

Attack of the Mind-Snatchers: Towards Strategically Decreasing Learning Viruses in the Classroom for Future Career Success of Students and Instructors

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This article focuses on the current societal, higher education, and personal environments, that may be responsible for challenging attitudes and behaviors experienced in the classroom. Strategic management and self-leadership literature, as well as actual college students' ideas are distilled to serve as the foundation of this article. This information provides a useful framework and prescription for developing and sustaining a nourishing and healthy classroom environment. Consequently, both higher education instructors' and students' careers should benefit from this unique perspective, as well as higher education institutions and society-at-large.

INTRODUCTION

Bringing higher education classrooms into the 21st century has become harder than expected for many instructors, given the complexity and pace of change in society (Wallis & Steptoe, 2006; Kao & Mao, 2011). Furthermore, these changes have been compounded by disturbing human reaction to these changes and the subsequent actions taken. Consequently, not only have instructors had to personally adapt to societal changes and make curriculum changes, for example, they have also become increasingly challenged by new types of “mind-snatcher” attitudes and behavior (viruses) being brought into in the classroom, daily, by themselves and their students, that can be destructive to a learning environment, increase the weariness of instructors, and jeopardize future careers of all classroom participants.

The above situation calls for increased attention in the classroom to both intellectual content and social context by instructors. If social context is ignored for the sake of intellectual content, the classroom environment becomes a hostile and distressing place for all class participants, impeding learning opportunities. On the other hand, if a decision is made to care about both classroom content and context, this can result in a nourishing and sustainable classroom setting for all classroom participants' learning and future wellbeing. Therefore, this article focuses on improving the social context of the higher education classroom in the current environment.

What is a Learning Virus?

Similar to “something that poisons the mind or soul,” and “a disease or illness caused by a virus,” (Merriam-Webster, 2014) “Attack of the mind-snatcher” will be used as a metaphor for causal agents that can increase the obstacles to creating and sustaining a productive learning environment in the classroom. It is assumed that the greater the number of learning viruses that exist in a classroom, the more the

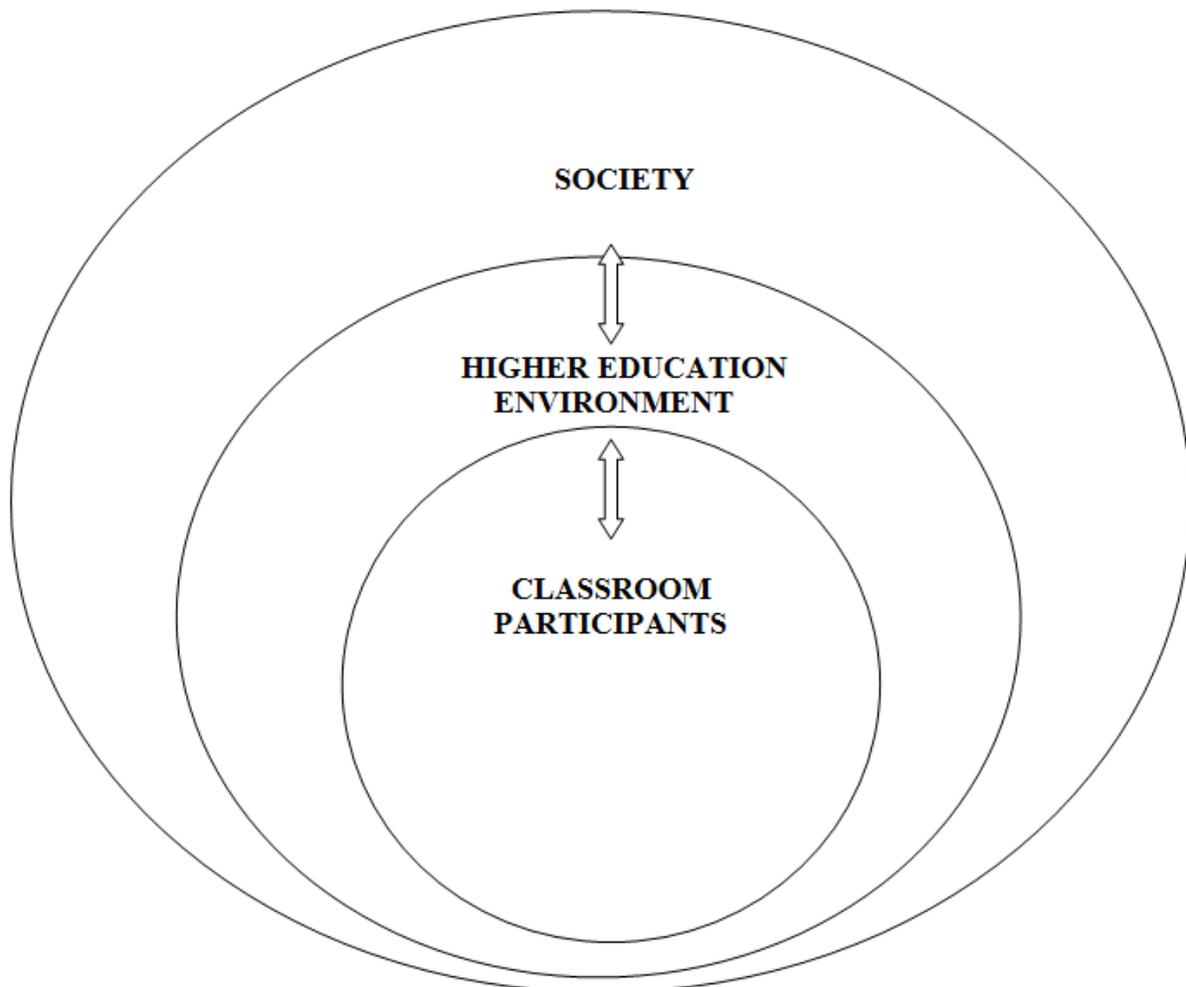
classroom environment becomes toxic to teach in, and useful knowledge being shared can become sabotaged and/or neglected.

