ENGAGING STUDENTS WITH LOW MOTIVATION IN A STUDIO LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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INTRODUCTION

I enjoy working with students of mixed abilities to create a high-energy yet supportive studio environment. The challenge is to stimulate learning in students with diverse needs, many of whom have low motivation and confidence. In this paper, I discuss some strategies to help achieve this.

My past life as an arts-based community worker with young people who were affected by intellectual and/or physical disability, mental illness or long periods of unemployment has had a significant impact on the way I view my present role as a tertiary art and design educator.

Working with people who have social and motivational challenges makes me aware of the disabling effect low self-esteem has on motivation and creativity. I think that low levels of participation and poor-quality student work can, in part, be attributed to the impact of low self-esteem. Several factors appear to contribute to this. These include negative experiences in home and studio environments, past learning experiences, health, cultural differences and the level of social skills and awareness that may affect the student's integration into the class.

Facilitating a culture of acceptance and support within a studio group who have diverse needs and abilities is a challenge. The power of peer support as motivating factor is one of the keys to maintaining a cohesive, energetic class. I will introduce some practical examples to help generate peer support in a group of new students. This is the starting point in creating and maintaining a positive learning environment.

Links between low motivation and low self-esteem are identified, together with strategies to help students achieve early success. The power of early success cannot be underestimated, because it frees learners to access the energy they need to work more creatively. Learning strategies that address this and stimulate creative energy are discussed. One of these methods is the use of physical action ("action learning") to help students of varying abilities to understand and implement theoretical concepts.

WHY DON'T LEARNERS LEARN…?

In 1984, Richard Allwright framed the pivotal question, "Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?"[1] He self-answered this question in part by revealing that learners have their own perceptions of what is being taught in a classroom situation. The experience of learning is specific to individuals – that is, when asked at the end of a lesson what had transpired, many students give different versions. The important question is, "Why are their learning experiences different?" The answers to this question form the basis of the concept of learner-centred learning theory, a concept that acknowledges the difference between "educating people" and "helping them learn."[2]

Decades of learning theory research has helped to find some answers to the question, "Why are students' learning

experiences different?" One reason is because the chosen teaching style doesn't suit the varied learning styles within the group. In 1988, Felder and Silverman conducted research into the learning experiences of engineering students and subsequently delineated learning styles into three main categories: auditory, visual and kinaesthetic.[3]

Auditory learners use sounds and words. They prefer verbal explanation to visual demonstration. Their retention is improved further if they can then explain this information verbally to others. Therefore, auditory learners get a lot out of discussions, seminars and critique sessions. Written text is also incorporated into this category because Felder and Silverman believed learners experience text as a sound, because they "hear" the sound as they read the words.[4]

Visual learners learn best from what they see, for example: images, diagrams, flow charts, time lines, films, demonstrations and gallery visits. Kinaesthetic learners experience their best learning through hands-on activities – they learn by touch, taste and smell. They are suited to studio and workshop learning situations with plenty of room for experimentation. They also need to be able to move around, so long structured lecture situations are not suitable for kinaesthetic learners. (Flemming and Mills added a "read/write" category to Felder and Silverman's three styles and re-christened it VARK in 1992.[5])

An extensive body of research has established that most people learn most effectively through one of these three strands and tend to miss or ignore information presented in either of the other two. Most people learn using one predominant style, though some use a blended approach, i.e., a combination of two or more styles.[6]

As arts and design educators, we need to know that important material is reaching its target. Therefore, when material is presented to a group, care should be taken to make sure all types of learning styles are catered for.[7] However, different types of learning styles aren't the only reason learners don't learn what teachers teach.[8] I think classroom/ studio atmosphere and culture plays a hugely important role.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A POSITIVE START

The atmosphere in the shared studio has a huge amount to do with the energy level of the students. To create a positive studio atmosphere, the group has to have enough fully participating members that an "up energy" is created. Then the work ethic of the majority helps "infect" the minority with some of this enthusiasm. It is essential to work towards this positive and energised atmosphere from day one.

When a new course starts it is vital that the first few days are a very positive experience for the students. Some students, particularly those with low self-esteem, are very easily put off and find meeting new people and learning new things a challenge, emotionally as well as intellectually. I have an aversion to ice-breaking games as do many students, who regard them with disdain, so I prefer to facilitate situations where the students learn about and relate to their peers as a natural part of the course introduction.

For example, on the first week of the Certificate in Creative Studies last year, we organised a class picnic at the boat harbour. Four lecturers and all the students headed off for a day of drawing, walking, jamming and picnicking. Drawing was loosely connected to the first project, "Motif and Pattern," and students were asked to find motifs in the surrounding harbour area which they could develop further into patterns during the coming weeks. We provided a selection of musical instruments and, as the day progressed, more and more students were involved in the jamming sessions using both traditional instruments and percussion items sourced from the surrounding area. We also looked at motifs and patterns in music, and many students responded visually to a group who had started drumming.[9]

The students appeared to have a happy and relaxed day, learned some basic drawing skills and started to get to know each other. If students start to form friendships early in the course, they have another reason to attend regularly. Most importantly, they connected with the idea that the course was going to be high-energy, creative and

fun. Dropout rates in certificate level and first-year degree courses can be high. Sometimes this can be due to a feeling of isolation, especially for international students and students with health issues and/or special needs.

The social integration of the picnic helped to foster a relaxed first studio session, as the students had already spent a fun and fruitful time with their lecturers and peers. From my observations, students who form friendships within a course continue to attend, even through the "hard times." Friendships can provide them with a secondary, and for some, a primary motivation to keep attending. Research with first-year Australian students has shown that supportive peer networks seem to help students become more integrated into and focused on life on campus.[10]

USING IDENTITY PROJECTS TO FOSTER A CULTURE OF ACCEPTANCE

I think it is really important to celebrate the differences within a group of students and to reinforce a culture of acceptance for a diverse group of people. Some of my students are straight from secondary school, where the pressures to conform to group norms and intolerance of difference can be very strong. Of course intolerance is not limited to school leavers, and having students from a diversity of cultures and of differing ages in a shared studio setting can be at times challenging.

Lecturers have an important role here to help oil the social wheels in such a way that diversity becomes the norm. I like to build in time and activities early within the course to allow individuals within the group to introduce themselves to other people in the class as part of the first projects.

Most students will respond well to a project that is built around their own culture, interests, personality and passions. When these projects are presented to the class, there is a natural opportunity for members to find out about each other's lives and begin to appreciate eccentricities, cultural diversity and life experiences within the group. I am often surprised by the depth of some of the material students share with their classmates as part of identity projects, and the support that they receive from the class.[11]

Projects on self-identity can be very supporting of the individual within a new group. They can also provide a very accessible subject for a first project, allowing for an easy first success. The power of early success cannot be underestimated, because it helps raise self-esteem and increases motivation. This in turn frees learners to access the energy they need to work more creatively. Low self-esteem is often seen as a barrier to people taking up learning opportunities.[12] "Low self-esteem is widely recognised as a factor that is associated with poor educational attainment and non-participation in education and training."[13]

It is also one of the barriers to participation in learning once the student is enrolled. The challenge is to have the students open to learning by helping raise their self-esteem. In their study of adult participation in learning, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in the UK recognised the need for confidence to build and learning to be accessed gradually to help build self-esteem. The report, cited in *Self-esteem, Confidence and Adult Learning*, by Kathryn James and Christine Nightingale, discusses how strategies to encourage participation in further education would be enhanced if greater attention was paid to the role of self-esteem and confidence in attracting and supporting students into learning.[14]

Some students need help to access ideas for an identity project, particularly those with low self-esteem who don't regard their interests as having much value. Their low self-esteem appears as low motivation, so they may self-edit their responses to the lecturer. Questions like "What are your interests?" may not elicit much of a response. An approach I used as a youth arts worker in Nelson, when working with groups of young unemployed people, was to ask a question like, "Who are your skateboarding heroes?" or "Who is your favourite DJ?" Such questions show that you are valuing their lives as they are, and are interested in helping extend these interests as fuel for their creative projects.

