

Case Study in Motivation

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Abstract

The following is a case study involving a 16 year old male who exhibits low levels of motivation and below average academic performance. The observation shows that through differentiated instruction the student's level of motivation increased, as did his grades and self efficacy.

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Introduction

The subject of the case study is Owen, a 16 year old male at a private, Catholic co-educational college prep school, located in Providence, RI. The enrollment of the school is 1,479 students from numerous socio-economic backgrounds and a wide span of educational abilities. Owen was observed in a United States history class at the .2 level, which is essentially an inclusion classroom which is currently the lowest level classes offered at the school.

Owen was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in 6th grade. As a result an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was developed and renewed, including several accommodations such as the use of organizers to help process learning, extended time to complete assignments, preferential seating to limit distractions, and repetition of directions. Positive reinforcements for appropriate behavior, effort, motivation and classroom participation are also accommodations in the IEP. Owen regularly checks in with the representative from the city of Providence's special education liaison. Academically he is a below average student, maintaining a 71 average in a class where the entire class average is an 83. Homework is usually completed but he struggles on traditional assessments like test, quizzes and essays. Socially the student exudes confidence, however when it comes to academics, he has a low level of self efficacy.

The subject is a member of the school hockey team, he is well liked by his peers, faculty and administration. The student lives at home with both parents in a comforting,

loving and supporting environment. He is well mannered, kind and courteous young man that shares a mutual respect with all people in the building.

Motivational Observations

Owen exhibits several characteristics of the self-determination theory, specifically he can be labeled as amotivated, meaning that he has little confidence in his own academic abilities and does not value academic tasks (Anderman & Anderman, 2010). Owen's primary motivation is to remain academically eligible for the upcoming hockey season. The parents of the subject, along with his coach, have tied his upcoming hockey season into his academic performance. If Owen is to play hockey this year, he must have all first quarter grades above a 70, and then each class must improve each and every quarter if he is to continue playing hockey and remain enrolled at the school. Owen's motivation about academic tasks has shifted. At one point he did not value the tasks and cared little about the results. Now that his parents have tied hockey and academics together, he is showing signs of extrinsic motivation. Owen's fears of not playing hockey this season have motivated him to put more time and effort into his studies, so that he will be eligible to play. The following are observations from the first quarter, along with classifications of motivational theories of the student. It is important to note that while the aforementioned motivational theories were prominent in Owen, he exhibits characteristics of several motivational theories.

Observation One

The class assignment was an examination of the Declaration of Independence. Students were placed with partners in such a manner that there was a stronger reader and critical thinker paired with a weaker student. Groups were asked to complete a graphic

organizer titled “APPARTS.” Students were asked to determine the author, place and time, previous knowledge of the document, audience, reason to write, significance of the document, and finally the main idea. The idea behind the organizer is to synthesize the information found in the document, all of which leads to the main idea.

During the lesson Owen displayed characteristics of the goal orientation theory, specifically the performance-avoidance aspect. Evidence of this was found when Owen and his partner initially started the organizer, he was able to answer the more concrete and factual questions, such as the author, place and time. As the pair began to work through the organizer and the questions called for higher level thinking, Owen was less engaged and tended to let his partner do most of the work. Most of the conversation and comments from Owen merely affirmed what his partner was saying, rather than reasoning through the document. Owen claimed that he was not sure about the document’s meaning and was unsure of what some of the questions were asking for. Simply put, Owen acquiesced to his partner, who is much more gifted academically, in order to avoid the perception of being dumb. Owen was highly engaged in the beginning, when the assignment was “easier” and did not require much critical thinking and analysis. Towards the end of the assignment he was less engaged because the assignment became much more difficult, which led him to become frustrated.

Observation Two

Traditional tests and quizzes are often Owen’s downfall. Such assessments usually follow the same format, consisting of multiple choice, true or false, fill in the blank, short answer, and essay questions. A recurring pattern has been established in which he is the first to finish all assessments, often times with unfinished essays and short

answers. Of the four traditional assessments given so far this quarter, Owen has failed three, earning scores of 43, 56, 64, 75.

Owen's reaction to the results is the same each time he receives a paper with a failing grade. Usually he reads the grades, looks around to see what others scored and then quickly puts his papers away so that no one will see his scores. At one point Owen did not care to see grades, in fear of being disappointed by the results.

It is important to note that since Owen needs to pass each class in order to remain eligible to play hockey, he sought extra help and has tried to find ways in which to improve his test scores. Owen's new found motivation clearly falls under the attribution theory. Owen has taken the steps of examining his grades, determining why the results occurred and is trying to determine whether or not the cause of the results was his doing (Anderman & Anderman, 2010). Essentially he is examining the methods he used to prepare for assessments and determining if they were sufficient.

Observation Three

Classroom lectures are a weak point for Owen. A portion of each class is dedicated to note taking, lecture and class discussion. Owen's diagnosis of ADHD makes it difficult for him to sit for extended periods and remain on task. Early in the school year Owen was lost and did not pay attention to what was being spoken about in class. During question and answer periods he would rarely give a correct response or claim that someone already said the answer he was going to give.