As a learning virus spreads in a classroom, the more people it can infect, and the more powerful it can be, ultimately becoming an epidemic if not stopped. If instructors and students know what learning viruses are, they can choose to work on building up immunities to existing and potential learning viruses.

Potential Sources of Learning Viruses and Their Symptoms

There are multiple types of learning viruses that can exist in a classroom. Taking a holistic perspective reveals that learning virus sources may include society, the higher education environment, and the classroom participants' themselves.

**FIGURE 1
A HOLISTIC VIEW OF THE POTENTIAL SOURCES OF LEARNING VIRUSES FOR A CLASSROOM**



Society

The global economy and worldwide recession have changed many livelihoods, increased student loan and interest amounts, and reduced chances for finding higher paying jobs upon graduation. These types of

activities can lead to stress, financial loss, and relationship problems (Burzan, 2014). An increase in consumerism and mobilization reveals that many people have a high money/object drive, evade responsibilities, and ignore societal problems, through such ways as increased prescription and sleep aid use, digital toy playing/online gaming, legalizing pot smoking, gambling, and online infidelity, for instance. Distortions in thinking and strange behavior have also occurred from these types of activities (McCabe, 2014; Denhart, 2013; Gustafson, 2013; Blum, 2011; Bloomberg Businessweek, 2013; Jaret & Hogan, 2014; Kolhatkar, 2011).

It is suggested that “technology isn’t just changing how we live, it’s changing us” (Rosenwald, 2011). For example, the Internet allows people to do more in less time, increasing multitasking. Our gadgets contain not only data but also emotions and identity. Human contact is filtered and minimized. The Internet has become a cheap form of entertainment. People are becoming addicted to social media, videos, apps, and social networking. They do more work in less time on the Internet, but they do not produce more. Robots are even being trained to do social tasks for people. Furthermore, digital abuses, including cyberbullying and data breaching on a massive scale is being engaged in by younger generations (Kenny, Flaherty, 2013; Cheng, 2014). Pressures to get a lot done, conform, globally, and act anonymously, seem to be leading to a herd mentality, causing reductions in individualism, creativity, and sensitivity (American Funds, 2012; Ratnesar, 2011; Bennett, 2013).

