

Boredom: That Which Shall not Be Named

By Jason Weirnerman and Cari Kenner

By being unwilling to acknowledge and discuss the consequences of boredom in the academic environment, instructors are doing their students a disservice.

ABSTRACT: *Boredom carries a significant weight: It is not often spoken within the academic environment. However, by ignoring how developmental and first-year students experience boredom, instructors are avoiding a topic that most students will encounter. We present information on the common causes of boredom, ways to detect boredom, and the outcomes of boredom within the academic environment. We conclude with a lesson plan to assist instructors in recognizing the idea of boredom and how students can overcome academic boredom.*

Although the higher education literature encourages active learning, student engagement, and a learner centered environment, there is seldom discussion about how to help students overcome academic boredom. Titles such as *Battling Boredom: 99 Strategies to Spark Student Engagement* (Harris, 2011), *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Barkley, 2010), and *You've Got to Reach Them to Teach Them: Hard Facts About the Soft Skills of Student Engagement* (Schreck, 2011) provide resources that can help instructors connect with their students and minimize the challenge of boredom. However, there is not the corresponding literature that explores the idea of academic boredom from the perspective of the student. Rather, in the academic environment, the concept of boredom is similar to Lord Voldemort in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. In the series, Lord Voldemort is a character of such evil that he is referred to as "He who must not be named" (Rowling & GrandPré, 1998). By being unwilling to acknowledge and discuss the consequences of boredom in the academic environment, instructors are doing their students a disservice: They fail to help students recognize the characteristics of boredom and do not provide them with the skills for extricating themselves from those times when students find learning boring. The little research that does exist on boredom indicates that bored students are likely to experience lower grades, higher rates of absenteeism, and be at greater risk for dropping out (Daschmann, Goetz, & Stupinsky, 2011), which does not bode well for persistence to degree.

One of the critical stages of beginning a discussion with students is to define boredom. Without a clear definition, students may not be able to identify when they are bored or when they may be suffering from a more serious psychological ailment. Once boredom has been defined, instructors can present some of the challenges that students may encounter when they face boredom. Finally, instructors need techniques with which to engage with students about the idea of boredom and how students can empower themselves to reduce the danger from "that which shall not be named."

Boredom Defined

One of the challenges with the concept of boredom is that definitions tend to be self-referential. For example, dictionary.com (2014) defines boredom as "the state of being bored; tedium; ennui." Merriamwebster.com (2014) defines boredom as "the state of being weary and restless through lack of interest." A second difficulty with the concept of boredom is that it tends to be viewed as a negative emotional condition that is something that is not discussed in polite company. Individuals tend to avoid identifying another as boring or stating that the current situation is boring as a way of maintaining social cohesion (Toohey, 2011). Another confounding factor when looking at boredom is the different viewpoints relating to boredom from the psychological, social/sociological, and educational perspectives.

Within psychology, boredom is defined as a trait or state emotional condition. According to Goetz, Cronjaeger, Frenzel, Lüdtke, and Hall (2010), "trait emotions are seen as habitual recurring emotions typically experienced by an individual whereas state emotions are viewed as emotions experienced at a specific point in time" (p. 45). In relation to the concept of boredom in the educational environment, instructors should have a more extensive understanding about the state condition of boredom. However, for those who are interested in more information relating to the trait of boredom, researchers (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Harris, 2000; Mercer-Lynn, Hunter, & Eastwood, 2013; Sundberg, Latkin,

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Farmer, & Saoud, 1991; Vodanovich, 2003) provide a good foundation.

Within the academic environment, a more powerful definition has been forwarded from Nett, Goetz, and Daniels (2010) who call boredom “An unpleasant, transient affective state’ that is characterized by a severe lack of interest as well as difficulty concentrating on the current activity” (as cited in Fisher, 1993, p. 396). One of the key features within this definition of boredom is that the condition is a transient affective state, which means boredom is a short-term emotional condition. As boredom is an emotional state, Vogel-Walcutt, Fiorella, Carper, and Schatz (2012) have found that boredom can result in either heightened or suppressed arousal depending upon the individual and the specific situation.

