Fostering a Mastery Goal Orientation in the Classroom

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Raise your hand if you have ever had a student ask you one of these questions: "Will that be on the test?;" "Is there anything I can do for extra credit? I have to have an A in this class!;" or "Could you just tell me what you want?" Have you ever wished that all your students would ask this question instead: "Could you help me understand this better?"

I have yet to meet an instructor who can't identify with either of those situations. As teachers, we would like our students to work for the sake of learning, not for the sake of a grade. Translated into more psychological terms, we wish our students would adopt a mastery goal orientation toward the class rather than a performance goal orientation. The theories and research on achievement goal orientation toward motivation have been very prolific (Elliott & Dweck, 2005), and point out the advantages of having students adopt a mastery goal orientation toward their learning, just as we instructors would have them do. Mastery goals focus students' attention on achievement based on intrapersonal standards of learning; performance goals focus on achievement based on normative or comparative standards of performing. Colloquially we often think of this as being learning-oriented as opposed to grade-oriented (Eison, 1982).

When students adopt mastery-oriented goals, they engage in more effective learning strategies, such as learning from their mistakes, changing strategies that don't work, and seeking help when necessary. They also are more intrinsically motivated, the gold standard of motivation. Performance goals lead to a focus on the outcome rather than the process of learning, such as achieving success by any means, avoiding the appearance of incompetence, and being more susceptible to extrinsic sources of motivation (Elliott & Dweck, 2005; Harackiewicz et al., 2002). Since most instructors are focused on helping students learn, we'd rather work with those students who are similar.

When we examine the characteristics of mastery-oriented learners, one quality that seems to stand out is their willingness to take risks and learn from their mistakes. They appear to be confident that nothing bad will happen to them when they fail. They feel that their classroom is a safe place, where they are supported when they stumble and assisted when they try. If this is indeed the underlying base for mastery orientation, then as instructors we need to find ways of helping students feel safe so that they are willing to take risks. Learning is a risky business, but we can minimize fear and maximize risk-taking by the structure of the classroom. What follows are suggestions drawn from psychological theory and research about how an instructor can create that safe environment.

Class Strategies to Foster Mastery Orientation

Give students choices

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that when individuals feel autonomous, they are more motivated. I believe that this is because when we feel we are in control, we believe we will make choices at which we can succeed. If that is the case, we can be less anxious and freer to adopt a mastery orientation toward the task. So one of the first ways to help students adopt a mastery goal orientation is to allow them some choice and control over their own fate.

Model a mastery approach

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1985) focuses on the tendency we have to model our behavior on those around us. When the instructor models a mastery orientation, students are more likely to adopt it. What does this mean? It means that instructors need to show that when we make mistakes, we handle them in a way that causes us to learn from them rather than trying to hide or avoid them. Students need to see strategies that involve successfully coping with failure so that they can have a way to cope with their own failures. Once you know how to handle failure successfully, you are less likely to fear it.

Emphasize learning from mistakes

A corollary to the previous point is the need to give students opportunities to correct and learn from their mistakes. In general, once a grade is given, there is little that a student can do about it; students therefore do not have much motivation to learn from the experience. Instructors can change students' behavior by providing the opportunity to earn back points they have lost by examining their mistakes and learning from them. I do this in my own classes by allowing students to redo test answers that they have missed by writing a brief explanation of why they were wrong and why the right answer is right. If they're successful, they can earn back half the points they lost.

Give positive, diagnostic feedback that focuses on personal improvement

Instructors' feedback directs student attention toward its focus. Therefore, in providing feedback, instructors should not just say that something is wrong, but rather how to make it better. Even when giving positive feedback, an instructor can compare a student's current level of progress to previous performance and emphasize those areas that have shown improvement. In giving feedback on a paper, I always describe how it could be made better, not just that it was found lacking. Focusing on this also points students toward their own work rather than a comparison with others.

Minimize comparisons with other students and emphasize comparisons with previous performance

Goal orientation theory holds that performance orientation is a manifestation of normative performance, i.e., how one compares to others (Elliott & Murayama, 2006). If it is made difficult to make those comparisons, students will be less likely to make them. Of course, we can never eliminate students' comparing themselves to others ("what did YOU get?"). However, if the criteria for success are clear and not comparative, students are more likely to focus on what THEY did rather than what everyone else did. Another strategy for making such comparisons more difficult is to make performance outcomes more private. The law is on our side on this one; the posting of information that discloses details about an individual's performance is a violation of federal privacy laws. Fortunately, the advent of computer classroom management systems that allow easy feedback to an individual online have made this task much easier.

Foster a community within the classroom

Making the classroom a safe place is helped if students perceive others in the class as resources and supporters rather than competitors. It is also helped when they perceive the instructor as their partner in learning, not just their evaluator. There are many ways of fostering classroom community (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999), but a few stand out as easily to implement. For example, having students work together in groups encourages them to get to know other students in the class and seek their help when it's needed. The instructor can even help this process along by allowing groups to consult with other groups as they work through a problem. The instructor should also make an effort to learn students' names and something about them so that each can view the other as a person not just a role. The instructor can build a shared history for a class by referring to their unique experiences as a group and creating new ones that they share. Most important, the instructor should encourage all participants in a class to treat everyone with respect, both student-to-student respect and instructor-to-student respect.

Conclusion

There are undoubtedly many more strategies that an instructor can use to help students view the classroom as a safe place, one where the goal is learning, not just performing. Promoting collaboration ultimately helps us discover and create new class structures that make students feel safe so that they are free to become mastery oriented. And, an added benefit is that the instructor feels safer, too: safer to relax and enjoy teaching, to try new things, and to adopt a mastery orientation toward teaching itself.

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