Volume 6
Issue 4
April
2014

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Four Lessons about Learning Discovered on a Chairlift

CHEMISTRY PROFESSOR Steven M. Wright has written a one-page essay about his niece, Julia, learning how to downhill ski. She was ready for her first ride on the chairlift and Wright was helping her. He's a professor so he covered the topic in a well-organized, easy-to-understand way. It was a short, five minute lecture that ended with a repeat of the main point, "keep your ski tips up when you get on the lift."

So they get in the lift line and ready themselves for the chairlift to sweep them up the mountain. Whoosh! And within three feet of getting on the lift, Julia lost her skis. They spend the rest of the ride brainstorming solutions to being ski-less on the lift. Wright reports that Julia did learn her lesson. She hasn't lost her skis on a chairlift since. And Professor Wright learned his lessons—four of them.

1. **It's all about the learning.** "Successful teaching isn't measured by what I have covered; it is measured by what students learn." Wright gave a good lecture, one that would likely receive high ratings. But when measured by its effects on learning, it was a complete failure. If students can't or don't apply what they "learned," have they really "learned," or the more interesting question, have they really been "taught?" Teaching that promotes little or no learning does raise some interesting ethical questions. But there's no question about the lesson confirmed by this experience. "Coverage does not always equal learning."
2. **Learning requires engagement and motivation.** When did Julia learn that she needed to keep her ski tips up? When she lost her skis. At that point (not before), did what she was told become relevant and meaningful. In order for students to discover if they understand, they need to be able to act on what they've learned. They may know the formula but if they still can't solve the problem, chances are good, they really don't understand. The story illustrates the powerful learning potential inherent in failure and why it is so important for teachers to help students deal with failure constructively. When you can't do something or are clearly doing it wrong, and it's something you need or want to be able to do, there's compelling motivation to figure it out.
3. **Process and content go hand in hand.** Julia needed to learn to keep her ski tips up—that's the content lesson. But when she didn't, she had another problem—what to do on the chairlift when you're there without skis. When you don't get the content, you also have a process problem—what can you do about what you don't understand or did incorrectly? Do you need more information? Do you need to ask a question? Should you try again? Most process issues are resolved with critical thinking and problem solving. This reminds us how important is it for teachers to not fix problems for students, but to equip them with skills so that they can fix the problems for themselves. Wright shares an interesting image that sums up his learning on this point. "I visualize a student walking across the stage to receive a diploma carrying two suitcases, one brimming with ideas about molecular structure [remember he's a chemist] and the other teeming skills like critical analysis and problem solving." We should be helping student fill both these suitcases in our courses.
4. **Learning must be on target.** The target is the goal—what the students should know and be able to do with what they're learning. The test, in this case an authentic assessment, was whether Julia could keep her ski tips up and it was a test she failed. Students need frequent, ongoing assessments that test what they think they know. But Julia benefited in a way some of our students don't. Right after she failed the test, she had the teacher sitting alongside helping her figure out what she should do next.

"With these four lessons, my classroom model falls naturally into place. It must be student-centered and cooperative. Students must be actively engaged in the inquiry of chemistry, seeking theories for relevant data and solutions to authentic problems."

Reference: Wright, S. M., (2012). Lessons learned from Julia. Journal of College Science Teaching, 42 (1), 10

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Teaching Professor Blog; "Four Lessons About Learning Discovered on a Chairlift;" Faculty Focus; March 19, 2014 [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/four-lessons-learning-discovered-chairlift/]; March 26, 3014.

Student Motivation: Moving Beyond "Leading a Horse to Water"

WHEN IT COMES to student motivation, does the axiom, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink" apply? Although I believe that, as instructors, we cannot force motivation and learning upon students, we do play a vital role regarding student motivation and a student's ability to gain knowledge and proficiency in the subject matter.

As a business owner and an organizational leader, I stress to managers and staff the need to motivate employees. I ask them to begin the process by making sure the de-motivators such as ambiguity, harshness, narcissism, hubris, bullying, and anger are never reverted

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A Lone Wolf's Approach to Group Work

"I'D REALLY RATHER work alone. . ."

Most of us have heard that from a student (or several students) when we assign a group project, particularly one that's worth a decent amount of the course grade. It doesn't matter that the project is large, complex, and way more than we'd expect an individual student to complete. That doesn't deter these bright, capable students who are confident of their abilities and really don't want to work with others much less depend on them for their grade.

Should we let them go it alone? Often they aren't especially good group members. They have definite ideas about how the work should be done and quickly make judgments about the capabilities of others. These "lone wolves," as some have dubbed them in the literature, are very task-oriented. When studied in professional contexts, they don't feel much loyalty to the organization and aren't all that into interpersonal relationships with co-workers. In student groups, they don't think others are as committed to or capable of doing quality work.

