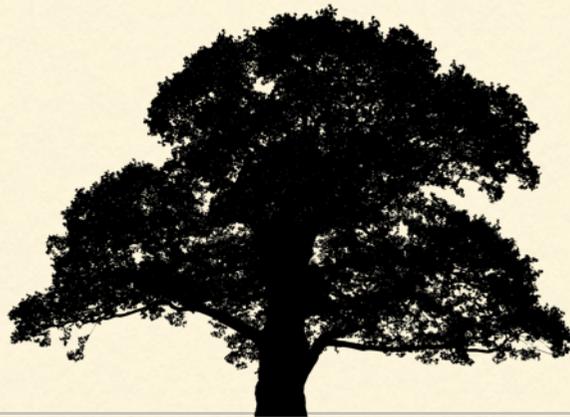

Student Attitudes Toward Learning in Post-Secondary Education: Making Learning Fun Again

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ABSTRACT

This study qualitatively explored the specific contexts encompassing the college learning environment, in order to better understand student attitudes towards learning in post-secondary education. For far too long, stagnant standards have continued to be in play in regards to what is typical of college classroom settings, the styles of teaching that are often used, and the inner-workings of the student-to-teacher dynamic. A primary objective of this study is to discover and properly utilize students' current attitudes, in application, to better allow for an overall heightened learning experience in which students find learning fun and engaging. This study used approximately 10 college-university students (8 female and 2 male), ages 19 to 30 (mean age 23), who were either currently enrolled or had recently graduated, and were interviewed via a semi-structured interview protocol. Additionally, two separate observational periods took place that aided in documenting examples of the current styles of teaching within the overall classroom dynamic. Interview responses and observation records were later assessed and coded in order to observe if any patterns or predominant themes were repetitive, across both situations that were observed in this study. Guiding research questions and the results are discussed, as well as implications for future research and limitations pertaining to this study. Lastly, all observed themes from the interviews and observations performed are sufficiently grounded in theory, utilizing the framework Integrative-Exchange theory, to better allow for the visualization of real-world applicability from both a micro and macro level of analysis.

I was barely even four years old, and I remember how badly I used to pester my mother about wanting to go to school, for reasons unknown to me at that time. I always had this deep burning sense of desire to learn, and I mean learn everything! Of course, because of this my mother always referred to me as the “living sponge” because I could quite literally pick up anything I learned very quickly, always remaining with the dire thirst for more. For example, I learned algebra one summer, just for fun, from my babysitter when I was still a meager second grader, and I was so proud of myself that I knew how to spell a hard word like “hippopotamus” at just five or six years old. As some might call it, those were the good days, very good days indeed.

Those were the days when learning was something that one looked forward to because it meant utilizing the imagination and your unique creativity to put your own personal spin on projects and papers. Anything was possible, the sea was your oyster in terms of not having pre-set limits on how big and incredibly crazy your ideas could actually be. We were engaged and locked into the seemingly limitless possibilities that we could gander and tweak, usually something that would literally blow the teachers mind! However, something seems to happen along the way, learning becomes more difficult and less creative; beginning to amount to hours spent critically thinking about an assignment that just doesn't quite offer that “creative spark” that it once did. Young students whom often looked forward to utilizing their imaginations to the upmost of its capability, now however, as adults never once hear a genuine request from an educator that entails tapping into the abundance that is ones' imagination. Thus students' unique creativity eventually morphs into nothingness; the imagination becomes something that just gets stored away in some hallway closet with the old winter coats, often left unused and forever forgotten about indefinitely.

However, this does not necessarily need to be the case according to some of the more recent findings existing within the relevant literature. For instance, Billings and Halstead (2005) have shown much success when exploring this idea by utilizing games and/or gaming within the classroom setting. Gaming has been repeatedly shown to be enjoyable by everyone at any age in many differing context. In addition, using games for learning is significantly related to many other positive outcomes, such as: 1.) facilitating an increased learner participation, 2.) observed increases in student motivation, coupled with similar accelerations in goal-oriented behaviors, 3.) the increased retention-and-recall of important material currently being learned in the classroom via the actual gaming experience itself. These findings alone provide us with some very important and interesting insight regarding both its use and application, both

in theory and in applied practice. One example supported by the literature goes further to illustrate that we can indeed make learning more fun and engaging, and thus was later observed in the real-world within a class of approximately 60 junior nursing students. Their nursing instructor took advantage of some of the benefits that gaming offers in the actual classroom-setting, and later found that it had contributed to the improvement of student memory and overall knowledge retention-and-recall during relevant memory tasks. This method ‘specifically’ went on to being documented and subsequently published at a later date, serving as a goal-and-means by which to share with others while continuing to bask in its gross benefits (Horsley 2010).