Sometimes the less able and angry young people aren't very verbal, and are less likely to tell you what they are interested in, so quiet observation can be used to help make suggestions – for example, "I see you arrive on a skateboard every day; would you like to work with skateboard culture as a focus of your project?" If students are involved in the planning of their own learning, and use their own ideas and interests to help negotiate the outcome, they are much more likely to take responsibility for completing the project.

During the 1980s I taught in the Community Studies Department at Nelson Polytechnic, designing and teaching music night classes.[15] These "Making Music" courses were for people who were learning to play an instrument and wanted the experience of playing with other people. I taught simple improvisation skills, starting with twelve-bar blues. The blues provided a secure framework for experimentation to take place.

The purpose of the class was that everybody would learn to play together. Most people had the idea that improvisation was a difficult and special thing for which you need an "ear;" however, it is a skill based on some simple rules. These classes were very exciting, based on demystifying the complexity of musical rules and deciding which ones we needed to use to start playing. The class composed songs as a whole and also within smaller groups and duos. Class members also experienced easy first success, which had a positive impact on motivation. The participants were highly energised by using their own material, based on their own experiences.

All the studio-based projects that my current students are engaged with require some self-directed learning – so it is essential that they engage fully with the project, or their interest falls away when there is an expectation of self-direction. Sandra Adams, a lecturer in design at Otago Polytechnic, undertook a study of first-year design students and their experiences of self-directed learning in the design studio at Unitec (Auckland, 2000). One of the students she interviewed discussed the feeling of excitement in having the freedom to choose their own project:

> [When the tutor said] … "just do what you want" …That was the best environment I did my work in. … that I could actually run with my ideas. I definitely produced the most work in that brief. … I was interested about it; was passionate about it. It wasn't boring or hard work.[16]

I think that students need to feel that they are running with their own ideas in their projects. Clearly, briefs need to have certain parameters, but they also need to be flexible enough so that students can relate to the project and find a link to their own interests, skills and passions.[17] I usually offer several choices in a project brief, but also state: "If you have another idea, please negotiate it with me." For example, the Level 4 drawing identity project can be presented within a range of six media or have a negotiated final outcome.

Some students feel panicked by too much choice and want to be told what to do, and so for them to work within set guidelines makes them feel secure enough to relax and experiment. To "just do what you want" is a nightmare for some and a freedom for others. Offering some flexibility between a list of options and a negotiated project can be a solution.[18] [19]

DELIVERING A HIGH-ENERGY WORKSHOP TO KICK-START A NEW PROJECT

The first day of a new project is a vital time to engage students' interest and understanding. I have been trying approaches that attempt to synthesise the conceptual and practical concerns of the project in an easy-to-understand and energising activity.

I have been experimenting with presenting new material in a way that all learning styles are catered for, and hands-on learning is related to the theoretical and/or conceptual concerns of the project. In a traditional lecture-style presentation using PowerPoint or slide presentation, auditory and visual learners will take in some information, but kinaesthetic learners will largely miss out on accessing the material unless it includes or is followed very rapidly with a physical activity which will help cement learning.

One strategy that appears to work is to build in an early period of non-assessed fun activity, which includes a hands-on learning experience. A useful spin-off in using a non-assessed activity is that it reduces performance anxiety, which in turn has a positive affect on receptivity to new ideas. An example would be an energetically presented lecture with relevant images and a practical demonstration, immediately followed by workshop activity to cement the learning.

I will give an example of this type of learning presentation that I used recently with my creative studies studio class. The group was being introduced to the notion of assemblage. In the lecture, I showed simple pivotal examples, e.g., Picasso's bull's head made from a bicycle seat and handlebars, contemporary examples from Jim Cooper, and an example of my own work which I bought in for the class to see and touch. As part of the lecture, I tore around the room collecting items and maniacally made an assemblage while discussing its essential elements. I then released students to "mine" the surrounding area for materials. They then worked in small groups to create an assemblage of found objects.

