Group 6: Case C: "My Students Are Going to Love This — NOT"

By Somdut Roy, Jong Han Yoon, Chris DuPre

1. Introduction

In this case study, Professor Hill is teaching a class which relates directly to her field of study: Continental Philosophy. She is extremely excited for the class, and decides to model the class very similarly to the act of research in her field (namely the use of research projects using primary sources). She is then very disappointed by the lack of engagement and enthusiasm for the course. In the end, she seemingly concludes that most students just "do not care much about philosophy" [Ambrose 66].

One of the mistakes Professor Hill made in this class was seemingly assuming that if she was excited for the class, that her students (unless they simply do not like the subject) would automatically also be excited as well. She seems to be entirely relying on a wellspring of internal motivation from each member of the class, in the same way she would have as a student approaching the material. Any student which does not have such a burst of enthusiasm is seen as apathetic, lazy, or somehow just intrinsically uninterested in philosophy.

2. Problem Statement

Unfortunately, this is not how motivation works. While there are many theories on the origins and structures of motivation, we will confine our discussion to two central concepts at the core of a variety of frameworks: value and expectancies [Ambrose 69]. Value is the subjective importance of a goal. A student that does not see value in the subject simply won't view the course as very valuable and worth effort. Expectancies involve the student's expectations of success. If the student believes that no matter how hard they try they will still fail the course, then attempting at all will be seen as a waste of time and the student will not try. In order to motivate a student towards success, both of these levers must be used in a supportive classroom environment in order to ensure the students are motivated and active in the material [Ambrose 82]. Hill seems to rely entirely on internal/ intrinsic motivation as it is unclear what she does to even motivate the value of the material before assuming others will find value in it. While intrinsic motivation is a powerful force, it cannot be relied upon exclusively as it depends on several factors outside of the student's control. Motivations behind the material must be explained and some external sources of motivation such as grades or feedback may be appropriate.

At best, relying solely on internal motivation is neutral and leaves the student's to find the value in the material for themselves or simply stay demotivated. At worst, it creates a negative expectancy as the student feels the importance/value/intuition for the subject is intrinsic to one's character and therefore is impossible to address once they realize they do not see it immediately.

In addition, it is unclear from the case study that the professor ever attempted to assess the student's current level of development. The course seems to have relied on creative thinking as each student was asked to generate creative research reports using primary resources. The student's may very well have expected that any project which passed the bare minimum requirements of the course would have been acceptable. This may not have come from a sense of apathy or even disinterest, but simply because they did not see the agency and creativity they were given.

Baxter Magolda developed the concept of the journey to self-authorship to understand this exact transition. Each individual must struggle to develop a sense of identity and purpose (both in one's work and in their personal life). Everyone begins this journey by borrowing identities and frameworks from others. Magolda refers to this initial phase as "following formulas". In an academic context we may recognize this as a student who does the bare minimum or stays within the confines of the class even when given freedom. Eventually, the individual may transition to "the crossroads" where they recognize the need for their own vision and can begin to take the steps necessary to achieve it. Magolda's theory then has the individual transition from "the crossroads" to an internal formulation and creativity ("self-authorship") and the grounding of those beliefs against the need for external validation ("internal foundation"). A student which has not yet reached their "crossroads" in the context of their identity as a student (or even as a student in a given discipline) cannot be expected to simply become creative and confident in their ability to generate novel research ideas [Boehman]. Blaming the students for not doing so without seemingly asking the students why they chose not to is simply unfair.

3. Solutions

What could Professor Hill do to encourage her students' work and development if she decided to run this class again? First things first, she must address the problem of motivation. Based on the provided passage, it is clear that Professor Hill herself is extremely passionate about her course materials. With most of the students having multiple other diverse subjects/courses to focus on beyond this particular course, it would be hard for them to relate to the subject matter in the way that the teacher had. The students would naturally have a practical short-term, "let me pass this" or "let me try to get an A" kind of focus. In order to make the students connect to the subject matter in a similar vein, she would be encouraged to share her stories in relation to the particular topics that boosted her love and enthusiasm for the subject matter in general. This could lead the students to engage more deeply into the course as they discover the value that was initially overlooked [Ambrose 85]. In addition, citing case studies, that triggered her passion during her early learning phase, as studying examples would steer the less interested students to have new found vigor for the course materials and Philosophy in general.

In addition, the instructor may consider taking steps to increase the self-efficacy of the students. This may involve determining where the students are currently weak and being open and honest about difficulties the student's may experience that may not be immediately obvious to the professor via the expert blind spot [Ambrose 112-113]. Doing so will help student's feel that any

lack of preparation for the course is not an insurmountable wall, but simply another hurdle they can work with the professor to overcome. The professor may also consider throwing out outlandish and creative ideas for the students to consider, and actively encourage remixing and revamping these ideas. In this way, the professor would encourage each student to encounter their individual "cross-roads" and hopefully the professor will find that the students are deeply and creatively engaging in the work. Maybe, with enough encouragement and scaffolding, the professor will find many more active students and many less people who "do not much care about Philosophy" [Ambrose 66].

References

[1] Ambrose, Susan A. *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. Jossey-Bass, 2010.

[2] Boehman, Joe. "Who the Heel Am I? Self-Authorship Explained." *Tar Heel Diversity*, 26 Sept. 2006, tarheeldiversity.blogspot.com/2006/09/who-heel-am-i-self-authorship.html.

APPENDIX (Individual Responses)

1. Team Contribution

We contributed in equal proportions. We had our meeting early where we brainstormed ideas. Then I started the writing and formed an initial structure for others to follow. **Jong Han** joined then. Finally, **Chris** added his parts and then made sure the report flows from one section to the other as if it is written from the ideas of one person. Then we went through the final product individually for any necessary last-minute wordsmithing. It was a very smooth and productive group exercise.

2. As an instructor, what learning goals might group projects help you achieve? What steps could you take to implement group projects effectively?

Group projects help us get a handle on how students interact with each other. In addition, with exchange of ideas, students could be exposed to possibility of enrichment of knowledge gained in a course. One more thing that come out of it, is that the group projects could keep the motivation for some students up by associating with other relatively more motivated groupmates.

While teaching an advanced Statistics in Transportation course, the group projects will need to be an 8-week exercise. First thing to consider, the team strength, for that, it is essential to not have

(1) Too few members where the project becomes too demanding individually, or

(2) Too many members where the whole purpose of group interactions and sufficient individual involvement.

Once that is figured out, I would like to look through the background of the students and try to find a variety of students matched up in a group in a way that they complement each other's input. Once the groups members are selected, I will have multiple checkpoints in the project (1) to ensure they are on track for the deliverable and (2) to make sure sufficient contribution from all team members. For conflict resolution within groups, it would be best to ask the students to meet up with the TA together and sort the problems out.