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Two Activities that Influence the Climate for Learning

MY COLLEAGUE CHUCK WALKER, a psychology professor at St. Bonaventure University (NY), shared a collection of instructional strategies that illustrate how the principles of positive psychology might be applied in the classroom. (For examples see: http://wellbeingincollege.org/faculty-resources) I especially like this one.

> "Ask students to write short autobiographies (200 – 300 words) on themselves as learners. Urge them to include reflections on great teachers, peers who supported them, accomplishments, and turning points or times when they showed resilience and grit. Take a couple days to read each autobiography and, with their permission, ask them to read each other's autobiographies."

Chuck recommends using this activity at the beginning of the course. I think it accomplishes two objectives well. It's a unique way of letting students know that the instructor is interested in finding out something about them as learners. Perhaps the instructor could write his or her learning autobiography as well, and then post it on the course website, include it in the syllabus, or read it to students. If it's a large class and there isn't time to read 150 learning autobiographies, there is still time to read some of them. What several students may have written about great teachers and significant learning experiences could be mentioned (anonymously) when they are relevant to teaching and learning tasks during the course. Teachers could also give students the chance to meet several classmates by sharing portions of their autobiographies.

The second benefit I see accruing from the activity is the attention it directs toward learning right at the beginning of the course. I have written before how very unaware so many students are of themselves as learners. They can tell you about good teachers they've had, but they aren't always clear what those teachers did that helped them learn, and they haven't carefully considered the details of those successful learning experiences.

An article in the current issue of the International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education describes an activity that also accomplishes this second goal. It was used in an instructional design and technology program where students objected to having to learn theory. They wanted to use technology to make products and had no interest in the theoretical underpinnings of what they were doing. Teachers helped students understand the value of theory by having them write a 250-400 word description of their best learning experience … "just tell the story" they are instructed. With written stories in hand, students then met in small groups to hear and analyze each other's stories. "The goal of the analysis is to uncover a set of underlying instructional themes and attributes working behind the scenes of these learning experiences." The lists generated by the groups provide a foundation for what happens in that course and subsequent ones. "When you design learning experiences for others, it is important to consider what you instructionally value as a learner and educator." (p.270) Those themes and attributes provide an easy and obvious segue into theory.

This is another excellent way to raise learning issues with students. They could share their learning experiences in small groups and do the same searching for underlying themes and attributes, which they could then propose as learning principles. The teacher could assemble a collection of these and post them on the course website. The principles could be analyzed further in terms of how they relate to learning the content of this course. Do they need to be expanded or modified? Does the teaching in the course reflect these principles—a good question for students and teachers.

I've been on the lookout for activities like this since the recent post exploring some of the issues that emerge when students talk about their experiences. With these activities the talk starts with an individual experience but it grows from there into conversations that create pictures that encompass individual experience at the same time they enlarge it.

Always there's the question of whether we have time to devote to activities that influence the climate for learning and that focus students' attention on what we want them to do in the course—learn! For many of us the answer is another question: what are the costs if we don't?

Reference:

Dunlop, J. C. and Lowenthal, P. R. (2013). What was your best learning experience? Our story about using stories to solve instructional problems. International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 25 (2).

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Teaching Professor Blog; Two Activities that Influence the Climate for Learning; November 13, 2013;[http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/two-activities-that-influence-the-climate-for-learning/] December 2, 2013

Classes end - Dec 6
Exams - Dec 9-13
Commencement - Dec 14
All Grades due - Dec 15
Holiday Break - Dec 20-31
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Improve Your PowerPoint Design with One Simple Rule

WE'VE ALL HEARD the expressions "Death by PowerPoint" and "PowerPoint-induced coma." I think we'd all agree that most of PowerPoints stink. Yet after sitting through presentation after presentation that bore us to tears, we turn around and subject our students and colleagues to the same torture that we find so excruciating. Why?

