

Excited Students Are Motivated Students

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Introduction

In order to increase student productivity we must first increase our students' desire to learn. Reflecting on my teaching career, I realize that some of my language minority students may do poorly because they are simply not motivated. They will begin a project but will become bored and lose motivation before ever completing the assignment. I decided that this year I would focus my action research on creating ways to make the classroom more exciting, in turn increasing the motivation of my students to complete assignments. Specifically, the purpose of my action research project is to discover ways in which I can diversify the Language Arts curriculum in order to create a more exciting classroom environment. Over the course of the year I created and implemented an active, hands-on project into the classroom and then gauged student response in terms of the completion rates of the assignment. The desired outcome will be that diversifying the curriculum creates a more positive attitude toward learning and higher success rates in terms of the completion of assignments.

Connections to the Literature

Traditionally, school consisted of a teacher lecturing a group of students on a given subject and then assessing them on their ability to retain the information. Although this may no longer be a desired educational practice, it may still be common in higher education. Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison (1991) state in their report *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom* that "Research consistently has shown that traditional lecture methods, in which professors talk and students listen, dominate college and university classrooms." Although this method of teaching may still be successful in a university or college setting, it would be inappropriate for an elementary or secondary classroom. In order to better motivate our students we need to move away from this type of teaching and adopt a more hands-on approach. Bonwell and Eison refer to this as "active learning" and define it as "anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing." Instead of simply lecturing, teachers must actively involve their students in their own education.

Although this seems like a simple solution, how can we be sure that including active learning in our classrooms will create excitement about learning? Larry J. Solomon, in his report *How to Study and Succeed in College*, states that "...students want to get the best grades, but what many often don't realize is that good grades come easily if the focus is on a passion to learn the subject, not upon grades"(Solomon). Once we help the students find that passion for learning, their assignments won't seem like "work" to them. As teachers, we

must find ways to diversify our lesson plans in order to make our classrooms more exciting places to learn. This will result in students who are passionate about their education and who are more motivated to complete their assignments.

The Project

In order to transform my 8th grade Language Arts classroom into a more exciting learning environment, I created and implemented an “active learning” project into the Language Arts curriculum. This project contained elements that differentiated it from the normal reading and writing curriculum of Language Arts. The project that I introduced to the students was entitled “Going for the Gold.” This project was a two-week, interdisciplinary assignment that required the students to use Language Arts, Geography, and Technology skills. The front page of the project contained a large image of the Olympic rings and read, “The time has come to choose a country for the 2012 Summer and 2014 Winter Olympics. You are part of the Olympic Bid Committee representing your country. Your job is to persuade the International Olympic Committee to accept your country as the best site for these Olympic Games”. As the students read this they were intrigued by the choices which they encountered. They could choose any country that they wanted? For many of my language minority students, this presented them with the opportunity to research and teach others about their native countries, something that they don’t often have the chance to do. As the students read on they found out that they were being asked to choose a country, research the answers to ten essential questions concerning this country, and then present their findings with a persuasive speech and a PowerPoint presentation.

Student Reactions

As the project began, the students were upbeat. They were excited to be learning on their own, not simply listening to me as I gave them information. They were researching a topic that they felt passionately about and then presenting their findings in a creative format of their choice. They were excited to have the opportunity to teach someone about their homelands and then to try to persuade them to choose their country as the next host of the Olympic games. The students enjoyed downloading pictures or images that represented their country to emphasize the information that they had found. They also liked the idea that they had total creative control over the presentations. From font to color, the choices were theirs to make. The students were also enjoying the opportunity they had to create their own timetable, to work on each section of the project when *they* chose to, not when *I* instructed them to do so. The number of choices that the students encountered in this project, coupled with the fact that they were actively participating in their own education, created a much higher level of enthusiasm than normal in my classroom.

Student Presentations

Although it was obvious through classroom observation that my students were much more enthusiastic about “Going for the Gold” than others projects they were assigned during the year, I wasn’t confident that this enthusiasm would carry over into the grade book. At the end of the two-week period the students had the opportunity to present their research. The presentations were strong and the PowerPoint slide shows were entertaining and informative. I was excited to see students who don’t consistently produce work standing in the front of the classroom, adamantly convincing everyone that their country was worthy of hosting the Olympic games. The real assessment in terms of the success of the project though would be whether or not the students completed *all* of their work. Overall, my students were excited to choose a country to research. They enjoyed presenting their research in an entertaining and exciting way. They were passionate about persuading others to see their country as a deserving recipient of the Olympic games. But would this enthusiasm result in the students *fully* completing their project by editing, correcting, and typing the persuasive speech? This would be the ultimate test of the project’s success.

Findings

In order to determine the success of the “Going for the Gold” project, I decided to compare the completion rates to a similar assignments using the same group of students. I compared the number of students who completed the “Going for the Gold” persuasive speech to the number of students who completed the “Coming to America” project, an assignment which required the students to research a topic by interviewing a family member and then to write a historically accurate, fictional essay using their findings. Both projects required the students to research a similar topic (their native countries) and then use their findings to complete an essay. The difference in the “Going for the Gold” project was that the students were motivated by the opportunity to actively participate in their own education.

Eighty-nine students were assigned the “Going for the Gold” project during March of 2003. Eighty-seven students were assigned the “Coming to America” project in October of 2002. Of the eighty-nine students assigned the “Going for the Gold” project, seventy-six completed the persuasive speech, a success rate of eighty-five percent. Conversely, of the eighty-seven students who were assigned the “Coming to America” project, only seventy completed the paper, a success rate of only eighty percent. I realize that outside factors could have contributed to the change in the success rates of the two projects. The time of year may have been a large factor. Because the “Coming to America” paper was assigned during the first quarter and the “Going for the Gold” paper during the third quarter, the students may have had different attitudes about school. Students who don’t feel that the first half of the school year is as important may have decided not to complete the project. Also, in terms of “Going for the Gold”, students may have been working harder in general because the end of the school year was approaching.

Final Thoughts

Regardless of outside factors though, I am satisfied with a five percent increase in the success rate. I feel that creating and implementing projects that exhibit “active learning” can be a positive way to improve the motivation of students, thus improving the completion rates of student work. I am confident that in the future, by creating a more exciting classroom, I can increase the productivity of my students.

References

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