Reader's Response: Motivating Graduate Students

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Abstract

A response to "Applying Graduate Student Perceptions of Task Engagement to Enhance Learning Conditions" Jay Caulfield, Volume 4, Number 1 (January 2010).

Readers Respond

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"[Applying Graduate Student Perceptions of Task Engagement to Enhance Learning Conditions](#)"
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Caulfield's study on graduate students' perceptions of task engagement was an important one for people, like me, who are involved in graduate level teaching. The issues ofmotivation can easily be overlooked with graduate students because one can easily, perhaps rightfully, make the assumption that graduate students come to graduate programs knowing what they want in their education; therefore, they are readily motivated. As Caulfield indicated, not all learning tasks are engaging even for graduate students. The study presented the issue of task engagement in relation to student motivation and cognitive, behavioral, and affective variables. My purposes in this response are to respond to the way Caulfield defined student motivation and to add to the practical implication of his research using John Keller's (1987) ARCS model.

Caulfield (2009) chose Skinner and Belmont's (1993) definition for student engagement which is involvement in initiating and carrying out learning activities specific to assigned learning tasks, such as writing assignments, discussion and group work. In his effort to distinguish between motivation and engagement, Caulfield, using Pintrich and Schunk (1996), defined motivation as "the process whereby goal directed activity is instigated and sustained" (p.4). This definition puts motivation in the hands of the teacher, or the motivator. However, motivation comes from the learner, not the motivator. In other words, a teacher can use many strategies to instigate goal-directed activity; however, the student may still choose not to engage in the activity. Student motivation from the learner point of view is the degree to which a student is willing to invest attention and effort into the learning tasks (Good & Brophy, 2000). Therefore, motivation is the drive, willingness, need, or desire that initiates and sustains the goal-directed activity.

I am in agreement with Caulfield that motivation is a predictor of engagement; though, engagement can occur without motivation. Expectancy X value theory of Atkinson (1964) can be helpful in explaining how different conditions can lead to different levels of motivation and task engagement. According to this theory, effort people are willing to invest into a learning task is a product of (1) the degree to which they expect to successfully perform the task, and (2) the degree to which they value the task and the outcomes that they will obtain from the successful completion of the task (Good & Brophy, 2000). Different combinations of expectancy and value result in different levels of student motivation and behaviors. High perceived expectancy and value produce high student motivation that results in high engagement with the learning task. On the other hand, high perceived expectancy and low perceived value result in little to no motivation which in turn

produce "*do the minimum to complete the task*" type of engagement that is characterized by minimum effort (Brophy, 1996).

As Caulfield pointed out, in order to maximize graduate students' task engagement, instructors should pay attention to motivational variables. Keller's (1987) ARCS model can be a good and practical guide for this purpose. Keller developed his ARCS model based on a comprehensive review of literature on motivation. According to this model, there are four elements that should be considered when designing instruction based on motivational principles: **A**ttention, **R**elevance, **C**onfidence, and **S**atisfaction. Following are brief descriptions of each component:

> **Attention**:   Capturing the interest of the learners, stimulating curiosity to learn.
> **Relevance**:   Meeting the personal needs/goal of the learner to affect positive attitude.
> **Confidence**: Helping the learners believe that they will succeed and control their success.
> **Satisfaction**: Reinforcing accomplishment through intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

Attention and relevance deal with the question "How is this learning valuable and stimulating to my learners?" while confidence and satisfaction address the question "How can I help my students succeed and allow them to control their outcomes?"

In order to design instruction based on the ARCS model, one needs to go through a series of steps to analyze the learners, the course content and materials, and to select and integrate motivation tactics to enhance the instruction. For example, if during the analysis the teacher decides that the perceived relevance of the content is likely to be low for the learners, then s/he selects and integrates motivational tactics that are appropriate for increasing the relevance of the content. According to Dick, Carey, and Carey (2005), all four of the ARCS components must be utilized to increase the likelihood of motivating students and maintaining their interest during instruction.

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