A generation of “helicopter parenting” is also in progress, not teaching kids to develop their own belief systems or have the courage to stick it out. This is extending adolescence, developing neurotic behaviors, and increasing the use of anti-depressant medication. For example, many people are not able to handle autonomy or develop life coping competencies in their twenties and thirties (Donatone, 2013). These trends seem to be rewarding attitudes and behaviors, whose outcomes include more impatience, self-centeredness, entitlement, and complaints.

Family structure, relationships, and gender behavior are also becoming more complex and challenging to manage, leading to emotional disruption in people, as an underlying conflict emerges between individuation and generativity, (i.e., concern for the welfare of others) (Castelloe, 2011). In some cases, because of emotional disruption, due to increasing family disconnects, the adolescent society is constructing its own social and material worlds more easily, spending less time with adults and filling in the dead spots in days with technology and the voices of peers and “the logic of word of mouth (Gladwell, 2002).” These ideas also seem to be added pressures that can lead to a troubling deficit in people’s outlooks on life and living.

**TABLE 1
SOCIETY**

LEARNING VIRUS EXAMPLES

CAUSE	SYMPTOM
Global economy and recession	Financial stress and loss
Consumerism	High money/object drive
Internet	Multi-tasking and reduced sensitivity
Social Media	Herd mentality
Helicopter Parenting	Increased medication use and self-centeredness
Modern Relationships	Family disconnects

Higher Education Environment

Role

Education in Latin means “to lead forth.” Higher education institutions are currently operating in an environment where many debates are going on about the right direction for education. One debate is over

the relative value of learning life-long learning skills versus career and professional skills. Another debate in higher education is whether to help individuals learn to construct their own realities, where everyone has his/her own reality, or to continue to transmit an objective and culturally sanctioned body of knowledge, created made for a comprehensible world.

A third debate is whether college is really worth the money spent anymore because certain prominent entrepreneurs in business, are doing well without it and it costs so much. Conflicting views of higher education, such as these, may reduce the importance of objectivity and factuality in learning, making it even more challenging for higher education instructors to lead their classrooms in sustainable ways (Korn, 2013; Arnn, 2013; Kamenetz, 2013)

Pedagogy

Higher education instructors spend much time and effort helping students to navigate career ideas and analyze career moves to make but many do not think about making their own careers better, increasing a sense of deep worth and value of their own careers, as well as exuding passion about learning to their own students, especially if they have been in their faculty profession for many years (Brower, 2013). Furthermore, just training students in career preparation and process may lead to students not learning how to think objectively and factually about the right way for people to live, and what is just and unjust in nature, overall (Arnn, 2013).

Another pedagogy that higher education instructors may be inducing in the classroom is a “set-to-fail” dynamic, similarly found in workplaces, in which students perceived to be mediocre or weak performers stay at the low expectations their instructors have for them. This can be attributed to such actions as heightened attention to the student by the instructor, instructor/student compatibility issues, and students doubting their own thinking and ability, resulting in lost motivation to make autonomous or take any actions on their own. The worst case scenario may be increased instructor intervention and scrutiny, paralyzing both the student and the instructor’s productivity, due to a vicious cycle, with relationships spiraling downward and nothing being done to prevent or stop this from happening by the instructor (Manzoni & Barsoux, 1998).

Attendees

More students are entering college with significant mental health issues than ever before. Depression is a major leading cause for students failing to complete their college educations. One out of four college freshmen suffers from some form of depression, and there are approximately over one thousand suicides that occur at colleges each year. Counselors see students who experience such conditions as: homesickness, roommate problems, family problems, social anxiety, substance abuse and addiction issues, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexual and physical traumas, psychoses, death and dying, and relationship issues.

Reduced concentration, attention span, and motivation can result from increased anxiety, stress, and depression in students. This decreases their ability and energy to work hard in the classroom. Outcomes can include: Missing classes, crying, anger, irritability, sudden social withdrawal, changes in academic performance, class participation, and appearance. Yet, many students struggle with emotional crises without the benefit of counseling, due to old attitudes and stigmas associated with counseling, demanding class schedules, or not being informed about counseling services (Bowman, 2012). These reasons for problems in the classroom may not be adequately paid attention to by instructors.

Peer Pressure

In a higher education setting, individuals interacting and becoming inter-dependent upon one another form informal groups. These interest and friendship groups are in response to social contact. They can deeply affect attitude and performance of individuals through the types of interactions they have with one another. Group norms related to appearance and socialization influence individuals and can serve to control them in ways that may be adverse to learning (Robbins, 2009). Some people convincingly argue that peer influence and community influence are more important than family influence in determining

how people turn out. In fact, ritualized, dramatic, and self-destructive behavior (e.g., smoking, binge drinking, suicide, etc.) can have extraordinary contagious power (Gladwell, 2002).

When students conform to the expectations of their peers, there can be under-miners who negatively influence them. Others might include: Attention getters, dictators, idea assassins, obstructionists, loafers, and wet blankets, who can lead to discourage and damage the best intentions of students who are pursuing higher education goals (Rigie & Harmeyer, 2013).

TABLE 2
HIGHER EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT
LEARNING VIRUS EXAMPLES

CAUSE	SYMPTOM
Debates	Reduced objectivity and factuality
Pedagogy	Lost productivity
Attendees	Mental illness
Peer Pressure	Destructive behaviors

Classroom Participants

Disposition

Many students do not give themselves time and attention (Bradshaw, 1988). Higher education instructors assume students have a disposition to be successful but many students are unaware of their own disposition, lack the disposition to be successful, or do not know how to take action to positively impact their learning outcome. In fact, students may not know that habits of thinking, such as taking initiative, having diligence, being responsible, or having determination, can influence their successful actions and behaviors in the classroom and elsewhere (Barnes & Filer, 2012).

Traits

Personality traits of students may be underdeveloped or not conducive to productivity in the classroom. For instance, low levels of the following: discipline, self-confidence, adaptability, self-awareness, judgment, stress tolerance, work ethic, adaptability, time management, positive thinking, motivation, energy, interest, creativity, passion, good habits, and individuality. Hysterical outbreaks in the classroom can be related to symptoms of underlying anxieties associated with these low levels (Gladwell, 2002).

Values

Defining themselves through money and power is consuming and burning people out. A high level of competitiveness and the “embracement of overachieving” seem to be current trends in getting a college degree, rather than work on well-being, wisdom, and giving back, according to Arianna Huffington. (Huotari, 2013).

TABLE 3
CLASSROOM PARTICIPANTS
LEARNING VIRUS EXAMPLES

CAUSE	SYMPTOM
Ignored disposition	Bad habits
Undeveloped traits	Low self-control
Money / Power values	Embracement of over-achievement

Students’ Actual Perceptions of What Inhibits the Learning Environment

Recently, an opportunity existed to ask sixty junior and senior business students at a private university what their views were on the following ideas: (1) What is your definition of unproductive classroom attitude/behavior? (2) What are the societal, college, and personal factors that lead to unproductive classroom attitude/behavior? (3) Who do you think exemplifies productive attitudes/behavior in business? (4) Who do you think does not exhibit productive attitudes/behavior in business? (5) Why should a student engage in productive classroom attitude/behavior? (Hawaii Pacific University Student Surveys, December 6, 2013).

Remarkably, although the students had answers to all of these questions, some of the students still self-sabotaged themselves and ended up with lower grades than if they had followed their own knowledge and advice. These students, however, either did not attend class regularly, or knew that they had attitudes and behaviors to continue to work on, after the semester was over. Distilling the information provided by these students led to the ideas found in Table 4:

**TABLE 4
ACTUAL STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

Unproductive Classroom Attitude/Behavior Examples

<i>Low Degree</i>	<i>Medium Degree</i>	<i>High Degree</i>
Procrastination	Making promises and not keeping them	Always late
Sloppy mistakes	Causing group members’ stress	Work excuses
Not 100% ready	Not being structured / disciplined	Unhealthy habits

Factors Related to Unproductive Attitudes/Behavior Examples

<i>Society</i>	<i>College</i>	<i>Personal</i>
Pop culture	Glorified partying	Upbringing
Social media role models / values	Desire to be accepted	Insecurities
Cultural expectations	Focus on grades; not knowledge	Personality

