Using Student Engagement and Goal Setting to Achieve a Winning Classroom

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According to a study of 944 two- and four-year colleges, "caring attitude of faculty and staff" was listed as the most important factor for retaining students (Roueche, 1993). This article will explain how one teacher demonstrates genuine concern for students while demanding high standards of excellence and student accountability. This is often a balancing act which, when implemented effectively, will most certainly reap rewards. These methods are simple, easy to use, and do not require a lot of advance planning.

Students in developmental courses have to work hard to complete their goals. They often struggle with a variety of academic and personal challenges. Many have little or no interest in the subject matter, but must take these courses as prerequisites to other courses.

I teach developmental mathematics to students who are required to take the class. They work hard to learn difficult concepts, do not earn college credit, and usually have no interest in math. Many come to me with poor study and time-management skills. While most educators will agree that teaching developmental courses is difficult, I view it as a challenge and am determined to help my students succeed. When my students show progress, purpose, and motivation, everyone is a winner.

Three simple techniques that I have found to be extremely successful in teaching developmental students are: fostering student accountability, goal setting, and student engagement. These simple strategies can help classroom instructors motivate and encourage students.

Student Accountability

In a recent study, Curran and Rosen (2006) confirmed that some students assume a very passive orientation toward knowledge acquisition and do not seem to understand that they are partially

responsible for what happens to them in their courses. Therefore, I try to foster student accountability and independence by encouraging my students to motivate themselves. On the first day of class I make it very clear that their grades, successes, or failures are their decision. Student success will largely be determined by how hard students are willing to work, attend class, complete homework assignments, study, ask questions, and get extra help when needed. Learning is not a magical consequence of sitting in my classroom. Student success will only happen when students realize that they are responsible and in control of whether they succeed or fail.

On the first day of class, everyone appears to be crowded in the back of the room. It is almost as if they plan to make a quick getaway. As soon as class starts, I instruct them to move up and fill in all the seats from front to back. Although this seems like a trivial request, it is not. It shows the students that I will not allow them to become anonymous inside my classroom. It indicates that I expect them to participate as part of a group. Isolation and alienation are the number one cause of attrition (Tinto, 1993). There are students who try to disappear into the woodwork. Many times these students are overlooked by their instructors because they are quiet and do not cause any problems. Eventually, some of these students will simply disappear. Although some students are at a higher risk for attrition and failure, I like to do everything I can to encourage retention and success by getting to know my students and setting high standards. Having them work in groups is another great way for students to get to know each other and begin to feel comfortable. It is true that I might not have any impact on some students with a propensity toward dropping out, but I like to treat each student as if I do.

After students change seats, I ask them to exchange contact information with at least two classmates. This is to help them stay connected in the event of an absence. This also enables them to immediately start to feel as if they are part of a group. I have always found a direct correlation between comfort level and performance level. The more comfortable a person is, the higher his/her performance level. A classroom is a learning community with interdependent components all working together. This is what I try to establish on

the very first day. While the students are gathering their contact information, I am quickly making a seating chart so I can refer to them by name instantaneously.

Goal Setting

Another first-day strategy I find quite useful is "goal setting." I give students an index card and ask them to answer three questions: Why did you take this course? What do you hope to get out of this course? What is your goal (projected grade) for this course? I file these cards. We meet again in 3 to 4 weeks or when I have enough grades to see a pattern. We discuss whether they are meeting their goal and if they want to change it. If goals are not being met, we discuss strategies that might be used to ensure that goals are attained. I repeat this process several times throughout the semester.

This goal setting method works well because it forces the students to take control of their grade and their effort. It is harder to fail when one is held accountable for one's own success. When a student is not meeting a goal, I ask what he or she could do to reach that goal. Some suggestions I have gotten from students are: study harder, show up more, go to the math lab, join a study group, etc. The student verbally lays out a strategic plan to achieve a higher grade, thereby shifting the onus of student success from instructor to student.

Student Engagement

Similarly, engaging students is very important. Research has found that when students participate in class, they are more likely to prepare for class, attend class, and commit to excellence (Curran & Rosen, 2006). I encourage student participation throughout the semester through many active learning activities such as group work, board work, and presentations. One example of a great student activity is requiring students to teach a sample ten-minute lesson for a grade. Although a few students balk when I explain the project, it has proven to be a useful and rewarding teaching tool. They must use a topic that I have already taught and cannot be within two weeks of my lesson. The students are graded on clarity of explanation, proper use of mathematical terms and language, poise, and creativity. They must also be prepared to answer questions pertaining to their topic. In

addition to teaching the lesson, each student has to prepare a 10-question worksheet for the class as well as a solution page with each problem carefully worked out. Students must submit this to me at least 3 days prior to their presentation date, so I can make copies for the class. The students pick their own topics and I do not permit lessons that other students have taught to be repeated. I instruct them to be creative and have fun. During their presentation, I participate as a student.

In addition to improving critical thinking by using active learning, this assignment also serves as a great review of the topics learned. When students verbalize a concept out loud and have to formulate their explanations, their understanding of the concept begins to deepen. Some of my students have shown immense creativity and it has proven to be a lot of fun. One student taught Order of Operations. She challenged the class to come up with a different acronym besides the familiar "Aunt Sally." The winner was "Please Eat My Dead Alligator Soon." Another student put the rules for addition and subtraction of signed numbers to a rap song. Before long, the whole class was rapping along. According to the students, this has proven to be a very effective and enjoyable activity.

One group activity that my students really enjoy is the "group leader" activity. It is very easy to execute and I usually do this when I have an extra 7 – 10 minutes. The students form groups of 4 and pick a group leader. Most text books have challenging activities in the back of each exercise section. I pick one and write it on the board. The students have to work together to solve the problem. The first group to get an answer shows it to me. If it is correct, the group leader comes to the board and must explain clearly how it was solved. That leader must also answer questions posed by either the class or me, and use correct mathematical language. The students enjoy the competitiveness of this activity and they seem to enjoy brainstorming together.

Because they get to pick their group leader, that person is normally a person that enjoys coming to the board.

Conclusion

I have found that many developmental students learn concepts more easily when they are not just lectured to. Because many developmental students lack the motivation to excel, effective teachers get them involved and interested by being creative and varying methods of instruction. Implementing simple techniques such as fostering student accountability, goal setting, and encouraging student engagement, will almost certainly result in a winning classroom situation. It has for me. After all, doesn't everybody aspire to be a winner?

References

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