Although Nett, Goetz, and Daniels’ (2010) definition provides a clear understanding of the parameters of boredom and how boredom is different from other psychological conditions, Mann and Robinson (2009) offer a definition that is more in line with a common understanding held by students, “Boredom is the result of having nothing to do that one likes” (p. 243).

Nett, Goetz, and Daniels (2010) indicate that boredom is a temporary emotional condition; they expand upon the concept of boredom beyond a simple emotional state by including several components:

- affective: unpleasant, aversive feelings,
- cognitive: altered perception of time,
- physiological: reduced arousal,
- expressive: facial, vocal, and postural expressions of boredom, and
- motivational: motivation to change the activity or to leave the situation.

By embracing a more expansive view of how students experience boredom, instructors can broaden their understanding of boredom as more than an emotional state experienced in class or during a particular academic activity. Students are likely to experience boredom as a multifaceted condition and can learn the skills to recognize and overcome boredom by addressing the individual components as they come to identify them.

Goetz et al., (2013) identify five different states of boredom based upon the level of arousal and the positive/negative emotions.

- Indifferent boredom: low arousal and slightly positive emotions.
- Calibrating boredom: higher arousal and slightly negative emotions.
- Searching boredom: active state and looking for something to do.
- Reactive boredom: unhappy, angry, and aggressive with a desire to escape.

- Apathetic boredom: learned helplessness with characteristics similar to depression.

Their study found these stages in high school students, but the stages of boredom are likely to be found among college students, particularly those who are in their first transitional year following high school graduation.

Boredom is also related to the perception of a given task. In Pekrun’s (2006) control-value theory (CVT), students were asked to rate their perception of control and their value of a task within the academic environment. When students indicated low levels of perceived control and identified the specific task as having low value, the task was identified as boring. Eastwood, Frischen, Fenske, and Smilek (2012) build upon the CVT in adding the component of being constrained. In situations where individuals find themselves powerless to make changes to the situation, control is further diminished, resulting in increased levels of boredom.

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One of the temporal perceptions associated with boredom is that individuals in the midst of boredom feel that time is slowing down and they are stuck in the present without any future escape or relief (Eastwood et al., 2012). This condition of being stuck in the present is the opposite of the condition of *flow*. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defines flow as an optimal experience in which individuals are in a state in which they “are so involved in an activity that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (p. 4). A state of flow occurs when individuals have clearly defined goals and are participating in a task in which their skill set matches the requirements of the task. Flow is the opposite of boredom. Individuals in a state of flow will embrace the task whereas those in the midst of boredom will suffer through the task, desperate for the chance to escape.

Sociology also provides an explanation of boredom, particularly in relation to adolescents and young adults. Brumhead, Searle Trowbridge, and Williams (1990) worked with urban youths and identified that boredom was a component of the adolescent persona. The youths in this study identified themselves as having nothing to do, which resulted in boredom. However, further exploration revealed that boredom resulted when the young adults were constrained by the

parameters placed on them by adults. This concept of constraints ties back in with Pekrun’s CVT in which the lack of control and limited value leads to boredom.

Shaw, Caldwell, and Kleiber (1996) found that the amount of work was not related to the level of boredom. Even students who claimed they were overworked indicated they were bored. Young adults who suffered from lack of time defined themselves as bored if they were doing tasks not of their own choosing. This concept of being bored when subjected to a task defined by another was also found in ‘leisure’ activities. Students who were doing an adult defined leisure activity frequently identified themselves as bored whereas self-generated leisure activities resulted in less boredom (Sharp, Caldwell, Graham, & Ridenour, 2006). Among youth, boredom may be a persona that is adopted as a form of resistance to the restrictions imposed by the adult world.

