Using Student Feedback to Provide Relevance for Students in Senior English

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Background

Graduation requirements in most states stipulate that students complete a certain number of credit hours of required core subjects and electives as well as demonstrate competence on state- mandated end-of-course exams. By the time students reach their senior year, many have acquired the requisite number of credits and completed all but one or two core courses to graduate. Typically, those credits include their fourth year of language arts and some other course such as social studies. Students, teachers, and counselors have reported that seniors who have fulfilled most of their requirements choose not to take challenging or upper-level elective courses, thereby, leaving many disengaged and struggling to find relevance during their last year of high school. Specifically, results of an exploratory student questionnaire revealed twelfth grade level English students in a small district in the Midwest admitted to having difficulty finding relevance in their coursework and were concerned primarily about post-high school preparedness and earning high enough ACT scores for college admission and scholarships. Even though these students admittedly chose to take less challenging coursework in order to "enjoy their last year of high school," many expressed anxiety about not being prepared for their post-high school plans, specifically college. For teachers attempting to engage students, provide a relevant and rigorous curriculum, and motivate students to take charge of their educational goals, students' lack of motivation and engagement due in part to their senior year course selections presents a challenging situation.

Perspectives

Since many educators strive to motivate their students and continue to search for ways in which they can engage their students, it is increasingly important to explore ways in which teachers can provide relevance through authentic teaching strategies and subject matter for their students. Motivation has long been considered a crucial component of learning, and one way to boost motivation is to help students feel a sense of investment and ownership in their education. When students are involved in instructional decision making, they feel in control of their learning and more likely to be motivated to learn (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Using student feedback to design instruction provides teachers with an opportunity to make instructional decisions that tailor the curriculum and instructional methods around specific student needs. Expectancy- value theorists postulate that when students find value in a task they are more motivated to engage in the task, and when they expect to be successful, achievement gains are even greater (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). A significant aspect of this theory is that the motivation of the student relies solely on the value and expectations to succeed as viewed from the student's perspective and not from what the teacher believes to be valuable or evidentiary of success (Feather, 1982). Therefore, it is increasingly important that teachers not only provide a rigorous, authentic learning experiences but also that they spend time guiding students to view the work they are encountering as valuable and important. In order to design a student-centered approach to increase motivation, engagement, and relevance for students in this senior English class, students were asked to respond to various surveys that allowed the teacher to design instruction around initial and ongoing student needs. Initial exploratory questionnaires revealed students found little relevance in their current coursework and students' main concerns revolved around college and college entrance exams.

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The following questions then emerged from exploratory discussions and surveys:

1. What are students' learning gains when they are given control over specific class curriculum and instructional decisions?
2. Do students' attitudes toward subject matter improve when given control over class curriculum and instructional decisions?

Methods and Procedures

Twelfth grade students enrolled in senior English at a small Midwest high school were asked to respond to a series of questionnaires and surveys to gather information in order for the teacher to tailor the instruction to their needs. Data was collected over a period of four years. The final sample number was $n=$ 329. Initial exploratory surveys were used to determine the reason(s) for lack of student motivation and engagement in their senior English class. Initial survey questions were derived from class discussions in which many students verbally expressed their opinions (see Appendix A). Once the questionnaire responses were sorted and narrowed into specific themes, it was revealed that students' main academic concern was increasing their ACT scores for college admission. After reviewing the ACT content material, it was decided by the students and teacher that a student-centered, non-traditional, vocabulary regimen would be beneficial and still fall within the language arts curriculum and state standards. Subsequent surveys were used to inform ongoing vocabulary-specific instructional decisions and track student attitudes toward the subject matter. Students were given a vocabulary pre-test and post-test to determine the level of overall learning after having direct input in their lessons. Students were also given a Likert-type survey that assessed their attitudes toward the subsequent instructional decisions (see Appendix B). Initially, students were given a pre-test of 100 words commonly found on the ACT. In the intervening time, the teacher used a variety of research- based strategies such as mnemonics, concept mapping, inductive and deductive reasoning, distributive practice, and Total Physical Response in order to help the students learn and retain the vocabulary words. Students were given feedback opportunities at various intervals to allow them to provide the instructor with valuable information about their learning gains and their views on the usefulness and effectiveness of the various strategies (see Appendix C). Students also gave suggestions about what they found most and least helpful when learning vocabulary based on current and past experiences (see Appendix D for student responses). The feedback was then utilized immediately in adjustments to the instruction so that the students would see that their input was valued and incorporated.

