

Fostering Graduate Level Student Success: What Research Says and How to Apply it in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The best instructors know how to engage their students from the first day of class and help them reach high levels of accomplishment in grasping difficult content, even in graduate level coursework. To create a positive learning environment, instructors must be proactive and anticipate challenges students are likely to face during the class. Whether we like to admit it or not, there are difficult courses for students to grasp within every program of study. Students' ability to learn and retain difficult information is based on physiological, emotional, sociological, and psychological factors. Therefore, instructors need to consider incorporating appropriate classroom practices for a diversity of learners. Are you searching for innovative, quick and easy ideas to "bait" your students on the first day and "hook" them to be comfortable with anxiety-laden courses for the remainder of the course instruction? This paper will present hands-on activities that can easily be utilized in even the most difficult graduate-level subjects. These activities build positive learning environments to help ease anxiety from the first day. It will also include interactive activities that can be adapted to any subject matter at any instructional level in the higher educational setting.

Keywords: Graduate student success, Graduate classroom practices; Positive learning environments, Interactive learning activities, Learner diversity

1. INTRODUCTION

Previous research in graduate student success demonstrates several factors related to practices affecting rate of completion and time to earn the degree (de Valero, 2001). Current researchers (Barnes & Randall, 2011; Ehrenberg, Zuckerman, Groen & Brucker, 2009) also reveal and suggest that the departments, not the graduate school, bear the greatest responsibility for doctoral students' progress and success. Understanding students'

experiences and outcomes in doctoral education and understanding best practices to improve these experiences and outcomes is paramount (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

Whether in the traditional classroom, blended, or online format, improving graduate-level understanding is of utmost importance (Park, Perry, Edwards, 2011). Barnes and Randall's (2011) study of doctoral student satisfaction with regard to student success revealed that noncompleters were not satisfied with faculty. They found no statistically significant difference across academic disciplines regarding their findings. Gardner's (2009) study of student and faculty attributions in completing doctoral programs concluded that it was not that students were incapable of completing a doctoral program, but that prior faculty members or poor academic experiences had failed them. However, the faculty responses concluded that students lacked ability, drive, focus, motivation and initiative. Faculty perceptions of student lack of ability factored into student departure decisions. Because of these findings, it is no wonder that in the USA, doctoral student completion rates hover at about 57% across all disciplines (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Across disciplines, the completion rate varies from 5.2 to 9.3 years (Kim and Otts, 2010).

To this end, it is important to understand teaching strategies which can foster graduate level student success prior to the first day of class, on the first day of class, and as class progresses. This paper discusses how to create positive learning environments and identifies specific hands-on learning activities appropriate for most disciplines in all learning formats.

2. CREATING A POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN THE GRADUATE LEVEL CLASSROOM

Instructors must be proactive and anticipate challenges students are likely to face during the class when creating a positive learning environment for students (Lyons, McIntosh, and Kysilka, 2003). In every program of study, there are difficult courses for students to assimilate. The extent, to which interactions take place in a graduate program, whether traditional, blended, or online, goes a long way to foster success. The study by Wells and Delinger (2011) on the type of learning environment revealed that quality of instruction is more important than the medium by which the content was delivered. Therefore, designing courses that appeal to student learning styles helps minimize student attrition (Park, Perry, & Edwards, 2011). This is true for both traditional and online programs. In the past, online was believed to be suited to only visual learners. With advances in recent technology online courses are now designed to accommodate various learning styles.

According to Dunn and Dunn (1999), students' ability to learn and retain difficult information is based on physiological, emotional, sociological, and psychological factors. Therefore, instructors need to consider incorporating appropriate classroom practices for a diversity of learners.

Creating a positive learning environment is very important and should start before the first day of class, continue on the first day, and as class progresses. In this section, we will discuss some strategies to increase trust, ease anxiety, and add to the positive learning environment.

a. Prior to the First Day of Class

Building trust between learners-learners and learners-instructor early helps student become comfortable with collaborative and group work later in the course. Invitational learning, as described by Purkey and Schmidt (1990), brings out possibilities within each person and helps develop classroom relationships. Shaw and Siegel (2010) summarizing works in the field of Invitational Education (IE) indicated that Invitational Theory is "a set of congruent suppositions about constructive human thinking and behavior that when applied across a multitude of human endeavors increases the probability for positive outcomes" (p.106). This is why, as instructors in a doctoral program, we endeavor to use an invitational approach to increase positive outcomes with regard to graduate success.

Prior to the first day of class, we place as an announcement for the students a motivating welcome email. This is the first information the student will read about the class from the instructor. All learning formats can adopt this because as instructors, we have access to

our classroom prior to the students. Below is a sample motivating welcome email:

Hello All,
"Welcome to Quantitative Methods and Analysis class. This class involves the use of quantitative software called SPSS for data analysis. The classroom contains all the data that will be used for running analysis both in the assignments as well as the final examination. The syllabus identifies where you can purchase the current SPSS software. All the labs in the Argosy campus have the SPSS software for your use. We also have the Academic Resource Center (ARC) that you can visit for additional help.

