

Case Study in Motivation:

Towards Susan's Postsecondary Readiness

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**I. Introduction:**

Susan is an eighteen year old student who has just completed my Technical English class. She aspires to become a large animal veterinary technician. Towards this goal, she has done an internship at a local veterinary office and has a part time job at a local dairy farm. Both of these experiences have been positive, and she has been complimented for her work ethic. She is a hard working young woman, but her view of high school has been as a pass-through. While her literacy is functional, her skills are somewhat weak. She does not read for pleasure, and her approach to text shows a strong preference for scanning for information over reading for a fuller understanding. Her writing shows mastery of basic conventions such as sentence and paragraph structure, but she does not fully develop ideas in her written work.

Failing is not an option for Susan, but a low B on an assignment is just fine to her. She is extremely resistant to revision and places little value on how individual assignments might impact learning in the big picture. Susan is often the first person in class to submit an assignment. While she almost always attempts a response to each question, she routinely answers only the first part of a multi-part question. Within written responses to readings, her work often restates pertinent facts but does not show evidence of interaction with the text beyond a basic comprehension level.

Throughout her high school career, she has taken the least challenging courses offered to her. Her grades in this coursework have been generally in the B to B+ range. Her grades, her test scores and her weak high school transcript have not earned her admission to the postsecondary programs in which she is most interested. In light of her intended plan of attending community college towards eventual entry into a veterinary technology program, she

needs to better understand and learn to meet expectations of academic work at the college level. She has taken the Accuplacer, a college placement exam as part of my class. Her scores on reading and sentences were 60 and 54 respectively. At the local community college, scores below 85 would recommend remedial coursework. She will be required to take a similar test at BCC, the school she plans to attend. It is possible that through test preparation and study, she might be able to meet some or all cut scores. “Research on remediation, although focusing largely on remediation at 4-year schools, suggests that students who enroll in developmental courses graduate at lower rates than those who start in regular credit courses.” (Calcagno, J., Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007 p. 778) It would be to her advantage to address her learning gaps as expediently as possible, a suggestion that I offered her throughout the class.

## **II. Observations:**

Susan approaches academic work with a goal of completing of it, receiving a grade and moving on to the next assignment. Each task is done quickly and at an “acceptable” level of quality. For example, when we working on collages to demonstrate appropriate attire for job interviews, her poster had the required information areas and even added the extra consideration that veterinary technician interviews might occur in an office or in the field. Most of the images she included were clear and on target as well as being thoughtfully and artistically placed. However, late in the work session, she chose to cut an image of several people wearing jeans in half, applying one half under “what to wear” and the other half under “what not to wear.” The same was done with two nearly identical images of fingernail grooming. When asked about the contradictions, she acknowledged that she just threw those pictures on at the end. Further, she

said that it was just a poster and that really didn't matter. I suggested that she could use the remaining class time to revise the work. She refused saying that it was "good enough."

Argument to the effect that she would be able to raise her grade was ineffective here, as from an expectancy-value perspective, she was unable to see importance in the task of revision.

As part of the course, each student develops individualized learning plan for grammar, usage and mechanics. These are based on a pre-test that includes both short answer responses to proofreading exercises and an analysis of a writing sample. In an individual conference, each student with the teacher prioritizes and orders the specific skills to be worked on. Class time is dedicated to individual and small group work on these topics. Susan's pre-testing showed competence with many skills, but identified difficulties in possessive apostrophes, transitions, parallel structure, punctuating lists and semicolon usage. Her reaction to this component of the class was negative from the beginning. She refused to consider working in a small group with others who had the same learning needs, and she approached the opportunity to work independently with disdain. She would "complete" exercises in her "purple folder" carelessly and submit them, stating that she was "done" and ready to move on to the next thing. Recognizing little utility value in these tasks, and quite possibly seeing an issue within the cost in terms of effort required to make substantial progress, Susan avoided engagement in the tasks.

Within a whole class format, Susan's performance was significantly more positive. During lecture/discussion sessions, she actively took notes and participated in the class. For example, during our unit on cross-cultural communication, she actively shared her experience of working with Guatemalan immigrants at her job on the dairy farm. She presented thoughtful and highly relevant examples of concepts related to the topic including how cultural expectations influence communication, how shared, job specific vocabulary enhances task related

communication, and effective and ineffective strategies for working in a cross cultural context. It was evident that during this unit, she considered important questions outside of the class, as she would report on her attempts to gather information and perspectives about the issues from her co-workers. While these extra efforts were not tied to earning a better mark to be entered into the grade book, the relevance of the learning and the practical application of it was an important intrinsic motivational consideration for her. “When students report that tasks are intrinsically motivating, they are likely to use more effective cognitive processes, which promote deeper understanding and the ability to remember and use ideas in the future” (Anderman & Anderman, 2010, p. 46) Also in evidence here is behavior that may suggest a “performance approach goal.” (p. 7) As Susan does exhibit an interest in being a “good” student, when given tasks with which she has experience and comfort, note taking and lecture discussion participation, she performs well and is able to engage her skill base towards new learning.