Results and Conclusion

A Paired Samples T-Test was conducted to assess the level of growth of vocabulary learning students experienced after having direct input in the instructional planning and decision-making. Growth of vocabulary knowledge was significant $(t(329)=28.323, p>.001)$. A Paired Samples T-Test was conducted and revealed a significant difference in attitudes toward vocabulary instruction from negative at the beginning of the school year to positive at the end of the school year $(t(243)=23.497, p>.001)^*$. The student attitudes were scored on a Likert type scale with 1 being "Extreme Dislike to 5 being "Extreme Like." *Sample numbers differ here because one year students were not given the attitude survey at the end of the course due to unforeseen circumstances that altered the instruction and timeline that year.

Discussion

Educators understand how important student engagement and motivation are to learning. The results of this analysis reveal that allowing students to identify what they care about, what they want and need to learn, and then help design the instruction in relation to how they best learn can be powerful in motivating students. Additionally, resultant learning gains have the potential to be significant. These students were very involved in the generation, planning, designing, and execution of the vocabulary program. They felt a vested interest because they had been instrumental in helping make decisions that made a real difference in the way their lessons were delivered, the strategies that were used and the manner in which tests were designed and administered. Students could see evidence of their input when the changes they suggested were implemented without delay and the teacher was responsive to their needs. As students made increasing gains on their vocabulary acquisition their expectations for success grew and their willingness to attempt more became apparent. While this aspect was not specifically addressed in the results of the study it is nevertheless worth mentioning. When students were given the initial pre-test many expressed disbelief that it was possible for them to learn all the words present on the test. As time went by and students were successful in learning the words, they were able to envision further success which, no doubt, led to their improving attitudes on the subsequent surveys.

In addition, as students in the class came back and self-reported gains on their ACT test scores, the value students placed on what they were learning grew which perhaps led to greater levels of motivation and achievement gains. Even though the gains were significant on students' knowledge of vocabulary words as evidenced by the test scores and self-reporting of gains on the ACT, this study has some drawbacks. Long-term gains on their vocabulary retention are untested and unproven. Lessons were designed to be cumulative and students were eventually tested on all words by the end of the year; however, no information was collected on how well students retained their vocabulary knowledge post-high school. Secondly, multiple choice tests may not be the best good measure of real vocabulary acquisition; however, whether or not the students gained a widened working vocabulary or retained their knowledge after high school graduation is outside the scope of this study. Additionally, the study did not include comparative data that would inform whether or not student learning gains would be as significant with only the research-based instructional strategies without the feedback and teacher responsiveness. However, a real benefit for these students is that they were given the opportunity to make instructional decisions and take ownership of their learning that improved their attitude toward what they were learning and possibly allowed them to see relevance in what they were doing.

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Appendix A

What courses are you taking this year?
Are you taking a math course? If so, which?
Are you concurrently enrolled in any courses?
What are some things that you expect to learn this year in this class?
What are some concerns you have about your abilities in English? What are some areas that you would like to work on?
What plans have you made for after graduation?
Have you taken an ACT or SAT?   If so, are you satisfied with your score?
In which areas do you feel you need improvement?

Appendix B

Student Survey
Have you had vocabulary lessons since you've been in high school?
What types of vocabulary lessons and tests do you remember having had in high school?

Do you feel that you were successful at learning past vocabulary?
If not, what are some of the reasons you felt kept you from success?
What are some things that would help you be successful learning new words?

On a scale from 1 to 10 with one being "I hate it" to 10 being "I love it," how well do you like vocabulary instruction?

1   2   3   4   **5**   6   7   8   9   **10**

I hate it I don't care either way I love it

Appendix C

Checking Your Pulse
How are you progressing overall on your vocabulary knowledge?
What has been the most successful strategy for you?
What has been the least helpful strategy?
Please let me know.....

- What I need to fix
- What would help you learn better
- Anything you don't like
- Anything you love

Appendix D

The following emerged from the questionnaire:

1. Students are given "crazy words" that they seldom see, won't use or can't even pronounce. Like "old words that don't matter" from literature.
2. Words on a test are all too closely related in meaning are difficult to master.
3. Students were given ten new words on Monday and were tested on Friday. They learn them for the test and forget them. There is no incentive to remember words from previous lessons.
4. Words that are grouped together beginning with the same letter of the alphabet or all beginning with the same prefix are difficult to learn.
5. Being tested on spelling in addition to the definition takes away from focusing on meaning.
6. Having to learn multiple definitions for the same word decreases the likelihood the word will be remembered.

1. model pronunciation of the words repeatedly, constantly using them in my teaching other areas
2. group discuss the definitions and come to an agreed upon definition
3. limit the number of definitions per word
4. discuss parts of speech, discuss connotation and model situations and contexts- do not include on test
5. as a group come up with clues or mnemonic devices to link the definition- put them on the test at least for a while to help students learn how to use devices then fade
6. model practice using various studying strategies