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**Positive feedback as a means to motivate students
or “I go to classes because I feel that I’m important”**

*"Superb teachers can teach the "unteachable"
James Rhem*

Informing, providing opportunities for study, passing on some of our knowledge - what are our responsibilities, as university teachers? Sir William Haley used to say: „*The purpose of education was to ensure that by the time the students leave school everybody should know how much they do not know, and be gifted with a lifelong desire to know it*”.

To motivate students means more than encourage them to attend classes, to complete assessment tasks and to participate to discussions... Sometimes, teachers feel that motivating students is not one of their responsibilities. It is my firm belief that this is a misconception. This essay emphasizes the fact that teachers hold a major responsibility on how and why students learn, since they are supposed to master not only the knowledge but also the abilities to make that knowledge transferable. Hence, some of my exemplifications above rely on a short inventory made among the students I teach. I was particularly interested in their motivation to study during their classes at university.

Cognitive versus emotional

In regard to this, many theories have been advanced and many methods have been exemplified. Sheppard (in Gregusova, 2005:13) stresses upon the importance of interesting and personal assignments, the opportunity of sharing their own experiences and methods like case studies and debating articles. Kvaz (in Gregusova, 2005:25) talks

about cognitive conflict and teaching as a way to help the students to overcome the cognitive resistance. Most of these methods show how to handle the situation, organize the classes and address specifically to the cognitive interests and abilities of the student.

By means of contrast, it is common knowledge that most of the human triggers are emotional ones. Mass media is full of emotional messages and people react emotionally to most of the stimulus. Therefore, it is only natural for students to have strong positive or negative feelings towards one class or another: *“I prepare for seminars mostly because I like the person who’s teaching, I feel he opens his heart to give knowledge to us... he addresses us personally... then, I study because I like the topics... and this way I end up taking part and being active in classes”* (P.I). The feeling the teacher generates towards them as well as his attitude towards his own course are very important for the student. Far from being a method of manipulation, paying more attention to the students’ feelings is an important means of motivating.

The emotional level in motivational theories

Maslow, in his Hierarchy of Needs, stresses upon the need of affiliation. According to this, some students may attend classes because they want to identify themselves with a group, to share information with the others and to build relationships: *“I come to courses because it’s an opportunity for me to talk with the others and see what’s new...”* (I.M.) Hence, students are motivated by an inner need of status and self-esteem. Interacting with the others, especially with the teachers, they are given the chance to feel valuable and appreciated: *“What motivates me to learn for a class is the teacher – his attitude, the way he asks questions and he answers back ...when you like a teacher, you go to classes, you*

get involved, you smile more and you even read and study more because you want to surprise him with your knowledge” (V.C.).

Students are different and unique personalities and, in order to obtain the best results, we should address as much as possible their special and individual needs. One of the most revolutionary findings was the Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal effect) which “*refers to situations in which students perform better than other students simply because they are expected to do so*” (www.wikipedia.org). Rosenthal showed that if teachers would expect enhanced performance from some children, than the children would indeed show improvement. James Rhem, executive editor for the online National Teaching and Learning Forum (www.ntlf.com), commented: “*When teachers expect students to do well and show intellectual growth, they do; when teachers do not have such expectations, performance and growth are not so encouraged and may in fact be discouraged in a variety of ways*”.

Therefore, teacher’s attitude tends to have one of the most powerful influences on both the students’ motivation and results. “*Given the complex interaction between reason and emotion in sustaining our efforts toward long-range goals, the task of motivating students is far from simple*” (Capturing and Directing the Motivation to Learn, 1998). Consequently, the emotional motivation can either sustain cognitive motivation or undermine it.

My step-by-step approach to emotional motivation

As a first time university teacher, I have struggled with setting the limits and maintaining an optimal balance between responding to students’ emotional and/or cognitive needs. Sometimes I have let myself influenced by complaints regarding

workloads and methods of assessment that, according to them, were too many and too difficult. However, after that I have learned how to motivate them and how to prove them that they are capable of doing those tasks, and more than that, capable of enjoying and taking advantage of them.

According to Barbara McCombs, (in *Capturing and Directing the Motivation to Learn*, 1998) “*Research has shown that for students to be optimally motivated to learn, they must [...] believe that they possess the skills and competencies to successfully accomplish these learning goals*”. The concept of feedback concerning the student-teacher relation refers to providing accurate data on students’ performance and/or how others may view them. Unfortunately, this method has been seriously altered by transforming it into an instrument of criticism and blaming.

The main aim of a feedback should be to describe a behavior or a situation and not to evaluate it. This is why grades are not a real feedback. Even if the student gets a good mark, he still does not know what was correct. The situation is more tragic when it is about bad grades, without any form of explanation. In this situation, the teacher should praise the student for some positive aspects, even if this means mentioning the effort of writing the paper, attending the class, the handwriting, the general aspect of the paper, etc.

In the beginning, I found it hard to do and extremely frustrating, because I had the feeling that the student will not be motivated to improve himself. However, instead of becoming more defensive and frustrated, some students have become more and more willing to try harder. I tried to approach their mistakes in addressing the seminar’s tasks

as normal stages of learning, by pointing out and analyzing them, sometimes even by ignoring them in order to praise an important development or success they accomplished.

Most of the students told me that they have attended with pleasure the classes where they felt valuable, where the teacher showed them empathy and care. What they appreciated most was the teacher who communicates outside the classes, encourages them and smiles at them. Another thing mentioned, was the fairness of the evaluation and especially the presence of a clear and detailed feedback as well as explanations about their work. They also stressed upon the teacher's willingness to treat them as individuals and not as "a whole class" and to address them by name.

How to give positive feedbacks...

It is my firm belief that the foundation of an effective relationship teacher-student is the active listening. Maintaining eye contact, moving towards them, nodding, verbal tracking represent ways to motivate, by showing that you are involved, you hear, and more important, that you understand them. Students have reacted openly and with maturity when, analyzing their work or behavior, I referred to concrete facts and avoided general remarks like "*It is good.*" or "*That is evasive*". Replacing them with "*Your paper contains relevant and original ideas*" or "*You didn't elaborate the questions you have been asked*" – represented for them a proof of interest and professionalism.

It is also important to pay attention to the strengths and limitations of each of the students. As much as possible, I have tried to reward their strengths and strengthen their weaknesses, even if that meant for me taking extra time to analyze facts, attitudes and behaviors. That meant for me providing opportunities for success for each of them and showing them that everybody is able to accomplish the tasks. Unfortunately, I saw also

the negative side of using these methods, as students tend to become dependent on your positive evaluation and loose sight of the main aim. There is the danger that they would end up studying and learning for teacher's sake and not for his own development. This may also lead to disobedience and unjustified high self-esteem... Consequently, the overall goal should be to help students develop into self-motivating learners. Shaping „personalities” not simply „professionals” is one of the goals of education.

Conclusions

The teachers' responsibility lies not only in the providing of information and evaluation; it lies also in making students capable and willing to learn. Cognitive means of stimulating students are useful and important, but they are not enough, because most of the human triggers are emotional ones. Students attend classes because they feel valuable, because the teacher addresses them as individuals and appreciate the effort they make. By using positive feedback teachers have the possibility to reward and correct without demoralizing as well as to encourage the students to develop themselves and get more involved in study activities.

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