Getting the Job Done: Weaving Together Competence, Success, and Enjoyment in Family Science Education

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ABSTRACT. Traditionally, family science educators have had a difficult time attracting and retaining students in classes related to aging. In order to increase student engagement in a course on aging, I redesigned the course using Christensen's Jobs-To-Be-Done perspective. Learning partners from a local care facility were enlisted, the curriculum was focused on supporting the students' interactions with those Learning partners, and assignments were added that required students to integrate academic knowledge with real-life experience. Results of this redesign included increased skills, feelings of success, and students' engagement. This article highlights the core principles used to redesign the course, along with difficulties encountered. These principles may be applied in various family science classes to increase student motivation.

Keywords: aging, student motivation, service learning

While many family science students express interest in working with children or teenagers, far fewer of them discuss wanting to work with older people (Paton, Sar, Barber & Holland, 2001). Two of the greatest challenges in teaching classes about aging are motivating students to study in a field that seems remote to them and then keeping them engaged. The reasons for these challenges are varied and generally fall into two categories. The first is students often see aging as something largely irrelevant in their lives (Barber, 2012). They may enter a course with little or no knowledge about aging, or with the preconceived idea that this field is depressing. For example, in my sophomore-level aging course, I often have to do "damage control" with students who have already taken a freshman-level Biology of Aging class. As that course can paint a gloomy picture of age-related physical loss, I need to assure students that aging can be positive and rewarding. Students may take gerontology courses because they are part of a set of required courses and can be dubious as to whether they will gain any useful knowledge from them.

The second category of challenges is shared with many current fields of study—the ever-present, multiple demands on the time of students. With the current economy, more students must work while in school, which drains their time and energy. Also, the number of

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nontraditional students has increased; these students juggle not only work schedules but also the needs of partners and children with the traditional student priorities of school and athletics. Lastly, the Internet offers a smorgasbord of distractions and feeds the growing desire of college students for constant stimulation. This leaves educators in the unenviable position of competing for students' time and attention.

The Jobs-To-Be-Done Perspective

Increasing student motivation has long been a topic of interest to educators. Research has studied the effectiveness of differing instructional strategies (Semb & Ellis, 1994), use of software (Ganah, 2012), various types of class-related activities (White, 1998), and modifications of course content and organization (Lujan & DiCarlo, 2006), in terms of their potential to increase student motivation for university-level learning. One person who has addressed this issue is Harvard educator and author of *Disrupting Class*, Clay Christensen, who has applied principles of motivation from the business world to education. His *Jobs-To-Be-Done perspective* (hereafter abbreviated as JTBD) has been utilized in class levels ranging from kindergarten to university (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2010; Christensen, Allworth, & Dillon, 2012). This perspective looks at the factors that motivate students to be active participants in their own learning. It has two main principles.

Principle 1. Businesses succeed because they help customers to "get the job done."

In this instance, a job is a something that a consumer wants to accomplish. A job may involve solving a problem (e.g., figuring out how to unclog a sink), accomplishing a task (e.g., preparing dinner), or creating a positive feeling (e.g., couples recreating the feeling of being in love by playing "their song"). When consumers buy products or engage services, they are in essence hiring businesses to help them "get the job done." For example, Facebook does the job of relieving boredom by providing both diversion and positive feelings (Fitzgerald, 2012). For its user, Facebook provides entertainment, requires a minimal input of time or energy, and rewards with instantaneous new images or messages that are of personal interest. It also provides positive feelings by giving a semi-anonymous connection to others. As long as Facebook provides a low-stress entertainment and connection to others, people will continue to "hire" Facebook (i.e., go to the website) to do the job of relieving boredom.

Principle 2. When faced with a product that is not succeeding, businesses ask whether the product is getting the job done. If it is not getting the job done, they redesign the product or create a new one.

Businesses can fail if they become more concerned about selling products than meeting the needs of their consumers. A mistake of focusing solely on improving the product, rather than making sure it is actually doing the job, can waste time and money. For example, Henry Ford reputedly said, "If I asked customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse" (Wunker, 2012). It is important to separate the job that needs to be done (traveling more quickly)

from the product (a horse). Sometimes, instead of improving an existing product, a whole new product is needed.

How Do These Principles Relate to Education?