Unproductive / Productive Business Examples

Blockbuster	Apple
Enron	Google
WorldComm	Costco
Dennys	Starbucks

Reasons for Productive Classroom Attitudes / Behaviors

Operate independently for self sufficiency
Showcase different assets for a competitive advantage
Get better jobs and promotions
Stay up-to-date with new trends in a changing society
Be a better person and differentiate from others
Find success and happiness in life

The Need to Decrease the Potential for Learning Viruses to Spread in the Classroom

Today, many higher education instructors are feeling higher levels of tension and stress in their jobs because they are facing students who are making them doubt themselves and their abilities to teach effectively in the classroom. They wonder what they may be doing wrong, when, in fact, they may be unfamiliar with or untrained in understanding the existing character of their students. For instance, their students may appear promising, but still have learning viruses that lead to disappointing attitudes and behavior in the classroom. For example, some students may be able to start something but not be able to finish it; they may be judgmental or opinionated and show no compassion; or they don't consider the consequences of their actions or follow-through with their promises (Cloud & Townsend, 1995).

In other situations, students may be addictive to using technology in the classroom, which is reducing their chances for career success, because they don't multitask well, write down less information, recall less information, and perform worse than other students who are not addicted to technology (Weimer, 2014). Increasing insights about potential learning viruses, as well as attacking learning viruses with new ideas, intervention, and introspection, at the instructor and student levels, should aid in enhancing the social context of a classroom, by promoting a healthy and nourishing classroom environment.

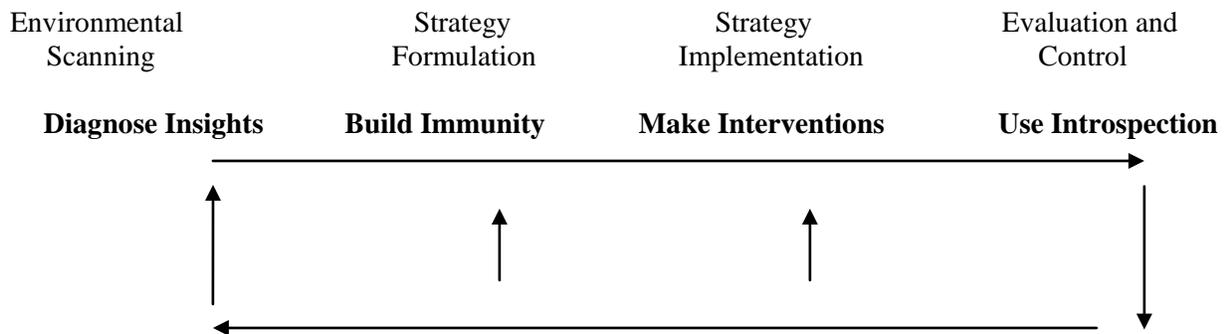
BUILDING LEARNING VIRUS IMMUNITY FOR A HEALTHY CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT: A STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT APPROACH

Just as a person can get cold or flu viruses from having a weak immune system, a classroom can also become susceptible to catching learning viruses, unless it has a strong immune system in place, in order to protect and defend it against these viruses. Higher education instructors, who care about the social context of the classroom, can use the strategic management process to boost, not only their own immunity from learning viruses, but also to help their students to do so too.

What is Strategic Management?

The strategic management process, used by successful learning organizations to achieve and sustain a competitive edge, is an idea that can also enable higher education instructors and business students to be more proactive in reducing the potential of learning viruses, through practicing self-examination and experimentation in a classroom setting (Wheelen & Hunger, 2010). The strategic management process is a systematic and dynamic process which is composed of the following steps, not necessarily taken as a step-by-step approach: (1) Environmental scanning (Insights), (2) Strategy formulation (Immunity), (3) Strategy Implementation (Intervention), and (4) Evaluation and Control (Introspection).

FIGURE 2
THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PROCESS



The strategic management process is a continuous process that highlights what one "should do" strategically, not just what one can do to enhance future personal and professional success (Thompson et.

al, 2014). If higher education instructors and students can learn to understand how they shape their own attitudes and behaviors, they should be able to develop the ability to modify their thinking, to reduce the impact of potential learning viruses in the classroom.

In the following section, each step of the strategic management process will be referred to, below, in order to enhance the understanding of its connection with reducing learning viruses and boosting immunity in a classroom environment setting.