A great deal of research has looked at "social loafers" in groups, those students who don't do their fair share of the work, but almost nothing has been done on "lone wolves" whose behaviors also compromise group effectiveness. Some posit that there's a relationship between the two behaviors. Not all "social loafers" are lazy and irresponsible, according to some researchers. They might be students who lack confidence. When they're in a group with someone who epitomizes confidence and capability, and someone with very clear ideas about what the group should be doing, these reticent students end up behaving like social loafers because they're pretty sure whatever they do isn't going to be good enough. That conclusion is confirmed when they finally offer an idea only to have it dismissed or ignored, or the work they submit is redone without their involvement.

Some lone wolves take a more subtle approach. They wait until the group is close to wrapping up the project. Then they volunteer to put it all together for the group, which in most cases gives them complete control over the final product. They can re-organize it, add, delete, or revise sections, and create the product they think the group needs to submit.

Given all this, maybe it's a good idea to let those who want to work alone do so. Maybe they're headed to one of those professions where they don't have to work with others. What would that profession be? Even those of us in academia with "lone wolf" tendencies are often surprised (and dismayed) to discover how regularly we are called upon to work in groups.

If we want to help lone wolves acquire constructive group skills, we need to start developing their awareness (and ours) that these behaviors compromise group effectiveness just as seriously as social loafing. The reference below contains a short instrument with questions that point out some of the beliefs and behaviors of lone wolves. When groups convene to start working on projects, they should be guided through a discussion of individual behaviors that help and hinder group processes.

Groups can agree to take actions that will help lone wolves become more relaxed about working with others. Members can create drafts of project parts and have them reviewed by others in the group with the expectation that they will have to make revisions based on the feedback received. Group members can work in pairs, not individually, so that collaboration occurs on every part of the project.

I used to tell students who didn't want to work in a group that my goal was not to make them like group work, but to help them develop skills they could use when they had to work with others. Lone wolves often have leadership abilities—they are willing to work hard and they have high standards. Group members with those characteristics can be a great asset to any group. And when lone wolves use their strengths to support the group, they occasionally discover that there are others worthy of their trust.

Reference: Barr, T. F., Dixon, A. L. and Gassenheimer, J. B. (2005). Exploring the 'lone wolf' phenomenon in student teams. Journal of Marketing Education, 27 (1), 81-90.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Teaching Professor Blog; "A Lone Wolf's Approach to Group Work;" Faculty Focus; March 12, 2014; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/lone-wolfs-approach-group-work/]; March 26, 2014.

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to regarding an employee. I believe the process of motivating students begins the same way, in that we must first remove the de-motivators. My experience as an instructor and former student tells me student motivation increases when:

- Instruction ambiguity is removed. Students need clear, consistent directions and guidance to respond correctly.
- Instructors provide timely and clear answers to questions. Students do not ask a question because they forecast needing the answer two days later; they need the answer now. Respond quickly and avoid the de-motivating tactic of answering a question with another question. Invite follow-up questions if necessary, yet ensure the answer clarifies the issue. Strive to keep the communication channels open.
- Instructor feedback and grading is consistent. Conflicting comments and inconsistent grading will lead to confusion and lack of motivation. When students aren't sure what you want, they get frustrated and stop trying.
- Students understand the instructor's expectations. Consider formally posting what you expect from your students and what they can expect from you. I suggest including a late policy, required level of participation, use of outside resources, format and structure, and degree of expected originality.
- The instructor is available. An engaged, personable, accessible instructor is far more motivating than a seemingly unapproachable, detached, "I'm too busy to help you" professor.

A frustrated, irritated, stressed student is a de-motivated student. When a student needs help (verbalized or not), we need to be attentive and understanding. As a proponent of servant leadership, I prefer to react with kindness and clarity. Although my message is clear and forthright, the tone is nonconfrontational, supportive, and encouraging. I think we have a choice; we can sit back and grade whatever the student submits (or enter zeros for no submission) or we can recognize when students are falling behind, intervene early, and make an attempt to ignite or re-ignite the student's motivation to learn the concepts and exit the course with an above average grade. I believe if we as instructors clearly exhibit our level of motivation to see our students succeed, a portion of our enthusiasm will be transferred to the students. If we react and interact with students using de-motivating tactics and behaviors, that too will show up in our students.

Can we motivate every student to succeed? Certainly not, but we must never stop trying. Removing de-motivators from our communication style, guidance, and instructions is a good first step. My final thoughts on leading horses to water: some we cannot lead, some are not thirsty, some are stubborn, yet while we have them corralled in the classroom, we can strive to ensure the water is clear, clean, and enticing.

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Ronald C. Jones; Teaching and Learning; "Student Motivation: Moving Beyond "Leading a Horse to Water;" Faculty Focus; February 18, 2014 [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/student-motivation-moving-beyond-leading-horse-water/]; March 26, 2014.