Greater student engagement is seen as a tool for helping students overcome boredom. Kuh, Klinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek (as cited in Harper & Quay, 2009) define student engagement:

Student engagement represents two critical features. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities... The second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation. (p. 44)

One of the challenges with using the tools identified in much of the student engagement literature as a way to overcome boredom is that it identifies in-class practices rather than changing the students’ emotional perspective or increasing student control or value. Research by Skidmore (2002) and Gasiewski, Eagan, Garcia, Hurtado, and Chang (2012) indicates that students with more intrinsic motivation or who had a previous experience with the course material placed more value on the material and were less likely to be bored, regardless of the presentation style. Some students were even negatively disposed to the engagement activities such as small-group discussions with their peers because of the desire to be taught by someone with more experience (the instructor) rather than work with peers (Herrmann, 2013). Exeter, Amerantunge, Ratima, Morton, Dickson, Hsu, and Jackson (2010) highlight that faculty can reduce student boredom by demonstrating passion about the material they are teaching. However, an instructor’s interest

in the material may bias their impression of the level of student engagement within the class, mistaking personal passion for student interest.

Risks Associated with Boredom

According to Toohey (2011), the results of boredom can range from mild and uncomfortable to severe and life threatening. On the mild end of the spectrum, individuals who are bored may daydream to escape. For individuals prone to chronic boredom, escape may involve risk taking activities or the use of drugs or alcohol as an escape from the angst associated with a generalized state of boredom.

Daschmann et al. (2011) cite several studies that document specific problems associated with students who experience high levels of boredom. From the societal perspective, students suffering from excessive boredom may engage in drug abuse, delinquency, inappropriate eating behaviors, or experience hostility or depression. In the academic setting, students who experience high levels of boredom may get lower grades, have increased school absenteeism, or drop out of the educational system altogether.

In relation to developmental education fields, there have been a few studies that indicate boredom can inhibit academic progress. Graesser and D'Mello (2012) reviewed the kinds of reading that may generate boredom among college students. According to their findings, readings that were not relevant, too difficult, or too easy were seen as boring. Readings that were seen as interesting were those that slightly challenged the student's abilities and were relevant to the course. For those students required to enter a sequence of developmental courses, one of the key features in lack of persistence has been students who may complete one, or even two, of their required courses but failed to complete the entire sequence.

One of the causes for this may be the frustration of students who get bored in later courses when they perceive they are repeating material from an earlier class as they begin the next class (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). Beyond the coursework and sequences required of several developmental courses, boredom can also be related to having a lack of a goal for attending college or a university. Students with strong goals are highly motivated to power through boredom; those with lesser goals may not have had the fortitude to overcome boredom and persist to graduation, or even the higher level courses (Carranza, 1999).

Boredom Busting: A Lesson Plan

Boredom as an emotional construct is something likely to be faced by most students. However, boredom is seldom mentioned as a stand-alone concept. Rather than use the word boredom,

college instructors use words like engagement, motivation, or concentration. Although these concepts may be useful euphemisms for instructors to avoid directly stating boredom, these euphemisms distract from acknowledging the problem. When students label a course or an instructor as "boring," they are using a common language definition and deflecting the blame to an external force. By not directly using the word boredom in their responses to the common complaint or as part of the study strategies or first-year curriculum, instructors are avoiding speaking in the language used by their students. And they may not be providing tools to help students cope with the transient boredom that can occur while students are attending lectures, reading texts, or studying for exams.

In order to help students identify, understand, and develop a mechanism to cope with academic boredom, we recommend instructors deal with the topic directly in an independent classroom lesson. We have used the following

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lesson to assist students in meeting the following learning objectives:

- Define boredom and explore the different kinds of boredom that students may encounter.
- Explore both academic and societal problems associated with boredom.
- Identify immediate causes of boredom.
- Recommend strategies for overcoming boredom.