Environmental Scanning: Diagnose Insights

Gaining the “street smarts” to know what is happening in society and how it might be giving him/her learning viruses is important. A person needs to make the decision to rehabilitate himself/herself if he/she believes that they have symptoms of learning viruses. Becoming his/her own doctor and learning the origin/duration of learning virus conditions can enable a person to take a “holistic” perspective in determining what is important to consider or not consider in shaping the direction that he/she wants to pursue. It is at this stage that one considers the opportunities and threats from the external environment that are facing him/her, and matches them to his/her authentic strengths and weaknesses, in order to get a realistic assessment of the learning virus situation. For people who want to reduce their harmful learning virus exposure, they need to change their thinking and see that cures involve intention and attention to the details of the self. They need to bring their beliefs and self-perceptions in line with their behavior (Sichel, 2008). Having resilience, tenacity, and perseverance, at this stage, are the values that will lead most people to find cures for their learning viruses. (Harvard Business Review, 2005)

Strategy Formulation: Build Immunity

Acknowledging that both attitude and behavioral choices are made by an individual, will lead to getting a grip over certain mental and physical tendencies that tell a person what he/she will/will not experience and what he/she will/will not accomplish. He/she must consider how the external and internal environments offer a conscientious assessment of what he/she should /should not be doing to achieve and sustain a sense of purpose and self-satisfaction in the classroom environment. Contingency planning can also be helpful in building defenses against current and future learning viruses.

Strategy Implementation: Make Interventions

People always act on their personal choices, despite facing challenges, having to make sacrifices, take on unattractive tasks, etc...as long as they achieve their desires. If he/she recognizes that he/she is always a self-starter, no matter what, he / she will be able to consider the choices that are beneficial to his/her learning values and to others in the long run. He/she is also able to control his/her attitudes/behaviors and to use self-rewards to sustain his/her healthy and nourishing choices, in order to reduce the impact of learning viruses on himself / herself and their spreading to others (Manz & Neck, 2010).

Evaluation and Control: Use Introspection

Sensitive people who consider the consequences of their choices and the impacts of their choices on the classroom environment, are able to improve and sustain their most productive learning attitudes and behaviors, and to work on the elimination of existing and potential learning viruses. Self-assessment, at this stage, consists of examining the current impact of learning viruses on a person’s attitudes and behavior, before engaging in the environmental scanning stage. The astuteness of a person can improve if he/she gets into the habit of using the strategic management process as a systematic and dynamic approach to building immunity from learning viruses in the classroom.

APPLYING A STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT APPROACH TO LEARNING VIRUSES: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

The impetus to attempt and sustain a virus-free classroom environment must be encouraged through education and its reinforcement in the classroom. Using a strategic management perspective, a college student must first want to reduce his/her potential to catch learning viruses, be educated about this idea, and then become actively encouraged and supported to engage in it through higher education instructors' beliefs and action. The following ideas are offered as examples of ways in which to make this process happen in the social context of a classroom environment.

Students Managing Learning Viruses

Diagnose Insights

College students have to know that they want an education and be intellectually adventurous, in order to be open to the learning virus concept. Therefore, if they are, they can reduce their erroneous attitudes and increase their knowledge to engage in productive behaviors and have competencies (Parry, 1998). This means being open to learning virus concepts and learning how to strategically manage themselves in the classroom to increase their immunity.

Building Immunity

Personal introspection can be mixed with calculated action, combining idealism with realism. Then, from a position of strength, students can determine what their moral identity is (Badaracco, Jr., 1998). For example, students can consciously commit to seeing course materials as exercise machines and instructors as personal trainers who will help them to build their immunity against learning viruses. The more mental exercises they do, the more their gray matter will develop into well-toned mental muscle and fight learning viruses (Mills, 2001).

Becoming a self-directed learner includes becoming a thinker and a goal setter. Making a self-assessment (strengths and weaknesses, values, emotions, skills, empathy, able to get out of a comfort zone, etc.) and setting goals that make personal sense, reduces the need to make excuses. Students need to see themselves as who they want to be as already being here. Then, they can start actualizing what they want to be, growing up in the process (Dyer, 2009).

