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Introduction and Overview

TEACHER: What did you get out of the class?
STUDENT: I got an A.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps nothing frustrates college instructors more than when students forsake learning in the pursuit of grades and in the process fail to appreciate the power of learning for the sake of self-expression, personal growth, and meaningful discovery. Certainly, many college students are grade driven, not to say “grade grubbing.” Indeed, we have found that many students rate achieving the highest grade possible as the main reason for undertaking assignments, with such intrinsic reasons as overcoming a personal challenge coming in a distant second (Covington & Wiedenhaupt, 1997). Ironically, we also find that students often accuse instructors of rarely encouraging the same intrinsic aspects of learning that instructors, in their turn, lament that students have come to disregard. From this perspective, instructors and students alike are often caught up in a drama with all the elements of a classic Greek tragedy: an overweening grade focus separates all the parties including faculty and graduate student instructors (GSIs)1 along with students who fall short of their gifts for learning. This book is about the nature of this potential tragedy, its origins, its consequences, and, above all, how it can be avoided for the mutual benefit of all.

UNDERSTANDING CAUSES

The first main theme of this book involves understanding the underlying causes of this stalemate. At first glance, the predominant grade focus may
seem intractable. Grades are not only sought after by students; they are also feared by students, with the winners being seen as brilliant, hardworking, and personally worthy while the losers are judged to be none of these things. This situation is made worse still by the fact that good grades are often made scarce by competitive pressures, so that many students must struggle to avoid failure rather than aspire to success. The scarcer the good grades become, the greater the importance that grades assume as evidence of superior ability. Faced with this confection of fear, materialism, and a rat race mentality, educators may despair at the prospects of ever encouraging a love of learning among their students. Can intrinsic educational goals such as subject matter appreciation coexist to any degree, let alone flourish, in the face of a performance ethic based on school grades? Indeed, is there life beyond grades?

PROMOTING ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

The second main purpose of this book is to provide answers to these questions. To anticipate our response, the answer is yes; intrinsic engagement and a love of learning can coexist with the competing pressure of grades, but often only barely. And thriving, not just surviving, is quite another matter. In order to encourage a vibrant intellectual life of the mind, we must overhaul the ways we teach largely in an effort to offset the divisive dynamics that drive a preoccupation with grades. Even if grades were to be eliminated—a most improbable scenario in any event—it would do little to ease the situation. This is because grades per se are less the problem than is the distorted meaning of grades as indices of personal worth. Thus, the task before educators is to teach in ways that encourage students to alter the meaning of grades and accord them a more positive role in the learning process. To the extent that classrooms can become a safe haven from the threatening formula that equates good grades with one’s worth as a person, curiosity and a sense of wonder will emerge naturally and flourish spontaneously. Also, on the positive side of the ledger, not only can curiosity arise spontaneously as part of a natural process, but there are teaching strategies available that can directly reawaken and strengthen these intrinsic impulses.

Our ambitious objective is nothing less than elevating positive task engagement to the level of a preeminent teaching goal, coequal with traditional achievement and performance objectives. But before there is any real hope of achieving this goal, we need to understand more about the psychological nature of task engagement itself—what factors sustain it and
what circumstances act to undermine it. We also need to appreciate more fully the relationship between intrinsic engagement and tangible, extrinsic rewards like grades. It is an uneasy relationship. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that the connection is an antagonistic one. It is thought that grades may tarnish, if not destroy, the value of learning for its own sake (Kohn, 1993). This is because learning may simply become a way to acquire these rewards, and when they are no longer available, learning and its appreciation will wane. Yet, to the contrary, there are countless everyday examples of people redoubling their personal interest when given the tangible means to pursue these rewards further. Rewarding aspiring young actors with a financial scholarship that allows them to attend a summer theater group comes to mind here.

In order to understand these complexities better, we will appeal to the empirical research that has emerged from the decades-long scientific study of human motivation as it applies to achievement goals and to the phenomenon of intellectual commitment and task engagement. This is not to suggest that our understanding of the nature and nurturing of academic engagement is complete. Far from it. Much is yet to be learned, but we now know enough to recognize gaps in our knowledge and what research steps need to be taken next. But above all – and this is the important point – we know enough presently to make a difference for the better in real-world classrooms.

BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE

The third, and arguably the most important, aspect of this book involves the matter of solutions. We will provide a blueprint or road map for developing college courses whose highest priority is to encourage the twin goals of content mastery and the will to learn over a lifetime. This blueprint has been developed to accompany a graduate seminar co-taught by the authors over the past decade. The seminar challenge reads as follows: “What would a course in your discipline look like based on motivational principles intended to enhance a love of learning and intrinsic engagement, above and beyond subject matter mastery and performance goals?” Seminar participants are advanced graduate students who will be going on the Ph.D. job market within a year. Typically, the participants choose to develop a course they will likely teach in their first year as new instructors.