Defining Boredom

Opening the class on boredom with the question "How many of you have been bored this semester?" usually startles students. For instructors who are willing to challenge their students, the question can be reframed to explore when students have experienced boredom within this particular course. We have found that by following this question with a short discussion about what students mean when they identify something as boring or those times when they have been bored generates many definitions of boredom. This allows for a transition into exploring the larger idea of boredom.

Nett et al.'s (2010) definition of boredom as "An unpleasant, transitive affective state..." can serve as the technical framework, whereas Mann and Robinson's (2009) "Boredom is the result of having nothing to do that one likes" serves as the vernacular concept that allows instructors to frame the idea of boredom. The five kinds of boredom identified by Goetz et al. (2013) allows for a deeper discussion as to the different kinds of boredom and how the emotional expression of boredom can lead to a variety of challenges, depending upon the specific level of boredom. We have found that students need minimal prompting to identify specific times within a class when they have experienced the different levels of boredom.

This introduction of the concept of boredom can be concluded by introducing the specific components of a boredom event as defined by Nett et al. (2010). These include affective, cognitive, physiological, expressive, and motivational components. Using simple scenarios such as the following exercise serves to assist the students in understanding the nuances associated with each component and how the five components relate to each other.

A short exercise we have used to demonstrate the physiological and expressive components of boredom in class is to get students to adopt postures that may induce boredom. Having students slouch in their seats or lean on their desks with their heads on their hands while visually focusing on an undefined middle distance are typical expressive and physical postures that can lead to boredom. Having the students shift from these postures to a more attentive posture where students holds themselves erect in their chairs and focus on the instructor or the notes on the board allows the students to experience the sensations of greater engagement with the course material and a redirection away from a boredom inducing behavior.

Problems Associated with Boredom

During the discussion of when students have faced boredom in college or university, we recommend the inclusion of a discussion on what happens when students are bored. Leading questions such as "How do you think boredom influences your attention in a lecture hall or when reading a textbook?" or "What are some of the unproductive ways that students can deal with boredom?" can be used as points that will lead into an analysis of the problems associated with academic boredom. These include the problems identified by Daschmann et al. (2011): poor grades, absenteeism, and dropping out. Societal problems include drug use, depression, eating disorders, and hostility. We encourage students to think about third parties whom they may know

who have faced such issues and how boredom may have contributed to these problems. In the case of societal problems, we have worked through why some problems are associated with higher levels of boredom and how poor decision making driven by boredom can exacerbate these problems.

Mann and Robinson's (2009) definition—"Boredom is the result of having nothing to do that one likes"—calls for exploration of the idea of boredom occurring when a student is trapped in an environment where she or he does not want to be. With boredom in the classroom being an immediate emotional response, it is useful to work through a "Decision Result Tree" exercise. In the collegiate environment, unlike the K-12 environment, a student is not compelled to attend class. If a student chooses not to attend a boring class, that is a specific decision she or he is making. By using a decision tree, students can explore how the midterm results of their decisions to avoid potentially boring situations can result in less desirable long-term outcomes. Many students attend college to improve their job and life prospects. Mapping out how skipping boring classes inhibits achieving these long-term goals allows students to have a better understanding of the consequences of their decisions to avoid something which may they find boring.

Identifying Immediate Causes of Boredom

Following the discussion of problems related to boredom, we move on to the idea of recognizing the different components of boredom and how one's perspectives can influence a boredom experience and the ability to overcome boredom. Asking students about their motivations for attending college is a useful starting point for helping students position themselves as the controllers of their boredom. Using Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory, we have found that students can easily identify several reasons (values) for attending college but may struggle with finding value in specific courses including developmental courses and general education requirements. Once we have built the value side of the equation, we work with students to identify internal control factors including motivation, focus, and interest. However, we also recognize there are external control factors including the environment and teaching methods that can influence one's level of boredom. The use of the video segment of Ben Stein giving the economics lecture in the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is a humorous tool for bringing in external content, which can stimulate further discussion about the specific student-actors reaction to boredom. These are tools for demonstrating how external factors can lead to

boredom, but we remind students that these are secondary factors and highlight that the internal control variables have more import and allow for a more effective response to boredom.