The underlying theme directing this particular nursing game was similar to that of Family Feud and Who Wants to Be a Millionaire, but rather this particular game was an abundant combination and a much more synergistic piece, that also integrated Microsoft PowerPoint Presentation Software to create multiple slides that would display several multiple-choice questions in articulate order. Therefore, student-participants were free to compete against one another in providing the correct answers in a timely matter that ensured they answered well before their competing classmates stood any slim chance. The game creator ensured that all students were included and/or were participants throughout every stage and position within the game, be it contestants, host, public crowd, etc. The teaching faculty member was present only to observe that the game moved along as it should and to provide expertise if any answers were challenged strictly on an as-need-basis.

Moving forward, it is crucial to draw the proper attention towards a separate but very prominently-problematic vein in which students' personal lives are isolated from their lives of education and work. Past and current literature combined goes on to illustrate a centuries old problem in terms of ‘the divide’ that exists within educational institutions far and wide, a divide between being able to have fun and that of being tied quiet and restricted; a divide that not only exists, but has continued to grow increasingly since first acknowledged many years ago. The Dean of Students at the University of Minnesota, E.G. Williamson (1957) appears to be one of the first individuals to properly shed light on just how large this divide is existing between our work and education domains are, in comparison with our home and personal life domains, during a speech provided the Student Leaders of Campus Activities. Williamson went on to define the life of the typical college student as encompassing embarrassment and inconsistency, in which their study had become nothing but an interference that beckoned upon their overall life-domains. Upon identifying key concerns about this issue, he later

suggested a means to remedy the divide and thus create an adequate ‘bridge’ of sorts, one in which fun and engaging-enjoyable experiences would also abridge into ‘ones’ inside work/and/education-spheres’, rather than occurring only largely within ones ‘outside personal life-sphere’. Seemingly enough, several individual attempts have been made through the years since the divide was first identified, and while the foundation of knowledge pertaining to this has only continued to grow considerably since, nothing of any real substance has been put into application (Merriam and Caffarella 1999; Glendon and Ulrich 2005). One might even describe the scenario as a situation in which there has been all talk and no play in this regard, whether it was just a means to an end; continuing through the years building more and more support but never truly vested in making any real change with the findings that have amassed.

One critical factor to consider when trying to rationalize or reason why nothing has been put into motion to enforce any actual change within the educational domain, may be more properly explained by the strict argument observed within some of the Sociological literature. Some of this literature acknowledges a prior support for a Pedagogy implicating that individuals themselves (e.g. the actual student learner) does not contain the needed skills or necessary knowledge prior to their actual continued attendance within an educational institution. Therefore, they cannot possibly contribute to their own learning process of any real substance or material, when discussing implementing policy changes that would allow for the integration of the student voice and have a say in their own learning experience and future (Horsley 2010). According to Knowles Adult Education theory, Pedagogy seemed to be the primary influence upon education up until sometime around the 1950’s. The term ‘Pedagogy’ defined teachers as the all-knowing, while defining students with no real capability to assist, thus students are passive bystanders in their learning process. However, Knowles noted that adults over the age of eighteen are unlike children in vastly regarded-different ways, mainly because they bring with them prior learning and life experience when entering a classroom. Thus, if students are equipped with this prior knowledge and life experience, then it is only logical to implement teachers as ‘facilitators’ who empower students during their learning experience, rather than participating forcibly in ways in which they create barriers to any real learning experience taking place (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 2005). Ever since this was uncovered, the Pedagogy approach was later shelved and traded places with a newer approach called ‘Andragogy’. Andragogy has since illustrated that it applies attributions to adult learners as a means to qualify that they do, indeed,

possess critically important prior life experiences and/or knowledge, therefore, adult students actually can contribute to their own overall learning processes.

Therefore, it is the goal of the current study to identify with today’s college students in the attempt to enable a more precise and clear understanding pertaining to how they feel in terms of their current college experience and their learning trajectories overall. Hopefully, by discovering how college students of today feel towards post-secondary education, and thus accurately assessing for how importantly their educational spheres rank within their lives, when in comparison to other personal life spheres, will better provide us the experts with the key that will ultimately [and hopefully] unlock the creativity that was long ago stored away with childhood memories. In large, it is believed that if one is adequately equipped with the tools necessary to hack into untapped creativity, as well as the freedoms to use this creativity as one feels fit, this might just be the missing puzzle piece that will make students want to wake up in the morning already excited to go to class, and thus engage in new learning materials in excitingly-new fun ways.

