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Gambling with Grades

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Gambling with Grades

Book Review


What makes one student fall behind while another student performs steadily? The answer, if we only knew it, would make the teaching profession far more satisfying.

In two kindred books, scholars in related disciplines drill into this question. Raymond Wlodkowski operates on a practical plane to specify methods and techniques that motivate learners who are adults—a slippery classification, as he explains, yet one that fits most university students from nineteen to ninety. He has revised this hefty book to include new material on planning for cultural, ethnic and gender diversity among students, with examples, tips, and charts to reinforce the goal.

Meanwhile, Howard Rachlin explains at a theoretical level the results of his psychological experiments into human habit, especially in gambling and alcohol abuse. A teleological behaviorist, Rachlin explains willpower behavior using not just the language of diagrams, graphs, equations, and formulas but the more readable style of personal example too. In short, Wlodkowski tells us how to engender motivation, while Rachlin theorizes why it succeeds or fails.

To start with theory: Rachlin studies the inconsistency between the long-range pattern people aspire to, such as sobriety, and the short-term acts they take—drinks, in this case—that defeat the purpose. Although his examples often involve alcohol, they would also apply to a student’s behavior. For example, the student desires an "A" for the course, yet decides to watch television. Rachlin, the reason why the steps are (abstractly and practically) reinforce her effort on the long run.

When people commit to an academic course, family, who will also continue to receive reinforcement from others—everyone must do the difficult things.

This hypothesis is that the learner with the most motivation is the one who sets reasonable goals, that the student who sets a goal and then develops a plan to accomplish that goal. For example, the student identifies a problem, and then develops a step-by-step plan to deal with it. The plan might include a reward or a formative test if the student is successful.

Our students, in competition for their grades, must motivate themselves. Wlodkowski gives an example of a student who enrolls in a course and then decides to continue to receive reinforcement from others—everyone must do the difficult things.

Wlodkowski’s guide is a comprehensive resource for educators, providing practical strategies and techniques to enhance adult motivation to learn. By integrating cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity, he offers educators a more inclusive approach to teaching all adults. Rachlin’s work delves into the psychological aspects of motivation, focusing on the inconsistency between long-term aspirations and short-term actions. His insights provide a deeper understanding of the factors that influence student behavior and offer educators tools to address these issues effectively.
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room, is that it reduces the tendency of the instructor to circumnavigate, so to speak, when addressing stu­

dents. Instead, there is more straight talk about how to succeed with the assignments.

Rachlin’s approach suggests, to me in the writing field, at least, a new way to think about last-minute writing. Anyone who waits until the night before a paper is due to begin writing it is, in essence, gambling. The gambler receives random rewards, in the form of good feedback or grades. If the gamble pays off and the last-minute paper wins an “A,” however, the gambler probably continues the impulsive writing pattern. In fact, gamblers find many like-minded peers within the university culture, exchanging sheepish grins as they deliver their eleventh-hour prose.

The university too is harmed by the lack of

research into (184). “People do”

For instance, in a chapter on developing positive attitudes toward learning, Wlodkowski gives an eight-step method that instructors can use to have students set goals. He illustrates it with a specific student and her assignment (162-165). These steps require the student to discuss with the instructor whether her goal can be achieved, what resources she will use, and how to measure her progress. This method would find favor with Rachlin’s theory, since it supports the learner with a crutch or scaffold that lets her focus her effort on the long-run project. It validates who the learner is in light of what she has just performed.

Our students, in Wlodkowski’s view, have demands competing for their attention with the classroom, so we must motivate them through the design of the course with signs that they are welcome, that the class will have value for them, and that they can achieve the academic requirements with our help. This perspective treats students with dignity, unlike some criticisms that students lack intellect or literacy. What’s more, it defines an instructor stance as one that focuses on conveying the subject matter incrementally. However elementary this approach may look—and some of Wlodkowski’s steps and strategies look tedious—it nevertheless oozes reassurance. Another unexpected bonus from applying this approach, as I have found when

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Rachlin, the remedy is habit. Rachlin writes, “People are (abstractly and in the long run) what they do” (184). When people conform to their abstract decisions and commitments, they achieve their goals and receive rewards, such as social support. Recovering alcoholics must form a “positive addiction” to their friends or family, who will provide meaningful social contact and reminders of the motivation for getting sober and staying that way. If we apply this concept to a student, it would mean that she would have to identify the reason that she enrolled in the course or the university and then continue to receive positive reinforcement for her choice from others—even a new set of friends—to make herself do the difficult or unattractive homework.

This hypothetical student, in Wlodkowski’s view, would gain motivation from self-efficacy, a quality that lets learners give themselves credit for accomplishments and increases their persistence. Often he lists steps to help students get there. For instance, in a chapter on developing positive attitudes toward learning, Wlodkowski gives an eight-step method that instructors can use to have students set goals. He illustrates it with a specific student and her assignment (162-165). These steps require the student to discuss with the instructor whether her goal can be achieved, what resources she will use, and how to measure her progress. This method would find favor with Rachlin’s theory, since it supports the learner with a crutch or scaffold that lets her focus her effort on the long-run project. It validates who the learner is in light of what she has just performed.

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exists that no habit of recursive writ­
ing will be learned and no reward won from deliberate revision; moreover, the addiction to last-minute writing transforms itself into a belief in inspira­
tion or genius rather than patient practice. The university, to the extent that it endorses such practices through course syllabi, has a greenhouse effect on bad writing practices.

One bonus of each book under review here (and an especially strik­ing aspect of Rachlin’s book) is that each discusses altruism by way of considering the ethical implications of goal-setting behavior. Take a car, for example. The more that you can recognize the abstract good of limit­
ing the use of gasoline as fuel, the greater will be your cooperation with others toward their well-being and, ultimately, the good of the planet. But you or I cannot touch the direct result of this restraint in the way that we can grasp the immediate good of, say, exercising. Instead, we must be guided by trust or—Rachlin's term—faith (179). Wlodkowski, too, urges teachers to remember that everything we teach has consequences; some teachers, he reminds us, instructed the tobacco-industry leaders (336). I would issue one caveat. When we write about behavior change, we encourage moralizing; that moralism is the potential drawback of adhering uncritically to either of these books. The very excellence of the authors' styles and the clarity of their presentations encourage their readers to adopt the philosophy of change and apply it broadly. The question of whether change is needed by you or by me or our students or any reader becomes obliterated, at least while the book lies open on the desk. Students' impulsiveness or lack of academic motivation stems from many more factors than the classroom.

Recently an 85-year-old friend mailed me a copy of a new, self-published book that she had begun five years ago in a writing course at her community's adult education school. The effort that she willingly invested in writing it contrasts with the effort that many students unwillingly produce only upon demand. A retired person with free time plainly differs from a student beset with writing assignments, yet isn't it true that we hope our courses will produce independent, motivated performance by students? In each of the books under review there is evidence that we can locate drive that will spur people on to do their work. And work, as Louisa May Alcott once wrote in Little Women, "gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion."