can make the teaching-learning process truly a two-way street for our students, how we can make our classrooms places of shared authority. I discuss the importance of getting students actively involved in their courses, especially in the ownership of their classes. Specifically I discuss how goals are chosen and implemented in a class, and most important, what role students play in that process.

Some readers might remember Father Guido Sarducci, a comedian who appeared on *Saturday Night Live* and other shows, who impersonated a priest assigned to the Vatican and a close confidante of the Pope. Father Sarducci was a font of good advice. He seemed always to have solutions to

the pressing problems of the world. One of his ideas was prompted by the spiraling costs of higher education. Father Sarducci suggested offering a university education that would require 10 minutes and cost \$20. He proposed that during the 10 minutes, students would be taught everything that university graduates could remember 5 years after their graduation.

There are two important themes in that story. The first has to do with the cost of a university education, which is a subject of much contemporary debate. That theme, however, is not one that I address here except to raise the following two questions: Are parents and students concerned about the costs of higher education because the costs have increased at a faster rate than inflation? Or are they concerned because they believe that the costs have exceeded the value of the education that is provided today? If it is the former, then those are budgetary issues to be worked out within the universities, or in the case of public institutions, between university administrators and state governments. If it is the latter, then the concern is very much related to what I want to say in this article—that is, the ultimate value of an education.

Student Involvement in Goal Planning

What role, if any, should students play in planning the goals of the courses they take? Think about a conflict that is likely recognized by all teachers but rarely acknowledged in any way that would affect the content, format, or goals of our courses. Axiom 1: Students come to our classes with differing motives for why they are taking the class. Axiom 2: Students come to our classes with differing expectations for what they hope to learn from the class. Axiom 3: As faculty we largely plan and conduct our courses in total ignorance of the nature of those student expectations and motives.

As an academic I am largely opposed to those who portray universities as businesses, although the case for that claim seems to grow stronger each year. Still, it seems obvious that we are selling a product, at a rather large cost, and that the immediate consumers of that product are the students. Can you imagine any business that would operate in ignorance of its consumers' motives and expectations with regard to the product sold by that particular business? So as teachers we might begin by asking our students why they are in our classes and what they hope to gain from that experience. If you do that, I promise that you will get some interesting answers. Simply ask students, "Why are you taking this course?" You might get responses such as these:

I am taking your course because nothing else was open at the time, because it is in the same room as the class I am taking just before your class, because your exams are on file in my fraternity, because it is required for my minor, because my boyfriend is in this class, because I heard that you are easy, because voices in my head told me to take it, because I heard you were funny, because I am tired of science courses and wanted something nonscientific like psychology, because at registration I saw this babe sign up for it, because the book you require is the cheapest one, because my mother took this class from you 24 years ago and she said I could use her notes.

If you ask students about their expectations of what they want to get from the course, you will get a similar variety of responses, including some that might even match your own expectations for the course.

An Instrument for Learning About Student Goals

In that regard, look at the list of 17 goals in Table 1. Samuel Cameron, emeritus professor at Arcadia University, generated most of that list more than 20 years ago; I added the last 5 items. You might think of these goals in planning for an introductory course in psychology, but they would likely be applicable to any course in psychology and many courses beyond the boundaries of psychology.

In numerous teaching workshops over the years, I have asked hundreds of teachers to read the goal statements on this list and choose the three that they would give highest priority if they were teaching an introduction to psychology course. For college teachers, the most frequently mentioned goal is 11 (Content). No other goal achieves anything near

the consistency of that selection. Other goals that make it into the top three on a regular basis are 3 (scientific processes), 2 (psychology and society), 1 (educational preparation for future psychology classes), 8 (scientific values), and 14 (critical thinking).

How would students respond to the same task using the same list? For several years I asked that question of my introductory psychology students on the first class day. Perhaps it is no surprise that the number one goal for faculty (content) rarely showed up in a student's top three list. Their highest ranked choice is 12 (self-knowledge and understanding), followed by 10 (study skills), and 9 (social and interpersonal skills). Those three goals rarely appear in the top choices made by college teachers. (I should add that I also have surveyed hundreds of high school psychology teachers, whose rankings are much closer to the responses given by students.) What do the discrepancies in goal choices tell us about college teachers and college students? John Gray (author of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*) might interpret these data as suggesting that they come from different planets. Whatever the explanation, it is clear that students and teachers come to the introductory psychology course with very different expectations for what the course should be about and what it should do for the students (Becker, Davis, Neal, & Grover, 1990; Brown, 1980).

McKeachie (2002), who is one of the most student-centered teachers I have ever known, wrote about these student expectations in terms of motives. He reminds us how important motivation is for learning and how motivation makes something easy to learn and difficult to forget. Thus in those courses that are designed to match student motives, one would expect better learning outcomes and greater retention of course material.

Table 1. Possible Goals for the Introductory Psychology Course

1. *Educational preparation*: To prepare students for future study in psychology.
2. *Psychology and society*: To develop in students an awareness of the uses of psychology in society to develop more informed consumers of psychology.
3. *Scientific processes*: To teach students about the investigative approaches to behavioral observation, formulation of hypotheses, setting up experimental situations, and gathering and analyzing data.
4. *Vocational preparation*: To aid students in occupational planning.
5. *Personal interest and curiosity*: To develop in students interest and curiosity about behavior.
6. *Philosophy of life*: To assist students in developing a clear philosophy of life.
7. *Values clarification*: To assist students in articulating and clarifying their feelings and values.
8. *Scientific values*: To develop in students the willingness to adopt the ethics and values characteristic of psychologists in their everyday behavior; for example, objectivity, open-mindedness, criticalness of evaluation, and concern for the welfare of research participants.
9. *Social and interpersonal skills*: To develop in students an understanding of social and interpersonal processes and to apply this understanding to more effective interpersonal interactions in social, family, and love relationships.
10. *Study skills*: To assist students in applying psychological knowledge to develop more effective learning and study skills.
11. *Content*: To provide students a balanced overview of the elementary concepts and facts of the discipline of psychology.
12. *Self-knowledge and understanding*: To develop in students a better knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of self.
13. *Learning to learn/lifelong learning*: To develop in students the tools for learning and the motivation for learning in their years beyond the university.
14. *Critical thinking*: To develop in students the ability for logical and critical analysis.
15. *Computer research skills*: To expose students to the methods of information search and retrieval from the World Wide Web.
16. *Writing skills*: To use writing assignments to help students learn to write (learning to write) and to learn psychology (writing to learn).
17. *Awareness of other races and cultures*: To use psychological research to expose students to the diversity of peoples and an awareness that behavior is not uniform across the world.
18. *Other*: _____
19. *Other*: _____

Note. To change this questionnaire to the student version requires changing only a few words in each item. For example, in Item 1: To prepare you for future study in psychology; Item 2: To develop your awareness of the uses of psychology in society to make you a more informed consumer of psychology; Item 3: To teach you about the investigative ... ; and so on.

Getting Student Input on Goals

So what should be done about student goals, if anything? My first recommendation is that teachers begin their classes with a survey of student expectations. That activity can be done in a recall format (e.g., asking students what they hope to gain from the class) or by a recognition task, providing them with a list of alternative goals such as those in Table 1, being sure to include some blank spaces so that students can write in their own goals. Based on their responses, there are several ways teachers can proceed. One would be to provide what some teachers would call a totally student-centered class in which the course goals are determined not by the instructor but by some consensus of the students. Thus teachers would modify their courses substantially to emphasize the student goals. Although I have known instructors who advocate that procedure, it has never been one I felt comfortable adopting.

As a second strategy, teachers could compare the student goals to theirs and then explain to the students why the teacher's goals are better and why they will be the ones that define the course. I do not know anyone who has done that and surely would recommend against such a foolish course of action. (I had a wise department head years ago, Cliff Fawl, who warned me never to seek input if I had no intention of listening to it.)

A third strategy would be something of a compromise in which, after assessing students' goals, the teacher would share the data with them. Then the teacher would indicate what her or his goals were and how the teacher planned to integrate the two sets of goals, as well as possible, in the conduct of the course. The teacher might even offer to work with a volunteer committee from the class to explore ways that this intermingling of goals might occur. After time, instructors will learn that student goals, like faculty goals, are reasonably consistent and can avoid the planning committee by modifying the course goals based on previous and consistent student feedback.

Do not misunderstand this compromise strategy. It is not meant to undermine the professor's goals, nor is it meant to give students the impression that their goals will become part of the course when there is no intention on the part of the instructor to do so. Certainly the instructor has considerable authority both in subject content and pedagogical practice and is there to provide leadership in those areas. The purpose of involving students in this process is to create a course that is more meaningful to students and professor, to increase the satisfaction of all involved in the class on both sides of the lectern, and to show students how important it is to become involved in their learning.

My Use of the Goal Instrument

Let me describe briefly how I use the goal sheet in my classes, using introductory psychology as an example. On the first day of class I talk about my goals for the class. I explain why I think those goals are important in a not-so-subtle attempt to seek support from the students to adopt my goals. I also indicate that I have been surveying student goals for a number of years and that it is clear to me that my goals and the student goals are not always the same. I also tell them

quite explicitly that it is okay for them to have goals for the course that differ from mine. I also explain that the time limitations in any course make it impossible to pursue all goals, even some that are very important. I further explain that I want to assess their goals and use that assessment to plan some of what I will do in the course. I then pass out the goals sheet shown in Table 1, although it is worded a little differently for students. I tell them not to put their name on it. I ask that they select the three goals they feel are most important to them and that they rank order those. I remind them that they may have goals that are not on the sheet and that they can write those in. I then collect the sheets and tell the students I will discuss the outcome at the next class.

At the next class I show the students their data, usually via a Microsoft® PowerPoint® slide or two. What they see is that there are some goals that received a lot of votes but none that approached unanimity. They also see that there is a great deal of variation in the class. Virtually every goal was selected by at least one student, and more than half of the goals have a fair number of supporters. I should add that I have collected these data both before and after I talked to the students about my goals, and it is clear that I bias the results in my favor when I present my goals first and my rationale for them. I have therefore continued that procedure, with the clear intention of proselytizing in advance for my goals.

The goals survey data from class to class are not very different. The fact that the student responses are largely predictable means that I can plan the course in advance, giving students the illusion that I am responding to their unique feedback. That approach might strike you as deceptive, and in one sense it is. In truth, however, I have altered the course to match student motives. I occasionally make minor alterations even to fit a single student's response, for example, including more coverage of dementia and Alzheimer's disease when a student wrote in the goal of understanding what was happening in her grandfather's brain. In another example, I added coverage of human engineering in the space program for an aerospace engineering major who explained that he was taking my course because he "wanted something wholly unrelated to his major." I don't know if he was pleased or disappointed to learn that psychology was part of his major field. However, it is the bigger goals that get more of my attention, particularly self-knowledge and understanding and study skills.

My approach to teaching introductory psychology is very applied anyway. I was attracted to psychology as a student because I saw the relevance of the field for appreciating everyday life. I have tried to remember that fascination as an instructor (see Brender, 1982; Grasha, 1974/1998). Much of the material that I cover "in response" to student goals is material I would have covered anyway. What is important is to identify that material in ways that help students understand its connections with the goals they expressed on the first day of class.

Self-knowledge and understanding is an easy one. Virtually all of the course content does that for us. It helps us understand why our vision improves in a dark movie theater, why the prevalence of food advertisements on television seems to increase dramatically when we are on a diet, or why we are more likely to take credit for our successes and blame others for our failures. Psychology should teach us a great deal about self-understanding. As psychologists, the connections between research and real-life explanations may be obvious to us, but for

students these connections might not be obvious. We need to remember constantly that these students are new to our field. Our job is therefore to make those linkages. I do that frequently in class, and sometimes I add, "That's another example of how research in psychology has helped to explain why we behave the way we do."

With regard to study skills, I can talk about depth of processing, memory aids like mnemonics, massed versus distributed practice, overlearning, whole versus part learning, context effects, avoiding interference effects, time management, reinforcement strategies, and so forth. Again, when instructors cover these topics, it is important that they make explicit the connections between psychological knowledge and the application of that knowledge to how students can study better.

In short, meeting student goals is sometimes about selecting material that you might not otherwise have covered or the use of a teaching strategy that you might not have employed. More commonly, however, meeting student goals is about making specific the linkages between what you teach and how it relates to student goals. The importance of making such connections cannot be overstated.

Conclusions

The life of a college professor is a privileged one. We get paid for learning and for sharing that learning with others. A university campus is a place of excitement and diversity, of art and athletics, and, most important, of new ideas. For someone interested in lifelong learning, there could be no better place. Personally, I give thanks daily that I am privileged to work at a job that brings me so much intellectual stimulation, pleasure, and satisfaction. But with this privileged job comes responsibilities, and I fear that we are meeting those responsibilities for too few of our students.

What is it that students are learning in universities today? Are students learning the intellectual history of Western civilization? Are they learning about other cultures? Are they learning to write? Are they learning to think critically? Are they learning to think abstractly? Are they learning how to research questions in an information age? Are they learning to learn? Are they enjoying learning? Are they being motivated for lifelong learning? The answer to all of those questions is "Yes," but only for some of the students—some would say a disappointingly small number of students.

Experts in higher education are warning that universities are not succeeding in terms of our obligations (Boyer, 1990; Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997). Particularly they point to a curriculum that still emphasizes memorization of facts while virtually ignoring higher cognitive skills. The information explosion of the late 20th and early 21st centuries makes universities more important to businesses, governments, and societies than they have ever been before. This information explosion also makes student mastery of their learning even more important. We must be willing to give students more control over their learning, and we must be willing to see that they accept that responsibility. We must graduate students who know how to learn, who know how to think, and who know how to solve problems.

In summary, I want to emphasize once more the importance of actively involving students from the first day of their

courses. The National Institute of Education's (1984) report on higher education concluded that

There is now a good deal of research evidence to suggest that the more time and effort students invest in the learning process and the more intensely they engage in their own education, the greater will be their growth and achievement, their satisfaction with their educational experiences, and their persistence in college, and the more likely they are to continue their learning. (p. 17)

It is critical to ask students what they want out of the course. Teachers need to remember that it is not their course alone; it belongs to them and to their students. So give students a meaningful voice. Teachers will find that in responding to student needs, they do not have to make wholesale changes in their courses. I am not asking teachers to cater totally to the desires of their students, but to recognize that to the extent they acknowledge those needs and wants and identify their connections with the course material, the teacher and the students will have a richer experience. Teachers will enjoy their courses more, students will enjoy them more, and teachers might even get better course evaluations from their students. Perhaps one of those students will become wealthy and endow a chair at your university in your name.

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Notes

1. This article is derived from part of an invited address delivered to the Teaching Section of the Canadian Psychological Association, Edmonton, Alberta, 1998.
2. I express my appreciation to Samuel Cameron, not only for his permission to publish his goals questionnaire in this article, but also for the important role his questionnaire has played in my teaching over the past 20 years.
3. Send correspondence to Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr., Psychology-4235, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843; e-mail: ltb@psyc.tamu.edu.