The good news is that 90% of the problem can be solved by following one simple rule: **No bullet points.**

Reread the rule again (and again, and again) to make sure that it sinks in. Bullet points are the primary source of Death by PowerPoint. Bullet points are basically ugly wallpaper thrown up behind the presenter that end up distracting and confusing the audience. The audience is getting a message in two competing channels running at different speeds, voice, and visual. It's a bit like listening to a song being played at two speeds at once. The audience member is forced to ask themselves: Do I listen to the presenter (which is running at one speed), or read the bullet points (which I read at a different speed)?

Research (Mayer & Moreno) has demonstrated that running a competing text channel with a voice channel actually lowers retention by sending two incongruent messages to the viewer. The audience member is literally trying to focus on two different things at once, and ultimately loses the whole message. Presenters would be better off using no visuals at all and simply speaking to their audience. There's a reason why State of the Union addresses do not include PowerPoints.

The ultimate source of the error is the belief that the purpose of PowerPoint is to project your notes. We once used 3 x 5 cards for our notes. When PowerPoint came along we assumed that we should now project those notes to our audience. But this is wrong. Your notes are for you, not others.

The Real Purpose of Visuals

The real purpose of visuals is to amplify your message with complementary imagery. For example, say you're talking about something that often confuses students. Don't just repeat the words coming out of your mouth on the screen. Instead, project an image of a confused student in order to focus your audience's attention on your message with an emotional driver. The image does not compete with your audience's attention, but rather helps draw it together by providing a visual cue to enhance thinking.

Online and Face-to-Face

Shifting to visuals will not only enhance your live presentations, but also your online content. More and more we're seeing videos in online courses. These videos are typically recorded narration with imagery layered on top, and they are an excellent way to improve student interest and retention.

To create such a presentation, start by recording the narration (narration determines pacing) and then add the imagery to illustrate concepts. Audacity is a free download that is perfect for recording and editing audio. Make sure to use a quality headset microphone, rather than a free-standing microphone, which generally produces poor quality (unless it's an expensive studio microphone). The imagery can then be added with Windows Live Movie Maker or iMovie.

Another option is to drop your images into a PowerPoint deck, and advance the deck while you speak, recording the screen and your voice with screencasting software like Jing. The drawback is that Jing only provides five minutes of recording time, so you will need to purchase Camtasia Studio for longer presentations. But Camtasia Studio allows for really elegant transitions that will greatly enhance your presentations, so it might be worth the purchase.

A Few More Simple Rules

- One image per slide: The reason why TED talks are so good is that they work with the presenters to ensure that their visuals are good. You will notice no bullet points. You will also notice one image per slide.
- No clip art or stock photos: Avoid using clip art and those contrived stock images of business people looking at the camera. Keep it real, or use retro images for a cool touch.
- Add audience surveys: Want to really keep your audience's attention? Include a live poll every 15 minutes or so with a tool like *Poll Everywhere* for face-to-face events. Video polling requires more complex software, so you might instead ask students to pause and reflect at various points in a video, and perhaps have them write down their thoughts on a worksheet as they go along.

The Experts

There is a simple secret to getting good at anything: Find someone else who is good at it and do what they do. Here are three sources that will transform your PowerPoint slides into powerful teaching devices:

- **Lawrence Lessig TED Talk:** Watch how Lessig uses visuals in the brilliant talk about our remix culture (an interesting topic in itself).
- **Life After Death by PowerPoint:** Watch this hilarious 5 minute video on the things that drive people crazy with PowerPoint.
- **You S[tink] at PowerPoint:** An informative and funny Slide Share presentation on the five mistakes to avoid when designing a PowerPoint presentation.

Reference:

Mayer, R. and Moreno, R. (2003). Nine ways to reduce cognitive load in multimedia learning. Educational Psychologist, 38(1) 43-52.

John Orlando, PhD, Teaching with Technology; Improve Your Power Point Design with One Simple Rule; Faculty Focus; November 11, 2013;[http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-with-technology-articles/improve-your-powerpoint-design-with-one-simple-rule/] December 2, 2013.