Our first face-to-face meeting in this blended class is January 24-25. You are required to respond to module one by listening to the tutorials/WebEx. By experience, I know students do have anxiety about this statistics class. I want you to note, however, that you are in good hands and there is nothing to fear at all. I believe the experience you will all receive at the end of this class will be rewarding. You will all become proud statisticians by the end of this class."

b. First day of Class

The most important day of class, is the first day, not the last day. The first class meeting, according to Svinicki and McKeachie (2014) can be likened to meeting a group of strangers which can be exciting and anxiety-producing for both students and teacher. Students who are not comfortable during the first day may decide to drop out of the class or even the program. "... Your students enter the class with high expectations. They come for more than the education. They come to meet others, participate, have fun, study, and learn. It is an exciting time in their life" (Wong, 1991, p. 46). For adults to be successful learners, instructors need to know how apply adult learning theory (Knowles, 1990) to classroom instruction.

The first day of class can assume various activities as a welcome to class. In this paper we describe how we utilize (i) nameplates, (ii) autograph collection activity, and (iii) providing students with a schedule.

(i) *Name Plates*: Using nameplates helps members of the class and the instructor get to know each other personally. This initiates dialog early on day one (Lyons, McIntosh, and Kysilka, 2003). In creating a nameplate, ask students to complete a name plate with items related to the course content. Items to be included on the nameplate may vary as necessary for each course. To start, have students fold unlined paper in thirds lengthwise. Using markers have students: 1) Write their names in the middle section. 2) Underneath name write organization to which they are aligned and their position. 3) Have them draw (no words) three pictures related to goals related to the course content.

For traditional, small class-size courses, students introduce themselves to the entire class showing the nameplate and describing what the pictures mean. For large classes, break the class into groups of 4 or 5 and have them introduce themselves to each other within the group. Then, pick one student from each group to introduce themselves to the entire class.

For online, ask students to reach out to one member of the class after selecting the individual's member's nameplate and try to guess what each picture means. The student will contact a partner to discuss the nameplate. See sample name plate in Figure 1.



Fig 1

(ii) *Collecting autograph activity*: the purpose is to help students feel a connection to each other. It also helps to dissipate course anxiety as they start to get to know each other.

In the traditional format, this requires students to move around the room to meet other students. Students get one person to sign his or her name next to the descriptor. Allow students no more than 5 minutes for the activity. They probably will not have time to get signatures for all items. By experience, we usually notice at the end of this activity, students suddenly become animated, begin laughing and talking, start helping each other, and naturally relax.

For the online, the same activity can be placed in the classroom and students can be asked to complete the sheet on the first collaborative learning with the instructor. Sample Autograph activity is shown below:

Instruction: Get one person to sign his/her name next to the descriptor. A person's name can appear only once.

1. _____ Someone who has travelled from outside the USA to attend this conference. From _____
2. _____ Someone who has a pet a home. What kind? _____

3. _____ Someone who drove to this conference. From where? _____
4. _____ Someone who loves to eat hummus, curry, noodles, or rice. Which one? _____
5. _____ Someone who shares a favorite hobby or leisure time activity. Which one? _____
6. _____ Someone who tries to be a true friend. How? _____
7. _____ Someone who works in a discipline different than you do. Which area? _____
8. _____ Someone who lives in the USA. Where? _____
9. _____ Someone who has visited an Orlando landmark on this visit. Which one? _____
10. _____ Someone who has never been to Orlando prior to this conference.

Adapted from Forte, I. and Schurr, S. (1991). *Operation Orientation*. Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications

(iii) *Class Schedule*: Using a class schedule helps students be aware of the content and activities to be addressed during class time. It is important to spend a few minutes at the beginning of each class to review the class schedule. This helps students feel more comfortable with the content and activities during the class time. A sample schedule for a blended classroom format is shown below:

**Tentative Face-to-Face Schedule W7000:
Advanced Academic Study and Writing
Day 1: Date**

Time	Topic	Activity
9:00-9:30	Meet and Greet	Nameplates; autograph activity
9:30-10:00	Volunteer helpers; Introductions	Introductions
10:00-11:00	Course overview: syllabus, textbooks, assignments, My Writing Lab, academic guidelines and policies; navigating the ecollege course platform; available resources—online and onground; turnitin; class schedule	Lecture; Q & A
11:00-11:10	Break	
11:10-11:45	Module 1: Individual research topics for doctoral research study	Class discussion of each student's proposed topic and

		research questions
11:45-12:45	Lunch	On your own
12:45-1:00	Move to Lab	Lab 314
1:00-1:30	Using the Argosy Atlanta Information Commons	Library Presentation : Library Specialist
1:30-2:00	Module 1: Individual Research Topics (continued)	Class discussion of each student's proposed topic and research questions
2:00-2:30	Module 2: What is a research article?	Identification of the 5 elements of a research article; research methodologies
2:30-3:00	Campus Academic Resource Center (ARC)	ARC Presentation: ARC Director
3:00-3:10	Break	
3:10-3:45	Module 2: Locating Sources: Information Literacy;	Individual advanced database searches to locate possible research articles related to doctoral research study
3:45-4:00	Module 2: Online data bases and searches	Identifying individual research articles related to research topics (print minimum of 2 articles to bring to class on Sunday, May 15, 2016)
4:00-4:30	Module 3: Use of Theory: what it is and how to identify in your research articles	Identify theoretical framework in individual research article
4:30-5:00	Wrap-up	Review; Q&A's

For the online, the schedule can be adapted for a weekly schedule. A shorter version for a weekly online schedule can request students enter a weekly short discussion of how they were able to adhere to their schedule; how they adjusted their schedules to meet the required online hours attendance to meet class goals; how they were unable to meet required hours and goals; and frustrations of each work session. A weekly online schedule like this could be used as a self-assessment tool with regards to time management.

c. As Class Progresses

According to Roberts and Pruitt (2003), adult learning should be both an active and interactive process. This can be achieved by employing novelty and using hands-on,

concrete and real-life experiences. In this paper, we discuss some novelty, hands-on, concrete and real-life activities employed in the graduate classroom. Some of these include:

(i) *Fun Time*- The instructor uses this time to help students get a change of pace in the lesson. Many activities can lead to graduate level higher order thinking skills. Example of a fun time that uses Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) is presented below:

- The situation you are most likely to make excuses is ---
- The one excuse you most often use and why you need to use that excuse is ---
- The funniest and most outrageous excuses ever heard is --
- How many birthdays does the average person have—
- Do they have a 4th of July in Brazil and France--

(ii) *Use of Hands-On*: Both the traditional and online format of learning can utilize hands-on activities. While the traditional learning and blended learning will conduct the activity in the classroom, the online classroom can utilize the same activity as a part of learning system assignment.

Some of the hands-on and concrete activities we have adopted in the classroom include non-linguistics representations, open-ended scenarios, and categorization.

Non-linguistics representations: We use the non-linguistic representation to teach classes such as the Advanced Academic Study and Writing and Introduction to Research Methods to students in Business, Education, Counseling, Organizational Leadership, and Pastoral and Community Counseling programs. These courses are the beginning classes in some of our graduate programs. Successful completion and understanding of these classes drive the success of the student in the entire program. This is the reason for the use of novelty to enhance success in the course. In the use of non-linguistics representation, multiple topics representing studies in different designs are presented. Students in small groups will sort topics according to design. Students will discuss in groups why such topics should be conducted in the choice of design and why? See fig 2 below.



Fig.2

Open-ended scenario: This involves presenting real life experience in the form of open ended scenario in the research classes. We utilize this real life experience activity to initiate dialogue with respect to research interest among the different disciplines in the class. Students will be allowed 2 minutes to view the scene; write down what they think is happening in that scene, and individually share their thoughts. By experience, no two individuals will project out the same thing. Students usually note their interest as viewed in the picture. Based on individual's writing, research topics, designs for conducting the research and so on are discussed. Pictures can be varied from class -to- class.



Fig.3



Fig. 4

Categorizing- This involves providing students laminated relevant pictures relating to course outcomes and then group discussion evolves from it. (Marley & Carbonneau, 2014.). In the sample below, pictures of household items were provided to teach data analysis in qualitative research. Findings showed how the females differ from what males constructed as themes despite been provided the same pictures. The females constructed themes in

regards to household use (decorating and cleaning), see fig.3. The males constructed themes in regards to temporal placement (Working and In Kitchen), see fig. 4. Categorization can be used in any learning format.



Fig. 5.



Fig 6.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the intent was to call attention to simple but innovative activities that instructors may adopt in the graduate classroom to create a positive learning environment, and subsequently foster graduate student success. Since students' ability to learn and retain information are largely based on physiological, emotional, and sociological factors, graduate instructors must strive to incorporate new and innovative, yet, quick and easy ideas to make students comfortable prior to first day of class, on the first day of class, and the remainder of the course instruction. Our perception of the use of some innovative, yet quick and easy activities includes use of a motivating welcome email, name plates linked to learning goals, and collecting autographs to ease class tension, as well as the use of a daily or weekly schedule to focus learning. The use of hands-on activities for continued motivating classroom learning. It is our hope that some of these activities may help improve the graduate learning experience and subsequently graduate success.

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