Cracking the Code: What Motivates Students to Prepare for Class?

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Abstract

As a new instructor for a mandatory graduation class, one can become frustrated when the majority of your students fail to prepare for class. Although there are several methods available for encouraging students to read for class, departmental constraints made the majority of them unavailable. Specifically, in the Law Department there are only 100 points available to each teacher for the category known as class participation. The remaining 700 points are awarded through examinations. After thinking about the problem and discussing the situation with a mentor, the choice was made to focus this study on what teachers can do in the classroom to encourage students to prepare for class by reading. Going into the study the assumption was made that the only way to get a majority of students to prepare for class was by providing an extrinsic motivator. That assumption proved correct. However, a couple of additional findings emerged as well. One, there is a direct correlation between a cadets class preparation and an engaging classroom, two, there is direct correlation between student’s being prepared for class knowing that they will be tested on the material prior to class, and three, although it did not result in a huge increase in cadet preparation, the student’s preferred the Case Highlights-Relating the Lesson to Today over other teaching methods.

Introduction

Everyone knows the saying you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. This statement represents how many educators feel when it comes to students being prepared for class. After teaching Constitutional and Military Law at West Point for one semester, the realization hit me that very few of my students were reading for class. Although this is not a new revelation for the educational system, there was some curiosity as to whether this behavior could be changed. That was the purpose of this study.

As stated in McKeachie’s Teaching Tips, “[K]nowing more about how students are motivated, and what you can do to structure a class that positively affects student motivation, can make a significant difference in the student engagement and learning. A classroom of motivated learners affects our motivation as well and can make teaching a more satisfying experience for the instructor.” (Svinicki, & McKeachie, 2014) This is what all teachers want in their classrooms. They want students who are prepared for class and motivated to learn.
Method

a. Participants:

For this study, two classes of LW403, Constitutional and Military Law, participated. Thirty-two students were enrolled in this class and had to pass the class as a requirement for graduation from the United States Military Academy at West Point. The students were not told that the instructor was conducting research.

b. Procedure:

There are a total of 40 lessons each semester for Constitutional and Military Law. As part of this study, the lessons were broken up into three separate teaching methods. One method used an extrinsic motivator and the other two focused on intrinsic motivators. All teaching methods were used in both classrooms during the same lessons.

The first teaching method used was a quiz. Prior to the start of each of these ten lessons, each student took a quiz that asked questions about the readings for that lesson. Each student knew that they would be given a quiz for each of these ten lessons prior to the lesson date. Each quiz had five multiple choice, true/false, or fill in the blank questions. Each question was worth two points for a total of ten points for each quiz. Each student had a possibility of earning 100 points. This was added to their final grade at the end of the semester. The remaining graded events for the course totaled 700 points.

The second teaching method used was the Student Led Lessons. This style involved breaking up the students in the classroom into small groups and giving each group a list of questions or having them analyze the cases using the IRAC (Issue, Rule, Analysis, and Conclusion) format. Each group was given approximately 15 minutes to discuss the questions or IRAC the cases. The IRAC method was taught during the introductory classes. Three levels of questions were used to include literal, inferential and evaluative questions (Honolulu Community College Faculty Development Web Page, 2016). After group discussion was complete, the class would come together again to discuss the answers or go through the cases using the IRAC method.

The third teaching method used was the Case Highlights-Relating the Lesson to Today. At the beginning of class the legal principles of a case would be provided to the class. Next, a real world or hypothetical situation would be given to the class to analyze either as a class or in a small group.

c. Measures:

Throughout all of these classes, assessment tools were used to determine the effectiveness of the classroom method and whether the classroom style had any impact on whether the students prepared for class. These assessment tools included an end of course written survey about the class and teaching methods used, pre-class quizzes, student generated questions at the beginning of class on notecards, and “one thing you learned today” at the end of some classes. I also kept a journal which tracked observations of classroom participation and preparedness level.
d. Quantitative Results:

The quantitative results came from an end of course three question survey and ten pre-class quizzes. The pre-class quizzes resulted in an overall course average of 72% for both classes. However, 60% of the class in one section had an average of 70% on the quizzes and in the second section, 59% of the class had an average of 70% on the quizzes.

Second, at the end of the course students were given a survey with the following three questions:

1. Has taking a quiz prior to the start of class resulted in you reading and preparing for class the night/day before?
   a. Yes
   b. No

2. Up to this point, which of the three teaching methods do you prefer?
   a. Case Highlights-Relating the Lesson to Today
   b. Quiz Lessons
   c. Student Led Lessons
   d. A variety of all three

3. Up to this point, which of the three teaching methods have encouraged you to prepare prior to class?
   a. Case Highlights – Relating the Lesson to Today
   b. Quiz Lessons
   c. Student Led Lessons
   d. A variety of all three

For question one, 25 out of 32 students agreed that taking a quiz prior to the start of the class resulted in them reading and preparing for class. In answering question two, 27 students out of 32 selected that they preferred the Case Highlights – Relating the Lesson to Today method of teaching. Question three resulted in 19 out of 32 students stating that they prefer the Quiz lessons when it came to being encouraged to prepare for class. However, seven said they preferred a variety of all three methods and six said they preferred the Case Highlights method.

e. Qualitative Results:

During this study, I made a point to journal about my personal observations in the classroom. After re-reading these entries, the qualitative data supported the quantitative data. Some of my journal entries included the following:
1. Although the case highlight method of teaching was the most preferred by the students, it was clear from my subjective observations that this method did not encourage students to read. (“Today I went over very broadly the take-aways from two cases. I then gave the class a real life situation/scenario and asked them to apply the test created in Youngstown. Most of the questions I received showed a lack of understanding of the basic principles surrounding Executive action as well as what the Youngstown case was about. . . . So far, I am not getting an increase in reading and class preparation with this method of teaching.”)

2. Quizzes were the most effective tool in motivating students to prepare for class. Student preparation resulted in a more engaging class for the students and the instructor. (“Today was a day two quiz day and the scores on the quizzes were extremely high compared to the first quiz day … class discussion today in both classes was great and people appeared to understand what was going on. Students could tell me about the cases, which allowed for a deeper discussion about the role of the court in society.”)

Discussion/Conclusion

This study supports the following: one, there is a direct correlation between a cadets class preparation and an engaging classroom, two, there is direct correlation between student’s being prepared for class knowing that they will be tested on the material prior to class, and three, although it did not result in a huge increase in cadet preparation, the student’s preferred the Case Highlights – Relating the Lesson to Today method of teaching over other teaching methods.

Going into this study, I had a preconceived belief that extrinsic motivators were the key to getting students to prepare and read for class. I wish that I could have proved that wrong, but this study did not. However, after reviewing my journal entries, there were a couple of days where students did appear to be prepared although it wasn’t a quiz day. On those days I asked students to write one question relating to or about the readings down on a notecard. When I read through the questions, I was impressed at how many students knew what the class was about and asked questions related to the readings that day. Although these were rare occasions, I still wonder what had motivated them that day to do the readings.

What also strikes me as interesting is how much students enjoyed the Case Highlight classes over the other two class methods even though the majority of the students had not prepared for those classes. One conclusion that can be drawn is that students want to relate class material to something that has relevance to them and their lives. Those classes were definitely more engaging and enjoyable to me as a teacher and apparently to the students as well.

However, if I was going to do this study again, I would change up my method. I would do an anonymous survey each day for each cadet with one question, “Did you prepare/read for class today?” I would also provide each student with a teaching method syllabus so that they would know which teaching method was going to be used for each class. Everything else would be left the same regarding the teaching methods used, but I think making these changes would give me a better read on exactly how many students are preparing for class in relation to the teaching method used. Although this study has
some good information, it didn’t answer the question of how many students each class are preparing for the lessons and whether there is any relation to the teaching method.

Teaching students who are prepared for class is extremely rewarding. When the students are familiar with the topic for the day or the facts of a case, the discussion and deep dive into Constitutional principles makes it enjoyable for students and teachers alike. It motivates teachers to become better teachers. Although this study only helped to support my preconceptions about extrinsic motivation in the classroom, I believe that the study opens the door to further research as to whether changing the classroom structure and environment will intrinsically motivate students to prepare for class. From the limited data that I have collected, there does seem to be some correlation between the teaching method used and a student’s motivation/desire to prepare for class.
References


Svinicki, M.D., McKeachie, W.J., (2014). McKeachie’s Teaching Tips. *Motivation in the College Classroom* (pp. 139-149).