

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Students Are Trying to Get Different Things out of Being at University

What students do as they are learning, how much they do and to what level, and what they pay attention to, varies a good deal from student to student. And an important determinant of these differences concerns what they are trying to get out of studying. Students go to university for different reasons and choose courses for different reasons and as a result they behave differently and they value different aspects of teaching and assessment. They make judgements about the quality of teaching, to some extent, in terms of the extent to which it helps them to achieve their goals regardless of whether they coincide with the goals of their courses.

The most common distinction that is made is between vocational orientations and academic orientations: whether students focus on what their education will achieve in terms of subsequent employment (whether or not they have a particular career or profession in mind, or whether the subject itself is their main interest, independently of its utilitarian vale. In a more general sense this can be seen as a difference between an interest in practical implications and 'real life', that might be useful later, or an intellectual interest in debates and ideas, right now, regardless of whether it might be useful later..

The vast majority of courses in higher education no longer lead to a predictable job.

Even science courses nowadays produce graduates more than half of whom will never again do anything with their scientific knowledge. So a vocational orientation is often about how their degree will either get them a job, any job, or will give them generic skills that will be useful to them in almost any job, rather than that the content of the course will have direct relevance to their subsequent working life. Despite trying hard to do well there may be little interest in the subject matter itself. Modules may be selected by students because they offer training in statistics or questionnaire design, alongside the content, rather than that the content itself appeals.

This 'vocational vs academic' distinction might be seen instead as a difference in students' preferred learning style: dominated by a general focus on practical applications and concrete experience on the one hand, or on reflection and abstract conceptualisation on the other, regardless of whether students with these styles have a vocational orientation or even an interest in the particular subject matter at hand. Learning styles are not 'hard wired' to any great extent and can be quite context-specific and flexible, but nevertheless many students have preferences for what they do with subject matter, left to their own devices.

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If you have no idea of the balance of these orientations and preferences in your classes then you are not in a good position to decide what emphasis you should be placing on, for example, real world examples, or whether you should be setting assignments about ideas or about their application. Engaging students is not just about you being engaging, but about understanding what it is that engages your students.

Cutting across this vocational/academic distinction, however, is the crucial issue of whether students have an intrinsic or an extrinsic orientation. An intrinsic vocational orientation to studying medicine might involve wanting to become the best doctor you could possibly become, learning about medicine and learning practical skills to the greatest extent possible. An extrinsic vocational orientation, in contrast, might be simply to want to qualify as a doctor. This might result in highly strategic study behaviour: question spotting, doing just enough to pass, choosing modules with lower failure rates, choosing specialisms with better employment prospects, and so on.

In a similar way there are intrinsic and extrinsic versions of an academic orientation. The intrinsic version might involve a History student being wholly fascinated and endlessly wrapped up in History itself. This might reveal itself in asking questions out of a sense of inquisitiveness, rather than to check on a fact or that a topic might come up in a test, and in reading outside the reading list, even if this meant overlooking recommended texts. An extrinsic academic orientation might take the

form of trying hard enough to get a 2:1 that would provide the qualification to undertake an MA in History. The intrinsic orientation might result in choosing an interesting but difficult topic for a project while the extrinsic academic orientation might result in choosing a safe topic that could be tackled easily and quickly with little risk of failure.

In terms of how much time students spend studying, or how interested they are in your lectures or the reading list, whether students have an intrinsic or extrinsic orientation may be more important than whether they have a vocational or academic orientation.

This distinction between academic and vocational orientations ignores personal concerns. Mature students, in particular, often have a dominant personal orientation. An intrinsic personal orientation might take the form of wanting to become 'the best person one could be'. Aspects of taught courses might engage such students, and they might take everything on every course seriously as it is perceived as inherently worthwhile and self-improving, whatever it is. But they might also be interested in competing activities such as volunteering and making use of a wide range of opportunities and experiences on campus. An extrinsic personal orientation might involve trying to prove to oneself, or to others (such as parents) that you are a good enough person to justify going to university, or as good as others, or capable of getting a first, or whatever. It may be wrapped up with personal identity and a feeling of self-worth. There is a phenomenon at the Open University of

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students withdrawing as soon as they are accepted, as acceptance validates their self-worth. Here the subject matter, again, may have little relevance, though doing well, passing, or at least not failing, might be quite important. Changing courses might be not because of interest in the subject but because there might be less risk of failure in the other course.

Finally there are some students for whom studying is hardly relevant. They have a predominantly social orientation and want to have a good time. There is no 'intrinsic' version of a social orientation – it has nothing to do with an interest in the subject matter or their courses, except that it offers opportunities to meet interesting and fun people, network, and so on.

Extrinsically oriented students may demand detailed specifications for assignments, recommended reading lists, clear indications as to what might come up in the exam, detailed criteria, and so on. They want to know how to meet externally defined requirements as easily and as reliably as possible. Their focus on feedback on their assignments is why they got the grade they did, not what they might learn about the subject matter. They may not be interested in being stretched and challenged, but rather in meeting requirements by using their time economically.

Students do not have a single or simple orientation. A vocational extrinsic orientation

may be mixed with a personal intrinsic orientation, just as people undertake jobs to earn a living so that they can have fulfilled lives in other ways away from their work. Students can get completely wrapped up in some subjects and study them in depth, pursuing their own interests, while treating other courses in highly strategic and disengaged ways – saving time on one course to 'spend' on another.

Students also evolve in their orientations over time. Unfortunately the available evidence is that this tends to involve a shift from intrinsic orientations to extrinsic orientations, as they work their way through three years of a degree. Students may spend an ever smaller proportion of their time on anything other than formal course requirements and marked assignments, seemingly abandoning their own intrinsic interests. This is quite an indictment of higher education and the opposite of what teachers aspire to.

Given the importance of orientations to how students respond to our teaching and our courses, it is discussed very little. Interviewing students about their orientations reveals that they often have a very low level of conscious awareness of why they do what they do and find it hard to articulate. Whether students are likely to change towards a more intrinsic approach to their studies if they talked about it more and made more deliberate study decisions is not known.

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