Owen's predictable responses on a daily basis are further evidence of his performance-avoidance characteristics. Refusals to answer and lack of answers are clear evidence that he has not paid attention to what happened in class, and in order to avoid

looking dumb, he gives the same responses. Over the course of time I have learned to ask him the first in a series of questions so that he will have an array of possibilities to answer with, which will hopefully raise his level of self efficacy. The first question approach has seemed to work so far, as he is often raising his hand right away, in hopes that he will be called first.

Observation Four

The final major observation took place during an in class project based learning situation. Students were assigned characters from the American Revolution and were given the task of researching the characters and determining their views on the American Revolution. Students took part in a round table discussion about the characters and then had to produce a project that demonstrated their findings. The project was open ended so that students were allowed to pick the means for which they completed the project.

Owen's response to the task was negative and he was quite vocal about his displeasure for the task. Comments included "this is dumb, why we need to learn this"... "this is way over my head, I am going to fail this assignment" and "Why can't you just tell us what to do, I can not think of anything I am good at, haven't you seen my grades?" Owen clearly lacked the motivation to complete the assignment and held little promise for success.

In this particular situation, Owen exhibited characteristics of the expectancy-value theory. Anderman & Anderman (2010) claim that a person's motivation for a particular task is related to their expected outcome of the task and the person's overall value of the task. Owen clearly did not understand that the exercise was a means to build upon the ability to critical think about and analyze topics, a task he struggles in and begins to tune

out. His level of motivation was non-existent because he knows that he does not do well in such situations and tends not to value them.

Observation Five

Owen has a hard time understanding directions when given the first time. The IEP calls for accommodations of repeating, rewording and individual distribution of directions. Owen clearly becomes confused when directions are simply spoken once or twice. Usually he tries to watch what others are doing in order to see what he should do. Together we developed a plan for distribution of directions.

Effective Strategies Used With Owen**Interest Inventories**

Chapman & King (2005) claim student interest is an important factor in helping to raise student motivation. Students are more interested and motivated when they are working on a task in which they have a higher level of interest. Examination of Owen's interest survey and general knowledge of the student clearly show that his main interest is hockey, but he also has an interest and desire to study business in college. Finding a way to integrate hockey and business into class will be a key factor. This is a key finding that should be shared with other teachers. For example, his math teacher may be able to find practical applications for math and business that can be integrated into class.

Graphic Representations In Place Of Graphic Organizers.

Owen's IEP calls for the use of graphic organizers to help him process information. Although the "APPARTS" graphic organizer helped him to gather concrete information, it did little to help him process information needed to answer higher level thinking questions, such as the main idea of the document. Owen was able to provide a

summary of the document, but could not synthesize the information in such a way that he could create a main idea sentence about the topic.

An alternative to the organizer is to make a graphic representation of the document. Owen has done well in the past when asked to produce such items. Given the fact that he has many issues with processing and retaining written information, graphic representations hold many advantages over traditional organizers, such as the “APPARTS.” Owen has done well with graphic representations because they are hands on and allow him to make a representation of the material as he envisions it in his head. When given a task that is hands on Owen tends to stay on track and his hyperactivity is a lesser issue.

An example, of a graphic representation he created was when students had to identify the major parts of the “Coercive Acts”, he drew a picture of Boston Harbor with a “No Entry at Ports” sign, signifying that the British closed the harbor as a form of punishment.

Use of graphic representations has helped him tremendously. As a result, Owen is retaining more information and scores on assessments have started to improve. Owen has also begun to take a more active role in group work. Since graphic representations are helping him process and understand information, he is becoming more confident and contributing more in cooperative learning situations. Other subject teachers, such as Literature could find this information helpful. It is quite possible that the use of graphic representations will help him show his understanding of various readings.

Graphic representations have also helped him raise his level of self efficacy, which is directly linked to the improved performance on tests and quizzes. As the year

continues, this is something that I have implemented more of in class. I have moved away from a traditional assignment of identifying terms and historical significance of each and transitioned into the use of graphic representations instead. I have found that the students are more engaged and understanding the topic on a higher level.

Authentic assessment

Authentic assessments were used in conjunction with interest surveys to create assessments that are interesting and relevant to the students, subsequently raising their motivation on particular assignments. Owen's interest in hockey and business is important to raising his motivation in class and engaging him in a manner that will help control his hyperactivity, limit distractions and increase student learning.

One activity that Owen excelled at involved creating a hockey team that consisted of major figures from the American Revolution. The assignment had several different layers. Owen assumed the role of a general manager and made a list of characteristics he would want in his players. Later he researched historical figures and then applied his desired characteristics to the list of historical figures he researched.. The culminating exercise was for him to create a hockey team of American Revolutionaries made out of cardboard cutouts of each person/player. The body of each player was filled with biographical information and the significance of each. In order to help him get his point across, he used several graphic representations on the cutouts to convey information.