I have just taught this paper for the third time and have found that this combination of passionate and active explanation followed *immediately* by a time of non-assessed experimentation can really help in cementing an understanding of a new concept and/or aesthetic style.

When I took on the role, I realised that the students who attended that first session were, without fail, those who made work reflecting a deeper understanding of the concepts of assemblage. They consistently produced work that was strong compositionally. The source objects were used to produce a new whole that reflected an understanding that the histories of the component parts have to be acknowledged as part of the final work.

I have now finished marking this project and have found that a small group of students failed to make works reflecting an understanding of assemblage. These students had not attended the first lecture/workshop. Those who missed the first day of the project for genuine reasons were given "catch-up" sessions. These included some one-to-one time with a lecturer to access the initial lecture material and images. After I had completed the assessment I realised that, despite the catch-up sessions, they still hadn't connected with the project. This made me realise that the hands-on act of making that followed the lecture appeared to be the time when learning was cemented.[20]

Kinaesthetic learners learn primarily from touch, taste and smell.[21] They learn from engaging in activities where they are moving and using their senses. It would appear that many students who are involved in studio-based art and design courses are primarily makers, and are comfortable cementing links between theory and practice by making. I have also used this concept in my work in theory tutorials with first-year art school students.

USING ACTION TO WORK WITH THEORETICAL CONCERNS

I taught art history and theory tutorials for Level 5 students for several years. During this time, I found that working with action really helped students of varying abilities and cultures to understand and implement theoretical concepts. My memory of art history and theory tutorials as a first-year student was of working word-by-word through dense texts to try and understand them. I found this process unrewarding and frustrating because, in my opinion, this working method was delivered too early in the programme, before the class had a basic understanding of the theoretical concepts underpinning the texts.

Using action learning to address theoretical concepts is an alternative approach that works well in helping students alter an often-held negative mindset regarding academic work. Often I hear students ask, "What's the point of all this?" with regard to theory. It is important to be clear about the reasons for learning new concepts by showing how they can be applied. Energy levels rise when the purpose is clear. Using action helps students get a basic grounding in concepts that may later be further explored through more traditional means at higher levels. Action learning can be used in conjunction with written and oral explanations to ensure that this information can be accessible to all

students, whatever their learning style. However, it appears to be a particularly valuable tool to use with students for whom reading is a difficulty.

Here is an example of action learning I facilitated as part of a workshop on poststructuralism for Level 5 students. I wanted the students to understand that poststructuralism is concerned with a plurality of world views containing no single over-arching philosophy. The notion that energising and ongoing debate takes place on the fringes rather than in a centre of power was important as part of this learning. I asked the students to bring with them a variety of images and texts relating to their current projects. We also added news items and images relating to current popular culture to help spark a dialogue. We installed these around all the walls and included signs containing concepts from various social theorists and philosophers.

I then introduced them to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome.[22] They use the term "rhizome" to describe a horizontal model of theory and research that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points, giving rise to the possibility for connections to take place anywhere and between anything. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they opposed it to an arborescent (tree-like) conception of knowledge, which works with vertical and linear connections.[23] "The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers …The rhizome includes the best and the worst: potato and couch grass, or the weed."[24]

Having introduced this concept, I then supplied the class with a huge ball of red string to make connections between the images, texts, signs and ideas. They were not allowed to cut the string, cementing the idea that the connections were to be continuous rather than separate links. The room became a dense myriad of threads that then moved down the hall and into various other spaces.

When the string ran out, we looked at the composition of the rhizome and saw that there were many dense points of intersection where a myriad of threads overlapped. The students could see that all these "intersections" were formed around the edges of the room, and there was no major centre of power. By using physical action, the students could grasp a basic understanding of how the rhizome concept could be applied to further their understanding of poststructuralism. Although this workshop was particularly useful to kinaesthetic learners because of the hands-on approach, the rhizome workshop also catered for visual learners because it functioned as a 3D diagram. There was also plenty of discussion and debate.