How, then, can the principles (identifying the job to be done and designing a product to do the job) be applied in the classroom in order to adapt to changing student behaviors? First, there has to be a fundamental shift in the way we view students—as consumers with choices. It is no longer a given that students will always be present in the classroom. The competition of online distractions, the increased demands on today's students, and the growing number of available educational options have supported a shift toward students becoming consumers of education (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). Students increasingly are picking and choosing the way they receive their education in terms of what works for them, in the same way that they would choose a computer app or a smart phone. Students choose not only between courses and instructors, but also between face-to-face, online, and blended or hybrid forms of education (Parry, 2010). They also choose whether or not education will be the main focus of their attention.

Second, in applying these principles, we need to realize that, generally, education itself is not the job that students want done—it is a means to accomplish the job. If we remember the definition of a job, we realize that students "hire" education to solve problems, accomplish tasks and create positive feelings. Students want to feel successful in their lives. Some choose school as a viable route to achieve this success. Others choose different routes. Therein lies a fundamental problem. While faculty members see *providing* education as their main job, the students do not see *receiving* the education as theirs, but rather as a means or tool to experience success (Christensen et al., 2010).

Principle 1. Education succeeds when it helps the students "get the job done."

What are the "jobs" that universities are being hired by the students to do? Over the past 14 years of teaching, I have asked students at the end of each semester for feedback on what would improve courses, what they would like to gain from courses, and overall what they believe makes a good course. From this feedback and class discussions, I have gained insight into what our Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) students generally want from their courses. Over the years, they have told me that they desired their courses to help them achieve competence, success, and enjoyment.

Competence. For these students, the most desired outcome from their classroom experiences was to gain knowledge that they could actually use, either in their own lives or in their future employment. To this end, they wanted assignments that were meaningful in helping them achieve competency. This included not only pertinent textbook knowledge, but also activities and experiences that involved their use of knowledge. This is in line with findings that experiential learning gives concrete understanding of abstract concepts, thereby building bridges between academic learning and real-life problems (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). For HDFS students, class-related activities that involved interaction with people were cited as being

personally rewarding. They stated that the opportunity to associate with and help people was a major motivating factor for coming into this field.

Success. The students did not define success in the way I had anticipated. I had expected that most would want an "Easy A" above all, but this was not the case. While getting good grades was important, it was not, in and of itself, the overwhelming focus. When I asked them whether they would rather have a meaningful but challenging course or an "Easy A" course, the students discussed their answers at length and told me that the question itself, in the way it was phrased, did not really apply to them. They would take either course as long as the subject matter interested them, the time requirements were reasonable, and the structure of the course was clear and well organized. If these three elements were in place, they could create successful learning through their personal involvement in the course. So, they did want good grades, but not at the expense of learning.

Enjoyment. Lastly, students also stated that enjoyment in learning was important to them. They appreciated the opportunities to apply their knowledge in working with people outside of class settings. They also liked in-class activities in which they could discuss ideas or solve hypothetical problems together. This is in line with Willingham (2009), who stated,

> Solving problems brings pleasure. When I say "problem solving" in this book, I mean any cognitive work that succeeds; it might be understanding a difficult passage of prose, planning a garden, or sizing up an investment opportunity. There is a sense of satisfaction, of fulfillment, in successful thinking. . . . It's notable too that the pleasure is in the solving of the problem. Working on a problem with no sense that you're making progress is not pleasurable (pp. 9-10).

These course expectations are in line with what has been found in other motivation-focused research (Ganah, 2012) and they imply that the primary jobs of college students were to feel competent, successful, and to enjoy learning. To help the students achieve these goals, it was important to make the challenges just beyond students' comfort zone and to give them structure to help them meet them. Students also needed the courses to have reasonable time requirements, along with expectations that were fair, clearly described, and stable over the course of the semester. Lastly, students wanted to enjoy learning, which came in the form of interaction with course material, fellow students, and people outside of class.

Principle 2: If the course isn't doing the job for the students, redesign the course.

During the summer of 2012, I began to consider my sophomore-level course on aging in terms of the JTBD perspective. This is a survey class in aging studies, an introductory class for students with no background in aging. Students may choose it in order to fulfill general education requirements or to help complete an HDFS degree. It usually has 20 to 25 students enrolled, ranging from first-semester freshmen to seniors. In order to redesign this course, I looked at the ways in which it might be different if I focused on what was needed to achieve competence, success, and enjoyment. I wondered how I could take these three "jobs" and align all the assignments and experiences toward them. My conclusions were as follows:

Competence. The course should provide a focus on learning and application of knowledge, either using actual examples (often shared via sites such as YouTube) or simulations. It should create bridges between abstract concepts and their real-world manifestations (e.g., while the students may not be facing these problems now, their grandparents are).