We have used the "Four Whys" exercise to help students specify value for college courses and classes. The Four Whys exercise begins with students answering four questions:

- Why are you attending college?
- Why did you register for this course?
- Why are you attending this class today?
- Why are you sitting in your specific seat?

The first three questions require students to explore their values in an increasingly specific framework. Why are you attending college asks students about their overall perspective on higher education. The second why relates to registering for specific courses. For many students, registration for developmental education courses has been required due to the results of an Accuplacer

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or other assessment test. This involuntary placement removes control from the student and may have the student focus on a deficiency rather than the value of the course in enhancing her or his academic foundation. The why are you attending class today question allows students to explore how developing goals for each class can enhance focus on the material and identify specific objectives for each class. The final why question asks students to consider how their choice of seating in the class can bring them into more direct contact with the instructor and the material (e.g., by sitting near the front center of the class) or distance the student from the material and allow for more distractions (e.g., sitting in the rear or the wings of a class).

A final step for assisting students in identifying causes of boredom is to help them recognize that boredom is both a condition of the material's level of demand and a student's capability (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). Students are likely to easily grasp the idea that easy material might result in boredom. However, the idea that material that is more difficult than their

capabilities could also produce boredom might be a new concept. Introducing students to the idea that they may disengage when material is too difficult allows students to understand why they may be having boredom issues in higher level coursework or in coursework that is outside of their traditional frame of academic reference.

This concept of material being less demanding than a student's skill level may be a specific challenge for students who feel unjustly enrolled in a developmental education course. One exercise that has been helpful in demonstrating the value of a developmental education class is to use excerpts from an online discussion question from previous classes. At the conclusion of each class, students identify the most valuable thing gained from the class. Each class usually has at least one student who indicates she or he took the class with low expectations but gained at least one particular useful insight. Sharing the insights of previous students allows current students to see they are not alone in their feelings toward this class. We then ask students to identify if specific stories spoke to them and why. With proper prompting, students can find additional value in understanding how a developmental course relates to strengthening their academic foundation rather than being a sign of academic deficiency.

Introducing Methods for Overcoming Boredom

Once students have grasped the concepts of academic boredom and learned ways to identify their own academic boredom, we conclude with ways to overcome boredom when it strikes. Nett et al., (2010) provide three coping strategies students use when experiencing boredom. *Evaders* are students who use avoidance strategies to escape the boring situation. These students seek other things to do rather than engage with boring material. *Criticizers* are students who view their boredom with disapproval and seek to reduce the level of boredom by shifting responsibility to (or blaming) the teacher to make the material more interesting rather than trying to find internal ways to cope with the boredom incident. *Reappraisers* are students who realize boredom is an internally derived state and take active steps to re-engage with the material. They seek to change their view of the boring situation and use some of the previously identified internal and external motivators to increase the value of the content or the course. These reappraisers regain a level of control over the material by placing the content within their larger values system. By allowing students to role play with the different coping strategies, instructors can have students exercise the language of coping with boredom

and recognize that boredom is something that can be overcome.

Building on the reappraiser strategy, students should be introduced to the idea of motivation. The Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University (2014) identifies two sources of motivation that can help students identify a reason to overcome academic boredom. The first is *internal motivation*, which includes a student's fascination with the subject, a personal sense of accomplishment, and a sense of calling with the material. For students who have difficulty finding a source of internal motivation for the particular material, *external motivation* can include parental expectations, grades, and future earning potential.

To reinforce these ideas, we return to the Four Whys exercise, specifically why are you in college and why are you taking this class. One instructor relates a personal story about going to college based upon parental and community expectations: The loose connections created by these external motivational factors did not foster an internal investment in the process and led to a struggle with boredom. Continuing the exercise with my academic development, I identify the experiences through which I developed internal motivation and how that led to more engagement, active learning, and higher grades. We have found that students relate well to stories in which their instructors struggled with the academic environment and were still able to succeed and even move from the role of student to instructor.

Implications for Future Research

As boredom is an understudied area within the developmental education field, there are several areas in need of additional research. Based upon Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory, students who are enrolled in developmental educational courses due to direct placements may feel a lack of control over their academic careers. In addition, these students may place a low value on the information presented within the developmental education course. The combination of low control and low value will often result in boredom. Research to clarify the role of control and value as a driver of boredom within developmental education courses can inform efforts to either increase student control or enhance the value of developmental courses within the student's academic framework.

The concept of value of developmental education courses as a driver of boredom should also be explored outside of students' in-class experience. There have been efforts to eliminate or diminish the role of developmental education within the higher education system (Flannery, 2014). These efforts may further stigmatize developmental education courses within college or university systems; the underlying disapproval may be

communicated to students unintentionally by advisers and counselors. Additional research focusing on how advisers and counselors are communicating the value of developmental education classes will provide information on the role of language in framing the expectations of developmental education students before they even enter the classroom.

Boredom within the academic environment may also be influenced by the demographic factors of students. Vodanovich and Watt (1999) analyzed a variety of cultures and found that Europeans were more prone to boredom than other cultures, and there were differences within European cultures in relation to susceptibility to boredom. A pilot study we conducted of students enrolled in a First Year Experience course at a community college indicated some differences between adult learners and traditional students. A chi squared analysis of 70 students (55 students between 18 and 24 years old and 15 students older than 55) indicated that adult learners experienced

Personal stories would allow practitioners to see boredom from the other side of the desk.

boredom differently than their traditional-aged peers in relation to the material being easier ($x^2 = 0.16$), the material being harder ($x^2 = 0.22$), or the material not being relevant to their overall academic goals ($x^2 = 0.13$). Although none of these factors reached the $x^2 = .10$ statistically significant level, preliminary findings indicated adult learners may experience boredom differently from their traditional student counterparts. Further research on how boredom influences students from different demographic classifications would help determine if boredom is a more significant influence among particular groups of students.

Finally, a qualitative study examining students' experiences in their own words would be useful for getting a personal perspective of the challenge that boredom creates within the academic environment. These personal stories would allow practitioners to see boredom from the other side of the desk. Allowing student voices to frame the discussion on boredom could allow instructors to hear of struggles that may be occurring within students that they are uncomfortable directly voicing.

Conclusion

In Toohey's (2011) *Boredom: A Lively History*, one of the challenges of dealing with boredom is that it is viewed as a condition suffered by

children. Adults should be able to overcome boredom, rendering it unworthy of discussion. Unfortunately, this lack of discussion on the role boredom plays in the academic environment may create a condition in which students are left with no option but to suffer through the challenges and consequences that arise from being bored. Although most college students are likely to suffer from periods of boredom, those who are unable to develop strategies to deal with these periods of boredom may find their grades suffering and, in the worst case, sliding down a path that leads to their dropping out.

Much of the treatment of boredom in the higher education setting appears to focus on the role of the instructor in creating lesson plans that keep their students engaged with the course material. Although this emphasis on more student engagement can provide tools for instructors to make their courses more interesting to students, such a focus creates a perception that boredom is under the control of the instructor. By focusing on the role of boredom in content delivery, instructors are missing the opportunity to address boredom from the perspective of students.

Students can learn to monitor their own levels of boredom and learn skills that can allow them to work through periods of boredom. By providing students with the skills to recognize and deal with boredom, instructors can encourage students to become more actively involved with their educational experience. It is likely that most students will experience some level of academic boredom while they are attending a college or university. Rather than avoiding the issue of boredom, instructors can bring the topic into the light of day. As Harry Potter and his classmates learned, the evil that is not named is often far more terrifying than the evil which is known and directly addressed.

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