Once students have gained some understanding of theoretical concepts in an accessible way, it is so much easier to help them synthesise the theoretical and practical components of their projects.[25]

CONCLUSION

I have presented a series of studio learning vignettes to focus on some strategies that I use to help energise students in the classroom and shared studio. An awareness of different learning styles is an important factor to help all students connect to material presented, but is by no means a complete solution. It is vital to help generate and maintain a feeling of community within the shared studio to promote a relaxed, enjoyable and safe site for all types of learning to take place. Maintaining this positive happy studio atmosphere allows students with low self-esteem to feel supported enough by their peers and lecturers to start opening up to learning by taking risks. A tense work environment will not be conducive to learning, even if all learning styles are taken into consideration. To create a studio culture that is accepting of different abilities and levels of confidence will open up opportunities for all members to be fully immersed in their projects and open to learning from varied sources including presentations, critique and debate.

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1 RL Allwright, "Why Don't Learners Learn What Teachers Teach? The Interaction Hypothesis," in *Language Learning in Formal and Informal Contexts,* eds DM Singleton and D Little (Dublin: Irish Association for Applied Linguistics 1984), 3.

2 MS Knowles, *Informal Adult Education* (New York: Association Press, 1950).

3 Richard Felder and Linda Silverman, "Learning and Teaching Styles in Engineering Education," *Engineering Education*, 78:7 (1988), 674-81.

4 Ibid.

5 See Neil D Fleming and Charles C Bonwell, *VARK: A Guide to Learning Styles*, 2007, http://www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp, accessed 5 June 2007. In the most recent version of VARK sourced for this paper, copyright was held by Flemming and Bonwell, although the read/write category is first attributed to Flemming and Mills in 1992.

6 Felder and Silverman, "Learning and Teaching Styles."

7 GCTLT graduate profile (No. 1).

8 Allwright, "Why Don't Learners Learn."

9 GCTLT graduate profile (No. 4). An example of a flexible delivery mode that does not conform to the standard classroom learning environment.

10 R James and C McInnis, *First Year on Campus: Diversity in the Initial Experiences of Australian Undergraduates* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995).

11 GCTLT graduate profile (No. 3). This is an example of a culture-sensitive approach which is reinforced by teaching methods, projects and a picnic day.

12 V McGivney, *Education for Other People*, 1990, www.niace.org.uk, accessed 25 May 2007.

V McGivney, *Fixing or Changing the Pattern*, 2001, www.niace.org.uk, accessed 25 May 2007.

13 R Lloyd and F O'Sullivan, *Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled. A Methodology for Developing a Guidance Document*, 2003, www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/WP8(2).pdf, accessed 19 May 2007.

14 Kathryn James and Christine Nightingale, *Self-esteem, Confidence and Adult Learning*, 2005, www.niace.org.uk/Research/HDE/Documents/Self-esteem-confidence.pdf, accessed 3 June 2007.

15 Now NMIT.

16 Sandra Adams, "Students' Experience of Self Directed Learning in the First Year Design Studio," Unpub. Masters diss. (Massey University, 2001).

17 GCTLT graduate profile (No. 2). For students to progress from surface to deep learning they have to connect with the meaning of a concept and relate it to their project (their ideas or world view). Ideas have to be understood and applied to transfer to deeper learning.

18 GCTLT graduate profile (No. 4). another example of flexible delivery.

19 GCTLT graduate profile (No. 7).

20 Another example of the progression from surface to deep learning; this time the learning was deepened by using a combination of learning styles which reinforced understanding. GCTLT graduate profile (Nos 1 and 2).

21 Felder and Silvermann, "Learning and Teaching Styles."

22 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 6.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 6-7.

25 The rhizome workshop was an example of strategic learning. My strategy was for the class to gain a better understanding of poststructuralism by taking part in an energising hands-on workshop. I also wanted this understanding to go beyond surface learning so that it could be deepened further through application to their own projects.