Make Interventions

In the process of building learning virus immunities, students need to be able to fill-in childhood gaps, view bad experiences as stepping stones, get counseling, and use any support services that are available to them, so that they develop humility, own themselves, and build their character. Learning to love themselves, by telling themselves the truth and being more responsible for their own life, will help them to figure out what responsibilities and values they have that are in conflict with society and to see what they ultimately care about. (Pauley, 2013; Cloud & Townsend, 1995). Also, if students can jump into ready-made learning communities, they will focus on the process of learning. This makes them independent learners, which gives them flexibility and ability to learn on the job, which is increasingly important in the workplace (Kamenetz, 2013).

Use Introspection

Learning to unplug and recharge, and finding the inner strength to trust that what they are doing is right and will work out, comes from evaluating where they currently are in life and if it is where they want to be (Talevich, 2012). Students' personal worth can increase from esteeming themselves (Shriver, 2014). This could happen through setting personal boundaries, knowing they affect others positively, and giving themselves intrinsic rewards for self-validation, for instance (Herzberg, 1988).

Higher Education Instructors Managing Learning Viruses

Diagnose Insights

Higher education instructors need to look at the facts from society and the higher education environment. Then, they need to draw on their past experiences, and scan resources for ideas that work to reduce unproductive attitudes and behaviors in the classroom. If they learn about the origin and duration of learning viruses before they go further, they can address learning viruses and go further in creating a nourishing and healthy classroom environment.

Build Immunity

Higher education instructors must be able to align their life work with their personal values, so that they can make the appropriate choices to create classroom environments that they are proud of and that encourage the well-being of all (Covey, 1989). Engaging in self-discovery activities (reading, exploring, curriculum re-design, etc...) can increase the alignment between instructors' work and values, and become facilitators of healing students through confrontations in humility. (Brower, 2013) Making sure that students' safety and support needs are met, increases the chances of students finding curiosity and satisfaction in learning (Battista & Ruble, 2014).

Being able to address students' dispositions and helping them to develop more successful dispositions requires having a personal mission to do so (Barnes & Filer, 2012). Using positive psychology in the classroom and infecting students with a "can and will do" attitude helps students to find meaning in their learning and stay the course (Maddux, 2000).

Make Interventions

A higher education instructor can provide early guidance in avoiding learning viruses and be actively involved with students at first, and then gradually reduce their involvement, based on improved student performance (*Harvard Business Review*, 1999). Not shielding students from every consequence, talking about expectations, and respecting their own ability to solve their own problems, should convince students that what happens in the classroom is similar to what happens in the workplace. (Donatone, 2013)

Developing a curriculum that emphasizes identity building, based on objectivity and reality, enables students to strengthen their personal and professional skills which will help them to build their self-esteem (Hernandez-Soria, 2013). At the same time, being a role model, making learning virus messages memorable, and going the extra mile with difficult students, can create "defining moments" that build character and a growth mindset, as well as not being an enabler, by cracking down and stepping up the enforcement of rules and standards in the classroom (Badaracco, Jr., 1998; Gladwell, 2002; Weimer, 2013; Cloud & Townsend, 1995).