Success. The course syllabus should provide stable and consistent course organization. Clear descriptions and examples of what constitutes excellent performance should be available, including how papers and other assignments will be evaluated (sometimes called score cards or rubrics). Assignments need to be meaningful and have reasonable time requirements. Scaffolding, or instructor-guided assistance in learning, needs to be present for learning new material and behaviors. Scaffolding may come in many forms, including modeling, using templates, and breaking down complex concepts into components and explaining each part. This enables the students to mentally build the concepts themselves.

Enjoyment. The course should have activities that involve interaction with course material, (e.g., library/Internet research on selected topics), with other students (e.g., classroom discussions of ethical questions, or of the application of textbook information to real-life settings), or with people outside of class.

The first change I made in the course was based on the positive responses that students had given in earlier courses concerning their interactions with older persons and their strong desire to apply the knowledge gained to real-life experiences. I moved these interactions from being a supporting activity to being a central focus of the course by setting up a series of visits/interviews throughout the semester with older people from a local continuing care retirement community (CCRC). These interviews with individuals, who were given the title *Learning Partners*, would increase student enjoyment and also build student skills.

Along with this came a change in the central philosophy of the course. Instead of considering the interviews with learning partners to be supporting activities that reinforced classroom instruction, I focused on the interviews as providing actual examples of core information. In this way, classroom instruction/discussion helped students prepare for the following week's interviews with their learning partners. Students discussed the topic that was covered in the current week's class, chose potential questions from topic-related readings, and practiced interviewing in terms of those topics.

The second change in the course involved changing the scope of material covered. Incorporating four visits with learning partners into the course would add more for the students to do and would violate one of the jobs (success, in terms of realistic time requirements). With the realization that students retain only a small part of what they have been taught in a course (Bligh, 2000; Semb & Ellis, 1994), I decided to focus my efforts on going deeply into the material that was important for them to retain, rather than going broadly over considerable content. I made choices about what I've termed *crucial takeaways*—the core information from the course that I wanted them to retain. Then I simplified course content by focusing on these crucial takeaways (theories of aging, cognitive changes, physical changes, retirement, and elder safety) and streamlined the remaining details.

A third change involved how the students would be evaluated in the course. A system was needed that assessed both the knowledge students had gained and how they used it in their interviews. This was accomplished by having the students write four papers, each two pages in length, with each paper due after a visit with the learning partners. This was in addition to the tests that traditionally had been part of the course. The students' papers described what they had observed or learned from the interviews and how it related to information they had learned from the text and our in-class discussions. Writing a number of small papers would assist them in learning how to integrate academic information with real-life experiences (White, Reichelt, & Woods, 2011). Students were given detailed instructions on the type of information to be included in each paper, and the course syllabus included a list of expectations for the paper and the point value for each. They also received feedback quickly after each paper so they could improve their observation and writing skills.

Successes

Over the semester, I observed students grow increasingly comfortable in talking with their learning partners. I also noticed in class discussions and written papers that the students improved in their ability to explain the ways in which information about human development appeared in real life. Their papers described how they had observed the ways hearing loss and physical limitations affected their learning partners' abilities to join in activities. It became important to the students to understand how the learning partners dealt with losses and limitations in their everyday lives. Textbook information was no longer thought of as "irrelevant" to students' lives when they saw it was important in the lives of people they had come to care about.

At the end of the course, the students pulled together the information they had learned about aging and created a final project with their learning partners: a Christmas carnival for other residents of the CCRC. In this process, I was available as a resource to the students. This was consistent with Christensen's (2012) recommendation to "transform the delivery of content. Then the teacher can be a tutor of students and to design projects so students have to master the material in order to . . . solve [a] problem."

As students worked with their learning partners to create games for the Christmas carnival, they grew in their understanding of how to help individuals deal with limitations. The skills students learned in planning and carrying out this carnival—organizing materials and adapting activities to limitations—are ones they will be able to use in future human services employment, regardless of the client population they work with (e.g., older people, immigrants, people with disabilities, or those with learning challenges).

The students were not the only ones who grew from this experience. I gained satisfaction as students grew in their understanding of aging—not only in terms of textbook knowledge but also in its application. I also learned how much easier it is to teach enthusiastic students. Lastly, the learning partners gained the satisfaction of helping students learn. They grew attached to the students and looked forward to their visits. The meetings had a feeling of excitement, with both groups exhilarated and talking happily with each other after the visits.

