3.1.7 Setting High Expectations

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High expectations are intended to create a credible and relevant gap between participants’ present and future performance. In today’s academic culture students tend to avoid endeavors where poor performance may expose them to peer ridicule, making motivation to close the gap a special challenge. Setting high expectations requires supportive interaction among the learning community, the participants, and the instructional staff. This module gives techniques for engaging each of these constituencies around high expectations for performance.

Motivating Learners

One of the oddities of youth culture today is that they consider it better to be thought lazy than stupid (Cross, 2001). Thus, if students feel threatened by failure, they will not try very hard so that their lack of success will indicate to others a lack of effort rather than a lack of ability. How can we convince such students that not only effort but also ability can be improved by their own actions? Researchers have studied this problem of motivation extensively. They have observed two main types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsically motivated students respond to external rewards, such as grades, recognition, or the approval of others. Individuals who are intrinsically motivated find joy in learning because of its connection with personal goals and aspirations. Setting high expectations can influence both types of motivation, but it is especially effective with the intrinsic type.

Motivation as it applies to college courses can be defined as “purposeful engagement in classroom tasks and study to master concepts or skills” (McMillan & Forsyth, 1991). Purposeful engagement is more intrinsic than extrinsic as it deals with factors inside students and within their control, especially value (what students think is important) and expectancy (what they believe they can accomplish) (Cross, 2001). When facilitators set high expectations they are communicating that they think that students are capable of significantly improved performance. In other words, if their teachers believe in them, students are more likely to believe in themselves.

In order to help students meet high expectations, it is necessary to let them experience short-term failure, because protecting students from failure dissuades them from taking risks inherent in high performance (3.1.8 Letting Students Fail So They Can Succeed). Once students are challenged to meet high expectations, they need clear performance criteria and performance measures to assess their progress (4.1.7 Writing Performance Criteria for Individuals and Teams). Setting high expectations is more than “tough love”; it is a motivational technique for helping students become less risk-averse in their learning. The process of setting high expectations begins with a supportive learning environment and involves three-way collaboration among faculty, students, and peers.

Role of the Learning Environment

Teachers need to ensure that the overall environment is supportive and non-threatening in order to encourage students to take risks, turn short-term failure into long-term success, and grow their learning ability. Before articulating high expectations, facilitators need to create a welcoming learning environment that communicates trust and respect; then students are more likely to respond more positively to high expectations (3.1.4 Establishing Initial Respect Without Prejudging, 3.1.5 Getting Student Buy-In, and 3.1.6 Obtaining Shared Commitment). Shared commitment gained from a learning community has a powerful influence on individual learners when strong commitment is evidenced as the norm. As the entire community raises its level of performance in order to meet expectations, the challenges that participants are willing to undertake increase accordingly.

Role of a Long-Term Vision

It is uplifting to link participant expectations to long-term behaviors at the end of a degree program or in professional practice. When framed in this manner, course expectations are not compartmentalized; instead they are seen as authentic challenges that are an integral part of personal and professional development. Teachers can help students envision long-term performance using professional profiles (2.4.3 Development and Use of an Expert Profile). The key is to encourage students to identify the short-term and intermediate steps necessary to meet elevated expectations. An effective technique is to ask students to think carefully about how much they will need to know in order to perform well in their jobs five years after graduation. Specifically, they should envision how much will have been learned on the job and how much they will have learned in college. The purpose of this question is to convince students that their primary job in college is to learn how to learn. This helps them value the development of learning skills and strengthens the belief that one’s learning ability is not static, but that it can be significantly increased.
Role of Facilitators

Creation of the learning environment and early interactions with students are key responsibilities of faculty. McKeachie and Svinicki have observed that the same students may be highly motivated in one course and completely disengaged in another, depending on whether they value the content and expect to succeed. Students benefit when instructors have high expectations for success and also provide the conditions for achieving it (4.1.5 Moving Toward an Assessment Culture).

It can be tempting for faculty to lower class expectations and outcomes so that almost all students can meet the minimum requirements (4.3.5 Differentiating Growth from Acquiescence). The solution to student disengagement is not to enable the avoidance of high performance endeavors, but to promote a culture of accountability and empowerment (4.3.4 The Accelerator Model). It is important for an instructor to truly believe that all students are capable of meeting high expectations and to communicate that belief to students.

A number of useful tools and techniques for realizing high expectations are summarized below:

- Choose classroom activities that are demanding, but that also have clear expectations for performance
- Provide a mechanism by which students can calculate their grades and measure progress in the course
- Link high classroom standards with long-term personal and professional behaviors that will be beneficial in future classes and beyond college
- Communicate the importance of high standards as they relate to performance in “the real world” of professional standards (Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, 2005)
- Envision yourself as a student in your class and ask yourself which course expectations and structures for meeting these expectations might be perceived as unrealistic
- Don’t let students convince you to lower standards by one of the following
  - Delay tactics
  - Lobbying to eliminate portions of assignments
  - Demanding examples of previous exam problems
  - Using office hours to have you set up or simplify problems
  - Asking for answers so that they can avoid thinking critically
- Illustrate that you “walk the talk” of high expectations by making students aware of new professional challenges you are facing and undertaking in your teaching

Concluding Thoughts

High expectations must not exist in a vacuum; they are an integral part of a larger learning environment that is solidified at the beginning of a learning experience. Student performance is significantly affected by how we communicate expectations for performance and how we communicate confidence that conditions for success exist in our classrooms. In general, students will perform to the level of their own, their peers’, and their professors’ expectations. We encourage the reader to be mindful of the groundwork associated with earlier steps in the Methodology for Creating a Quality Learning Environment (3.1.3) and to explore techniques outlined in this module as a means of motivating new levels of student performance.

References