This blueprint takes the form of a series of instructional steps that form the structure of this book, chapter by chapter, with the content of each chapter providing both theoretical and practical guidance to assist readers
in designing courses. (The blueprint is found in Appendix A.) This book offers several important features. First, it is suitable for several purposes for a diverse range of audiences. For instance, this book can form the basis of a curriculum for a graduate seminar similar to the one described in this book. It will also serve equally well as an advanced upper-division social science or education course. Alternatively, readers can work through this curriculum on their own, perhaps receiving independent study credit. Also, readers can employ this book as a reference source for the art and science of course design and redesign from the unique perspective of achievement motivation.

A second feature allows readers to follow the step-by-step development of three case studies, one drawn from the social sciences, another from the biological sciences, and the third from the humanities. These case studies illustrate the diversity of approaches and pathways that the course design process can take, while providing some degree of continuity and order in a creative process, which is typically nonlinear in nature. Additionally, the fact that these case studies represent three decidedly different academic domains, each with its own assumptions and conventions for what constitutes scientific and scholarly evidence, its preferred methodologies of inquiry, and its unique intellectual histories and traditions, strengthens our claim to the generalizability of our approach to college course development.

In overall summary, then, this book is intended to function variously: first, as a scientific inquiry into the nature and nurturing of intrinsic task engagement, and the crafting of arguments favoring the will to learn as a legitimate, attainable educational objective; second, as a bridge between psychological theory and educational practice; and, third, as a principled blueprint for creating educational change in the college classroom.

SPOTTING THE MIRACLE

Everyone knows what it is like to be fully immersed in the pursuit of one’s studies. And we can easily recognize the fruits of such engagement in others when, for example, a student suddenly brightens with radiant excitement that says, “Oh, now I get it!” And as teachers will tell us, this process is reciprocal. We have this assurance directly from teachers themselves. As it has been remarked, “Few things can compete with the teaching of eager, talented, well-prepared and demanding students that crave, in fact, demand, precision and excellence . . . how lucky I really am,” and “Teachers live for such moments, when realization glows like a cartoon
light bulb over a student’s head.” In moments like these, task engagement becomes a living event. It actually assumes a rhythm and cadence of its own, so that at one moment the collective energies of the classroom are in step with students eager to learn more, leaning forward in the lecture hall expectantly; and at other times, this headlong exuberance is tempered only by the need to consolidate past lessons learned. There is nothing static here. This is why the concept of intrinsic task engagement is so elusive. It is a moving target. In sports, such engagement is referred to as momentum; in business circles, it is called teamwork; in education, unfortunately, it is all too often called rare.

There are significant reasons for this scarcity. The process of task engagement is made elusive by the fact that if students join in a collective commitment to learning, they do so to different degrees and at different times depending on their reasons for learning. Some students will remain tentative travelers, isolated from the group, content simply to accumulate grade credits. Other students, hobbled by the fear of failing, will hover at the margins of involvement, and may eventually implode and simply stop coming to class. Then there are those students who are committed to learning from the outset, and gain strength and resolve as they proceed.

What can be said more specifically about the nature of intrinsic task engagement? What is it? How is it manifest? At one level – on the surface – there is an easy answer: “We know it when we see it!” So what is there to see? More often than not, the casual observer sees a deep, abiding level of concentration and commitment as attested to by various comments from our undergraduates when asked to give examples of what it means to be task engaged. One student put it this way: “Students in Italian 1 going to watch films in Italian without subtitles week after week and not minding the fact they only understand 1% of what is being said on the screen.” Equally compelling examples were offered by two other students: “In my Economic History of Europe class, I sit next to a girl who is on the edge of her seat during every lecture. I look over at her and think that she must be listening to a different lecture,” and “Celebrating out loud during lab section when you manage to recreate the reaction that the professor was talking about all week and you feel that it is the most beautiful thing ever produced in a test tube.”

Naturally, there are additional characteristics of all task-engaged persons, besides concentration and commitment. Task engagement also involves an appreciation for what is being learned, along with an admiration for the intellectual processes involved and a respect for the personal sacrifices of individuals that is the basis of all artistic creativity as well as...
significant scientific and social discoveries. Engagement also means being invested in the processes of discovery and inquiry for one's self, and the application of these insights to problems and challenges worthy of great commitment. In effect, when students are task engaged, they become practitioners in the creation and use of knowledge, not just academic bystanders content merely to absorb predigested information.