Difficulties

I found four difficulties in changing a course to "get the job done." First, it was difficult to translate abstract concepts into concrete behaviors. It was important to take concepts like competence, success, and enjoyment and define them carefully and in detail. Without a clear understanding of what these jobs meant for the students, it would have been easy to expend considerable energy creating the wrong class structure. Even when these jobs were defined, it was still necessary to work out all the details of elements that need to be in place and have them described in concrete and behavioral terms.

Second, it takes effort to separate the ends from the means. I had to be careful not to be pulled into focusing on means rather than the actual jobs-to-be-done. I continually reminded myself that having enthusiastic students and learning partners was not the central focus of the course. Having a clear syllabus and good scaffolding in terms of student learning were not the main foci—competence, success, and enjoyment were, and each required ongoing assessment during the semester to make sure that these jobs were actually being done. This was done through looking at test scores, reviewing comments on student papers, and evaluating class discussions.

Third, keeping balance among the three jobs can be a struggle at times. Restraint was required to ensure one of the three jobs did not dominate the course. Otherwise, the students and I easily could have become carried away by any one of the jobs and have had the other two suffer. For example, when I offered a project in place of the scheduled third test, 80 percent of the class was enthusiastic about the idea (enjoyment), but a few students, who had heavy work schedules, reminded me that, for them, this disrupted the elements of course stability and reasonable time commitments (success). The class then discussed how it would be possible to carry out individual parts of the project with no more time commitment than that necessary for studying for a major test. Once this issue was resolved, competence, success, and enjoyment were again in balance.

Fourth, it is important to bear in mind that even though an educator may want to create the potential for each student to achieve competence, success, and enjoyment in learning, whether or not students actually achieve these goals is ultimately up to them. My decision to have a course that was set up to have these elements did not prevent students from failing the course, nor did it guarantee that every student would get an A. Educators are responsible for the conditions of the course, not the final outcome of student performance.

How to Make the Jobs-To-Be-Done Perspective Work in the Classroom

I found that, once the jobs that the students want done have been defined, it is not complicated to gear a course toward these jobs. Here are the steps to make this process work in other situations:

1. Look at the jobs your students want done. When preparing a future course, ask your current students what the best course they have ever taken was like. What makes a

good course? What makes a bad course? What do they want to do in their lives? How do they see this course as helping them in doing it?
2. Consider what has worked in the past. Using previous evaluations, which elements have students in previous courses enjoyed and which have enabled learning? Evaluate the material. Look at everything you want to teach in terms of core material and then decide what can be trimmed. What are the crucial takeaways from your course?
3. Know your students. Students in 100 level courses can be expected to have less knowledge and experience with course material. They may also be less mature and have less developed writing skills than those in 400 level courses.
4. Keep in mind that students have different learning styles. Thus, as the teacher, you need to teach in ways that appeal to the different learning styles: Provide concrete examples such as pictures or videos for the visual learners, use descriptive lectures for the audio learners, and utilize field trips for the hands-on learners.
5. Assess your unique strengths. What can you add to make a course engaging?
6. Be flexible in adapting. Alterations may be required according to needs of your university/department/course/students.
7. Continue to evaluate. Ask specific questions each semester about the new changes to see if they need to be tweaked, kept as is, or tossed out the next time you teach the course.
8. Quickly correct obvious failures. Sometimes things just do not work, and small changes can fix them. Be sure to balance changes with syllabus stability.

Possible Application

One recommendation for applying the JTBD perspective in a wider variety of classrooms is to examine the differing jobs desired from students in majors other than family science. It would also be helpful to look at whether the job(s) desired by a student would vary with the student's age and number of years in the university setting. Further study could enable researchers to discover whether the jobs students initially say they want universities to do for them ultimately differ as students spend more time in a university setting and/or as they choose different paths of study.

Conclusion

Student engagement is an important component in family science education. As educators, we do not have to assume we are fighting a losing battle in involving our students in their education. With increasingly sophisticated technology and distractions, and with growing and pressing time demands, we can adapt and apply focused interventions in our courses. Educators can ask students what jobs they want done by their courses and listen to their answers. When we define the behaviors that are in harmony with those desired jobs, we can then deliver courses that are rich in crucial takeaway content and also have the potential to increase skills, knowledge, and student engagement. In doing so, we can weave together competency, success, and enjoyment in education.

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