During the final project period, Susan’s performance was largely consistent with other class activities. The project was a scenario based assessment in which the students began by engaging in the job-seeking process -- applying for the fictitious position of “Excellent Technical English Student.” Tasks that followed required students to demonstrate their knowledge of the course content via the forms, formats and conventions of business writing covered in the course. Susan responded to her reading of the first task angrily. “You want me to make *another* resume?” I explained that I did not, as the intent of the question was to demonstrate understanding of the job seeking process through submitting requested job related materials and participating in a mock interview. Consistent with all of the instruction earlier provided, I reminded her that a resume is a document that can be pre-prepared and submitted when appropriate. She wasted a significant amount of time brooding about this and expressing her

intent not to do it because she already had done the unit work. Further she commented that she did not need any of this because she already had a job and knew how to get hired. In fact, during the unit, she challenged out of resume writing by providing an excellent resume that she had prepared as part of other coursework. Intrinsically experiencing distain for repeating work significantly interfered with what should have been an easy task. In the end, she submitted the project work that demonstrated good understanding of the course content. She demonstrated ability to correctly format business documents, but wherever possible within the project she presented information in bulleted points without analysis or example of the ability to write in expository or narrative styles. Much of what she was able to demonstrate was new learning specific to the course, but her continuing refusal to work on uncomfortable forms of writing carried through to the end of the course.

### **III. Effective Strategies:**

Multiple theories of motivation are applicable to Susan's case. Among them are expectancy value theory, goal orientation theory and social cognitive theory, especially as it applies to issues of self-efficacy. What these hold in common is that Susan is seemingly able to draw strength from a variety of motivational constructs. However, she has yet to be motivated to address the pressing issue of her larger academic preparedness.

While Susan is able to demonstrate a good level of motivation through the use of performance goals, this has only served to bring her what she *perceived* to be success as a high school student. She has seen her grades, solid attendance record, lack of disciplinary issues, and the fact that she is well liked by peers and teachers as evidence of a successful high school career. Unfortunately, this has been inadequate in bringing her learning to a level necessary to success in postsecondary education in her chosen career field. Susan very much needs to

establish mastery approach goals in order to bring her skills to the level required for success.

“Students who are mastery oriented are concerned with self-improvement and developing their competence.” (Anderman & Anderman, 2010 p.21) She will need to see the relationship between her academic growth and her ability to achieve entry into the field she seeks. As Susan already exhibits an ability to set and meet some achievement related goals, the key for her may be to expand and refine the goals towards increased, broader learning. What she needs to see is that the less tangible “learning” carries more value than receiving a passing grade on an assignment.

Gibbons and Schofner propose a series of questions targeted at issues of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and perceived barriers and supports. Among them are the following:

“What does this student believe he or she is capable of doing? In which fields?

For what reasons?” “What does this student believe will be the results of entering college? Of entering particular fields? What has led him or her to hold those beliefs?” “What barriers does this student perceive that will stand in the way of achievement of the goal of entering college and/or entering into a particular occupation or type of occupation? What supports is he or she able to identify to counterbalance these barriers?” (2004)

These questions are in their work aimed at persons counseling prospective first generation college students. While the educational attainment of Susan’s parents does include some postsecondary experience, the questions are quite pertinent to her at this stage. She presents a lack of awareness of and buy in towards academic expectations of postsecondary coursework that is consistent with first generation college students. Susan could benefit from engaging these questions from a more objective basis.

Susan did benefit from an instructional setting that employed strategies associated with differentiated instruction. Strategies employed included flexible grouping, contracts, opportunity to express learning in different modes, choice of books & learning materials, simulations and flexible assessment. (Tomlinson, 2001) While her strengths in participating in a traditional lecture/discussion format were clear, she was able to access a great deal of course content through activities that supported engagement by allowing for multiple learning pathways. This would support that her motivation can be seen to be influenced by expectancy value theory. She has been able to motivate herself to complete less preferred tasks, albeit at a quality level below her needs and ability, through recognizing an attainment value. She has thrived when activities met her intrinsic value of being enjoyable. Her perception of what being a good student entails has led her to an approach that while depending on seeing the utility value of completing tasks, misinterprets the expectations of others as to what level of competence is required. Exposing Susan and other students to college placement exams has been one step towards increasing awareness of academic expectations, but more can be done in this area.

**Conclusion:**

Working with Susan has exposed several important considerations for working with future students. By distinguishing between performance goals and mastery goals, students may be encouraged to perform at higher levels overall. Often students within in a CTE context students are accustomed to working towards performance goals. They see a good rationale in being able to complete assigned tasks within parameters defined by the instructor within the field of study. If asked to mill a part to a specific tolerance, a student working towards a career as a machinist has a very discrete, clear goal with a specifically definable outcome in mind. There is extrinsic reward in the sense that that performance is appreciated by the instructor. Greater

academic learning and more in depth career and technical study require a broader set of abilities and knowledge from which a student can draw towards producing successful work.

Applying differentiated instructional strategies can be helpful in engaging these students; but simply addressing content through multiple means may be insufficient to developing the patterns of learning and expression that will benefit students over time. Tapping into intrinsically enjoyable activities is a good vehicle through which to provide instruction, but it is necessary, too, to see that the tasks and materials presented are of sufficient rigor to demonstrate to the student what future expectations might be.

Susan took away significant learning from my class, yet she was unable to grasp the greater need for broad based learning and respect for academic conventions through her coursework with me. She has been provided with information on how to access the writing center at BCC, and she has been given a listing of quality resources to use for independent study to improve her skills. There is great hope for her future success, as she has many powerful assets as both a student and worker. If she is able to see and address how her skills are important, relevant and addressable, she will be able to take important steps towards college and career success.

#### References:

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