The exercise was a complete success. Owen was able to engage in an activity that would ordinarily be dull and boring in his eyes, yet he was able to evaluate and critically think about analyze several of the founding fathers and their role in the American Revolution. From a motivational aspect he was highly interested because it incorporated

is major interests and he desired to learn more about the business end of sports. In this instance he showed evidence of intrinsic motivation, something he had not shown before.

Weekly Progress Reports

Owen's parents have requested weekly progress reports to monitor his academics, behavior and overall progress. Copies of the report will be forwarded to his hockey coach. Owen's parents and coach feel that linking his academic performance to his eligibility for hockey will increase his level of motivation and drive him academically. Early indications have shown that the progress reports are working, as evidence by his questioning of his performance and questions about what is in his report each week. However, I have voiced some concern on this topic, for fear that bad progress reports may suppress any progress and subsequently do more harm than good. At this time it has shown to be working.

Ineffective Strategy

One strategy that failed to work for Owen was the use of a "mini-book." Through an intricate process students learn to fold a standard sheet of paper into a book with five pages. Students title the book by subject and each page is a chapter. Students are allowed to write bulleted lists of information under each chapter heading, usually a maximum of four bullets per page. Students condense the information from their notes into chunks of information and use the book as a study guide. The hope is that chunking the information, much like phone numbers, will help them to remember the information.

The process seemed to be a failure for Owen. Although he was able to remember some of the factual information, it did little to process the information, nor did it do much to help with critical thinking, analysis or cause and effect relationships, all of which are

necessary when trying to master history. As an individual, Owen did not do well with the exercise, but some consideration could be given to incorporating graphic organizers with the mini-book activity.

Potential Strategies To Increase Motivation And Student Learning

Student Contract and Agenda

In order to ensure Owen meets benchmarks for learning, it will be beneficial to use a contract and agenda system. Heading into each unit Owen should sit with his instructor and develop a contract that will set up a step by step program in which Owen must meet certain benchmarks before he can move on to the next task.

Among the items to be included in the agendas will be the essential questions in which he must be able to answer, a time table plotting out how much time for tasks, and tiered assignments that can be completed depending on readiness. The contract should be tailored to meet the needs in his IEP, but should also have enough flexibility for him to complete tasks in a manner in which he feels comfortable. For instance, if a project is assigned he should consult with the instructor about the means in which he will complete the project. Allowing him the freedom to make choices in the agenda will increase his motivation to complete the assignment. The contract should work well for him because it will allow him to be successful within each unit. Since he can not move onto the next step until he has mastered the previous step, the contract will ensure some level of success and it will also increase self efficacy.

Voice Recorded Directions

Owen's IEP calls for accommodations in directions. Repetition, rewording and written directions are to be provided when necessary. Tomlinson (2001) claimed that

voice recorded directions help students with sequencing and processing issues, much like Owen has. Another method of giving directions is the use of “Google Voice” in order to give Owen access to directions at any time of the day. Google voice allows the teacher to record a message for students which they may access via the internet or telephone. The software will also translate the recorded message into text if so desired.

There are many reasons why this is a potentially valuable tool. Owen often does better with verbal directions. Recording directions and making them available at any time, allows him to listen to the directions as much as needed. The recorded message will allow him to process directions and give a better understanding of the task at hand. If Owen understands directions clearly he has a better chance at achieving higher results on assessments, therefore increasing his motivation. If successful it should be shared with other teachers so there may be continuity from class to class.

Conclusions

Observations of Owen have been quite valuable in raising his level of motivation. Although the focus of the study was on one student, there were several other valuable observations made, especially when comparing the success and failure of particular strategies the worked with Owen, but not other students, and vice versa.

The most obvious conclusion is there is not one motivational strategy that works for every student. Students have different levels of motivation and different interests. Essentially motivation is task specific. Owen’s motivation seemed to peak for tasks like assuming the role of general manager of a hockey team. In contrast, the mini book exercise, which was for the most part a failure, seemed to bring him back to a lower level of motivation. The trend witnessed in Owen is not specific to Owen. On several

occasions the level of motivation changed for other students. Depending on the task and the style of learner, the level of motivation changes on a daily basis.

Perhaps the most important piece of information that came from the observation was the impact of interest surveys. Prior to this year they were never used in as a part of my curriculum. They have proven to be an invaluable piece of information this year. Knowing the level of interest in school and outside of school has allowed me to differentiate in many ways. Playing to the interest of the kids, and allowing them a level of autonomy in which they can use their strengths and interests has proven to be a great addition to my teaching. The level of motivation in my .2 classes has never been higher than this year. Students are finding ways to incorporate their interests into projects, in-class assignments and their writing assignments. They are making connections to the outside world today and learning valuable lessons in history at the same time.

The most important conclusion that comes from the observation is that through differentiation, Owen's level of motivation seems to be on the rise. His grades, although low compared to the rest of the class, are improving. Owen is participating more and his level of self efficacy is also increasing. It is also important to note that the strategies that are working for Owen are doing the same for many other students. Although it is still early in the school year, the results at this point seem to be promising. It is clear that the use of differentiated instruction is impacting Owen and other students as well as increasing motivation and student learning.

References

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