

Active Learning and Generation Next Perceptions of Engagement and Motivation: An Attribution Theory Approach

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Many challenges face educators teaching Generation NeXters. These digital natives, may not be academically prepared, think “me first” and have issues with correct self-appraisal and esteem. However, many faculty members are digital immigrants using traditional passive teaching methods which generate low-level learning. Hence, there is a growing conversation in the academic literature around the topic of “flipped” classroom pedagogy and its role in improving student performance. Researchers found a positive correlation between “flipped” classroom pedagogy and student performance in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. Thus, we propose an examination of active versus passive learning strategies in the business education arena.

INTRODUCTION

There are many challenges facing educators as they grapple with teaching generation NeXt. Generation NeXters are digital natives who may not be academically prepared, tend to have a “me first” orientation, as well as issues with correct self-appraisal and esteem (Coates, 2007; Hersch & Merrow, 2005; Prensky, 2001a, 2001b; Taylor, 2005, 2007, 2010; Tapscott, 2009; Twenge, 2006). However, many faculty members are digital immigrants using traditional passive learning teaching methods that generate low-level learning and do not stimulate the new generation of learners (Taylor, 2010). Hence, there is a growing conversation in the academic literature around the topic of “flipped” classroom pedagogy and its role in improving student performance (Beichner, 2006). This pedagogy involves the notion of flipping the classroom where the course content is pushed outside of the classroom via reading assignments and other activities, while instructors spend class time on active learning activities to engage students (Beichner, 2006). Researchers found a positive correlation between “flipped” classroom pedagogy and student performance in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines. Thus, we propose an examination of active versus passive learning strategies in the business education arena. In addition the study will examine how student attributions correlate with their motivation and engagement in various learning environments.

Attribution Theory

Attribution is the process that individuals use to explain the causes of their behavior and events. These attributions can be of others or of self. For example, a professor sees a student make a mistake on an assignment can attribute that mistake to the student's lack of interest in the subject matter. On the other hand a professor sees a student make a mistake on an assignment can attribute the mistake to their own inability to convey information to the student. Most people engage in the attribution process unconsciously several times in a given day. Attribution theory suggests that individuals' attributions shape their emotional and behavioral responses (Weiner, 1985). Previous research suggests, three attribution styles: optimistic, pessimistic and hostile. People with an optimistic style tend to believe in their ability to succeed. Pessimistic styles tend to lack confidence in themselves and their ability to be successful. People with hostile attribution style tendencies believe that their failure can be attributed to an external "entity" (Douglas & Martinko, 2001). In addition to attribution styles, there are several motivational states associated with attributional tendencies: learned helplessness, aggression, empowerment and resilience. Learned helplessness is when people are passive and lack motivation to take action because of past failures which leads to the attribution of their inability to be successful as the task or action. Aggression, unlike learned helplessness, leads to actions but those actions tend to be negative. Empowerment is a motivational state in which an individual expects that their efforts to accomplish a given task will be positively rewarded in some way. Resilience is a motivational state in which an individual has an accurate view of themselves and their environment and make decisions to adapt and improvise to major changes that they may encounter (Coutu, 2002). In this paper, we propose that students' attribution styles will influence their perception of learning styles used in the classroom and thereby influence their motivation and engagement for academic success.

Active Learning

Active learning is a classroom environment where the instructor serves as a facilitator of learning or the "guide on the side" versus the traditional lecture method where the instructor is viewed as the "sage of the stage." Studies have shown that student-centered teaching can improve students' memory as well as raise their consciousness of communication strategies, which is a skill often overlooked and dismissed by Generation NeXt. It has further been suggested that Generation NeXters are natural born leaders. They "take an active approach to tasks" and "are willing to take risks". That said, Generation NeXt learners are likely to engage in the challenge to lead their fellow classmates.

Generation Next and Active Learning

Generation NeXt students are digital natives who constantly interface with technology. Traditional paper and pencil assignments are not always the best way to engage students with course materials. As such, a second approach to flipping the classroom is utilizing a learning system for the passive learning activities prior to class. In traditional classrooms, students come to class for lecture and then complete homework assignments. In traditional classrooms, students complete homework assignments outside of class and come to class for lecture. When learning systems, such as MyMarketingLab, are used in the active learning classroom, instructors are provided the opportunity to assign various types of assignments for students to complete prior to class. The instructor can then analyze student performance on course learning objectives prior to class to determine areas where students may need more assistance during the class session. Thus, the learning system assignments are used as the foundation for in-class activities.

Lastly, the average Generation NeXt student needs exposure to course material more than once before assimilation of that information occurs. Therefore, a third suggested active learning strategy entails engaging students through pre-class assigned reading. Typically, students rely on being exposed to or "spoon-fed" material in the traditional manner through course lecture. To initiate an active learning teaching style, we propose that in the class prior, several questions about the reading material are given to students to be answered for the next class session. In the following session, students work in pairs or groups to discuss their answers and explain their points of view. After their discussion, students are asked

to develop one additional question for the instructor to be addressed in an open forum. For the instructor, this reveals which concepts may warrant additional coverage.

Student Engagement

Student Involvement Theory defined involvement as, “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience.” (Astin, 1984, p. 308). The concept of student engagement has evolved from and heavily relies on this theory. Specifically, engagement is conceived as being related to the level of investment of oneself into a role, and tends to be predictive of task performance (Rich, Lepine & Crawford, 2010). In essence, as students become actively involved in the classroom, the energy they dedicate increases. Further, student engagement is thought to be a predictor of learning. (Burch et al., 2015). Like Astin (1984) engagement is proposed to occur on emotional, physical and cognitive levels. Thus we have hypothesized that:

H1a: In an active learning classroom environment, students who have a pessimistic attribution style are more likely to have greater engagement than in a passive learning environment.

H1b: In an active learning classroom environment, students who have a optimistic attribution style are more likely to have greater engagement than in a passive learning environment.

Student Motivation

Motivation may be defined simply as the factors that lead people to act in the manner as they do (Solomon, 2015). Students can be academically motivated for a varied number of reasons. For example, students may have made personal pledge to do well, they may like the subject and consider it important or perhaps they believe there is value in the activity (Young, 2005). In terms of students, Rothstein (1990) and Woolfork (1990) both describe motivation as not only the driving force behind learning goals but also the actions people choose to take to and the intensity with which these actions are undertaken to reach those learning goals. It is our contention that active classroom environments facilitate student motivation. Thus we have hypothesized that:

H2a: In an active learning classroom environment, optimistic students will experience greater motivation than in a passive learning classroom environment.

H2b: In an active learning classroom environment, pessimistic students will experience more motivation than in a passive learning environment.

CONCLUSION

In sum, Marketing educators are challenged with the need to balance engaging and motivating Generation NeXt learners in the classroom while meeting assessment requirements of accrediting organizations. This challenge must be addressed because flipping the traditional school paradigm upside down allows educators to create opportunities for Generation NeXters to learn in a new and remixed way. There is some research on active learning and student learning gains in the math and science disciplines. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence in the business education disciplines. We propose that an instructors’ active learning teaching style positively improves the classroom environment to increase student engagement as well as student learning in the business education arena.

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