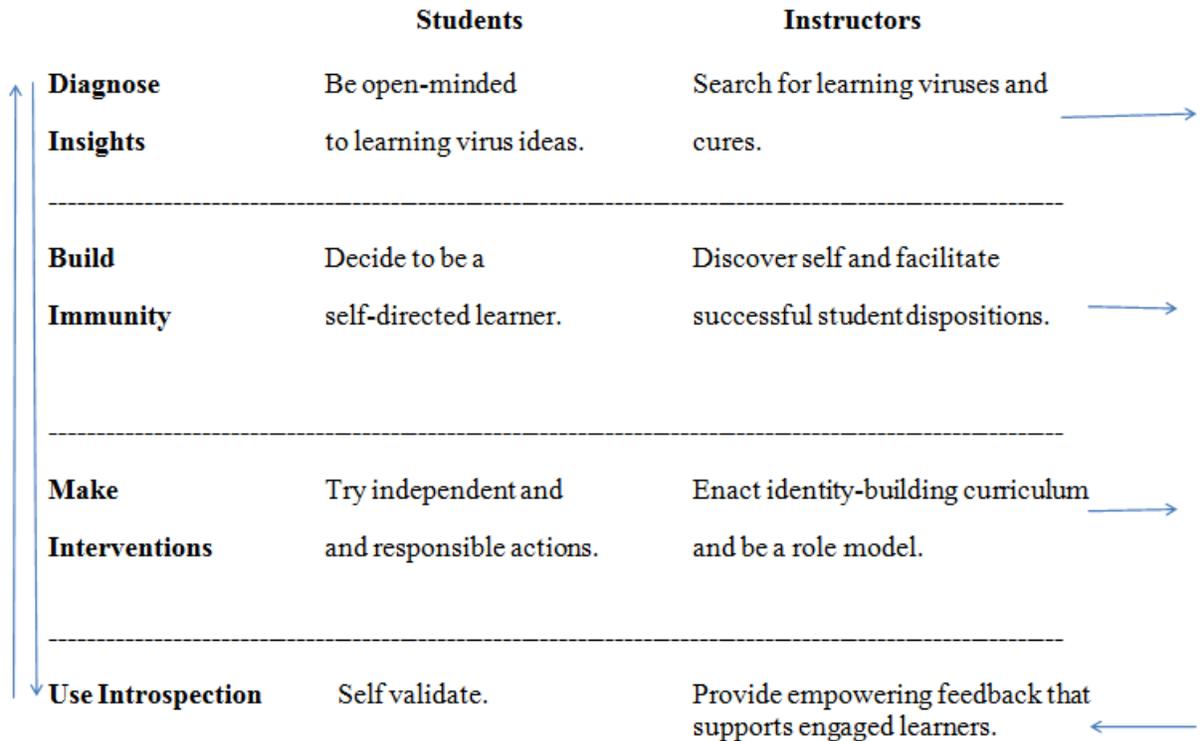
Use Introspection

Higher education instructors who monitor their own reasoning and challenge their own assumptions about low performing students, for example, are in a better position to give helpful feedback to students (Ventrice, 2009). This feedback enables students to move from being reluctant to engaged learners. Once students are engaged in learning, they can also take more control over their own learning through personal reflection exercises. This can be augmented by empowering students to find materials that they can use to show them how to improve. For instance, if they look at successful people's biographies (e.g., Thomas Edison, Walt Disney, Steve Jobs) and see how their failures were turned into successes (Lock, 2011). Instructors can also help students to reflect on the differences between engaging in classroom activities (note taking) with distractions (like texting) and without (Weimer, 2014).

If students can gain a sense of autonomy and see the relevance of their experiential classroom experiences to their chosen careers, they should become less susceptible to being underachievers and having a lack of motivation in the classroom (D-Abate, Youndt, Wenzel, 2009). Finally, they will use the "word of mouth" to encourage others to take these types of classes, as their self-esteem builds, because

they now have the courage to take the initiative that they may not have had before, for instance (Gladwell, 2002).

**FIGURE 3
STRATEGICALLY MANAGING LEARNING VIRUSES:
A SHARED AND CONTINUOUS RESPONSIBILITY**



CONCLUSION

Today, our society is filled with trends, events, and forces that have the potential to impede higher education classroom environments. As higher education instructors, we have a responsibility to make sure that we educate students to go forth and help society to be more productive and positive. These educated students, ideally, would be honorable, compassionate, empathetic, and generous (Stoddard, 2007). However, learning viruses are preventing many students in achieving this potential; therefore, not helping society to become any better. These learning viruses are also putting a tremendous strain on higher education instructors, thus reducing their potential impact and effectiveness in the social context of the classroom.

If we are to change this situation, higher education instructors and students, alike, must move towards sharing in this important responsibility. By increasing their defenses, combating, and strengthening their approaches to curing learning viruses, they will have the ability to create, engage and sustain a nourishing and healthy learning classroom environment. Furthermore, the strategic management process can be applied to both students and instructors, alike, to help them succeed in this endeavor. Finally, if a critical mass of higher education instructors and students work towards this goal, through their daily attitudes and behavior, this should help to improve the future career success of all.

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