But so far, we have only given voice to anecdotal definitions of task engagement and described some of its outward but still largely surface manifestations. What about the underlying psychological nature of the processes at work? To pursue this question, we asked members of our graduate seminar to describe a time or event in their own college experience involving an academic, school-related task of relatively long duration in which they were fully engaged. We also asked that they share what feelings and emotions prevailed; what was going through their minds at the time; and what were the circumstances in which they found themselves. Out of the many dozens of responses, we selected the following personal stories as representative:

“I remember studying for an exam during Washington DC’s ‘snowmageddon’ that dropped several feet of snow for which the city was unprepared. Consequently, I was trapped in my apartment with nothing to do but study. I posted large poster-sized pieces of blank paper all over the walls and drew visual representations of chemistry concepts. I would draw electron configurations, quantum states, and periodic trends using different colored markers. The excitement was because the material itself was interesting to me, and turning study into a coloring activity made me naturally more engaged. Lots of fun! I’d enjoy doing this no matter what I was drawing!”

“During my junior year, I took a seminar on James Joyce’s Ulysses. I was a little nervous about undertaking this notoriously challenging text. We were expected to come fully prepared, but not expected to have “correct” answers – just thoughtful, well-articulated ones. My reading of the text was motivated by a desire to actually understand what was happening and appreciate the beautiful language. Even though it would sometimes take an hour and flipping through four other books to read and understand two pages.”

“During my senior year, I was involved in a documentary film class which required making our own film. The idea of making films is inherently interesting to me. My dominant feelings were both excitement and trepidation – excitement that I would be able to produce work in a medium that interested me and showcase it to my peers; trepidation
in that I did not want to fail. But the fact that I had an idea for what I thought would be a good film excited me.”

To aid in our analysis of these and other stories, we have divided the concept of task engagement into four different psychological strands of what is widely believed to be a multifaceted process (Covington, 2009; Covington & Elliot, 2001). First and foremost, it seems clear that engagement is the result of a motivational process. By motivation we mean, simply put, the reasons individuals have for learning. And there are as many reasons for learning as there are learners. The influential German composer Robert Schumann put this point best regarding the complex landscape of motivation when he observed that “[p]eople compose for many reasons: to become immortal; because the piano forte happens to be open; because they want to become a millionaire; because of the praise of friends; because they have looked into a pair of beautiful eyes; or for no reason at all!”

Similarly, in the academic sphere, the reasons for being task engaged are also numerous and diverse, as reflected in the essays of our seminar members. In the case of these three examples, the motives were all constructive in one way or another, namely either wanting to become the best one could be, turning work into play, or pursuing a personal interest. Other essayists add to this list. They tell of striving for public recognition: “I wanted to prove to my Professor that I could solve the problems on my own,” or striving for the sake of career advancement, “I wanted a good grade because I was in the process of applying to graduate school.” Others recall striving to acquire a deeper understanding of events: “I hoped to string together all the facts which had previously seemed disjointed,” and “I got to thinking about how this new knowledge could be a springboard to combine some of my interests.” Also, essayists unexpectedly recognized themselves in a new light: “Being able to work through these problems may have been the first time I really began to see myself as a chemist.” Yet others aspired simply for the sake of personal satisfaction and enjoyment.

From these observations, it is easy to appreciate that the quality of task engagement – its purposes, duration, and consequences – depends largely on what reasons for engagement dominate. Some reasons are potentially liberating and constructive, as in the examples presented earlier, while – as we shall see shortly – other reasons can be profoundly self-destructive.

Second, task engagement is also a cognitive or mental process. In the vanguard of motives are one’s intellectual skills, unique ways of thinking,
and those planning strategies that give substance and direction to one’s reasons for learning. One of the most intriguing aspects of this mental realm is that our informants frequently reported reconfiguring or even altering the task facing them, as illustrated by our snowbound chemist’s strategy (in the first example listed), when she converted abstract constructs – electron configurations and quantum states – into visual representations using children’s crayons for ease of learning and also to have fun to boot. It is not unusual to find a sense of playfulness and feelings of joy as companions to task engagement. Other essayists cast their work in metaphorical terms, thereby simplifying their understanding of the problem at hand: “The facts in my head were the puzzle pieces, and the models and rules became the guidelines for fitting those pieces together.” Our essayists also proved adept at personalizing tasks by bending them to their interests in order to guarantee personal satisfaction. This meant taking personal ownership of problems, issues, and ideas – of being playful with them, even enlisting levity in the face of serious problems, and of reducing reluctant problems to their simplest forms.

Third comes an emotional strand in which task engagement expresses itself through a variety of feelings, including simply being curious: “I didn’t have to take this class. I did it just because I was interested,” and “My feeling was a sense of intrigue about what I was going to learn next.” Then there are feelings of being committed to a personally meaningful project with a readiness to be inspired to further effort by one’s discoveries: “I was excited to be working in an area that was completely new to me. There was so much to discover that would push my mind in new directions.” Emotions are also noteworthy sometimes for their apparent absence, but only because they are overshadowed by an all-consuming intellectual fascination with a problem. Nonetheless, apparent or not, in the view of our essayists, feelings and emotions remain part of the driving, motivational force that animates task engagement.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of these stories was the characterization in emotional terms of what was, in effect, a profound approach/avoidance conflict: “I was a little nervous about undertaking the notoriously challenging text, but curiosity about the novel outweighed my fear.” Despite these implied risks, our essayists nonetheless took up the challenges they recounted in their stories, but not before they had hedged their bets against failure: “What moderated my anxiety was the fact that I was working with a friend whom I deeply respected and I was confident that together our skill sets could make a solid project.” The task-engaged individual is attracted to risk, but reasonable, surmountable risk that...
resides just beyond the outer bounds of their talents and knowledge: “I felt excited about solving a problem that was truly just beyond my grasp.” Yet even with these qualified protections, sometimes risk overwhelms. Indeed, some of these personal stories ended in failure. But even in these cases, setbacks and disappointment were seen as temporary. Commitment and sometimes dogged persistence are the strong suits of the task-engaged person, as poetically reflected in the self-description of one essayist: “I am a tumbleweed when it comes to learning. It is true that obstacles come along every once in a while, but I push on, keep trying, and finally rise above those obstacles and just fly over them!”

Fourth, and finally, task engagement is also a social process. Virtually every essayist endorsed this proposition in one way or another. We were impressed by the variety of social relationships mentioned as well as the wide range of benefits and benefactors. Consider the following:

“Knowing that my work would be shown publicly, I was motivated to do my best.”

“Helping others to improve their projects was fulfilling in that I felt like a ‘real’ researcher.”

“Those interactions [with co-workers] were beneficial for all of us because in explaining our work to one another, we had to process again what we already knew.”

“I think that the Prof got a lot of satisfaction out of my interest and commitment to the class.”

“The instructor received the satisfaction of seeing me eventually shift my trajectory toward graduate school as the result of my positive experience doing research.”

“Even if I am not doing well grade-wise, if I have an instructor who cares about what I am doing, I am motivated to work harder because I want to make her proud of me.”

In short, task engagement is a socially defined event. The social implications of many of the synonyms of engagement make this point convincingly. For example, to whom and for what reason would one “pledge himself,” or “promise,” or “agree to serve,” or be “persuaded by?” Indeed, we will argue that the quality of academic engagement for everyone – instructors, teaching staff, and students alike – depends on a series of relationships, or as they say in “pop” psychology circles, “it’s in the relationship” – in this case “it” being the quality of reasons for learning.
and teaching. When these relationships are positive and uplifting, we will call them, collectively, an alliance.

Each of these four components of task engagement is beyond debate. But taken singly, each is incomplete. They must be considered as a whole. Nonetheless, they can be prioritized as to their overarching theoretical importance. It is our position that, at its core, task engagement is fundamentally a motivational phenomenon. All other propositions flow from this vantage point. Yet motivation and engagement are not synonymous, nor can they be treated interchangeably. Task engagement is best thought of as an outward manifestation of the reasons or motives that prevail at any point in time. This means that any effort by teachers to enhance the will to learn needs to be directed ultimately to the task of strengthening, or even repairing, the underlying reasons for learning.

One final observation brings the notion of task engagement in contact with the central theme of this book.

**Intrinsic Motivation**

Our inquiries focus on a special distinction between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation (Covington, 2000b). When we speak of task engagement as a valued teaching goal, our attention will be given primarily to intrinsic motivation. Here the rewards for learning reside in the benefits and satisfactions to the individual derived, for example, from becoming a more effective person: “I not only improved my understanding of botany, but also trained my ability to reason,” or from simply satisfying one’s curiosity: “I was inherently interested in the material so I just enjoyed learning it.” The rewards in these examples are intrinsic to the actions taken to complete the task – that is, the actions are their own reinforcement. Intrinsically engaged students seek out these rewards, which become, in turn, the reasons (motives) for learning more: “I felt like I was finally doing ‘serious’ work for the first time in college and felt like I had made intellectual progress.” In short, “engagement begets engagement.” It is this process that gives meaning to the notion of lifelong learning. Learning can be defined by horizons, but there is nothing inherent in horizons that limit progress. To move toward one horizon is simply to create another horizon, and the act of moving from one to another is the reward.

**Extrinsic Motivation**

By contrast, extrinsic motivation is said to involve the performance of an action, not necessarily out of any intrinsic satisfaction derived from the