Literature Review

As individuals grow older and move further in life by advancing through the educational institution, learning with it seems to grow and branch further away from those once engaging experiences that were so dearly treasured as children. I wonder, however, why exactly is this even a societal norm or current standard, speaking in terms of education and learning as a whole? The whole situation almost contains the appearance that once you are close to near becoming an adult, life requires one to put away childish nonsense and anything in resemblance of it—thus, becoming a mature and responsible working adult. An adult whom revolves around strict adherence to getting as much done, as quickly as possible, because today society pushes for this non-stop fast-pace of one never wasting one second of their time; more often than not resulting in having absolutely no room nor time for fun within work-and-school domains as an overwhelming new reality. Oftentimes, individuals will passively resort to and accept this dichotomy that society has presented them with on the daily, often with no questions asked. Face-it: your work life, training, and education is the serious part of your life that must be completely structured, while your personal life outside of these domains become the fun and engaging parts of ones’ life. However, why should one just accept that without question, especially so when nowadays there are a vast array of resources readily available to us. Resources and advancements have been made that can and will improve adult life, while also ensuring

to make it more engaging—so much so that ones' pure enjoyment of loving what it is that they do/learn, and the job they end up doing later on with this!

As past literature has abounded to clearly illustrate, one of the primary problems that remains a driving factor and continues to plague the educational-domain for many years now, is that an enormous 'separation and divide' continues to exist between school-life versus home-life; between learning something new and having fun with it (Zeichne 2010; Williamson 1957). However, this need not always be the case, especially in the now, when in this day and time we have such an abundance of technology within our short grasp, when if put to good use, could literally revolutionize learning as we know it. Indeed, research suggests that learning can be fun again, not just for child learners but for learners of every age. Stoney and Oliver (1998) have done just that by creating an interactive program at Edith Cowan University in Australia, that follows the principles of a more self-and-resource-based learning experience that appeals to the adult learner. Additionally, together they explore and contrast any current and/or traditional authoritative modes of teaching, and mix things up a bit with integrating a newer epistemology that places teachers and students on the same playing field—thus completely discarding any of the pre-existent hierarchical structure that once served as a barrier between student and teacher.

The Gold Standard: Authoritative Styles of Teaching

Yes, through intensive observations there does appear to be some typical standards existing within education. One in which authoritative teaching styles have been clearly observed, thus resulting in most coming to consider this the gold standard: the norm of teaching practices, boiling down to the conclusion where most accept and believe that this is just simply the way things are supposed to be. When students arrive in the classroom, they are immediately met with the perceptions of a rigid context, one which the teacher is always the head of the class, while all students must take a seat, face forward; begging the impression that the teacher is the authority and will be in charge of what the student will learn that day, and every other day for that matter. In simpler words, this illustrates an impression that learning is entirely a passive process where students do not get any opportunity for input, or any voice of their own, pertaining to what-where-how they learn. For instance, when a classroom setting sets such a strict adhering atmosphere, this translates over into even more difficulty for students to feel comfortable actively engaging in the learning process.

Considering however, support within literature has repetitively shown that students actually learn more efficiently and effectively

when they are allowed to actively engage the learning material. Also, allowing for the freedom to express and contribute their own views or opinions, without the need to fear any reprimand or becoming a target for embarrassment by the educator, results in more positive end-outcomes and is strongly supported by prior findings (Robinson and Kakela 2006; Leder 1987; Van Winkle 2014).

In addition, what is typical of college students of today has evolved tremendously in comparison to what once was a reality for most. Currently, the evolved college student must now juggle full-time school with full-to-part-time work, and in some instances having to additionally juggle providing basic needs and care to a family they may have at home. The present lifestyle that college students now largely experience is in no way similar nor illustrative of the 'traditional' college student standards that were once in play just a couple decades ago. Prior to this evolution, college students went off to college shortly after graduating high school in order to live on campus within dorms alongside their fellow peers. In an overall sense, they were still being very much sheltered and treated as children in most ways. Which during that period of time, it flourished largely because that was what the social norm was for that time period and the traditional college student of past did not have many responsibilities outside of maintaining their time on their studies. Within just a couple decades, society in general has withstood many massive adaptations and changes—thus, so with it has its college students also withstood and experienced radical changes across multiple interpersonal domains that are intrinsically related and affected by the education-domain. Today, college students are met with increasingly complex responsibilities and the need to ensure that they are managing every single moment of their day wisely. If society now expects the traditional college student to grow up and accommodate themselves to living in the real-world, then why is it that the very same society continues to treat college students as children while they are on campus and in classes, as if they have no prior experience with radical societal change? The equation here does not seem to add up accurately any longer, and it is vital for the education-institution to understand and embrace that in the end, change is inevitable. If change is inevitable, then with it we must adapt and continuously revise our schemata that we previously created for specific principles and their related domains.

The Role of Power and Integrative-Exchange Within the Classroom Setting

An all-encompassing feature of Integrative-Exchange theory by Emerson and Cook (1972) pertains to how power itself, may actually be a potential that is self-built into the underlying structure of rela-

tionships and interactive exchanges. Therefore, in order for social exchanges to flow properly, in as they should due to their transactional nature, requires that an equilibrium exists—an overall equal balance of both power and dependence between all parties involved within said unit of exchange. Emerson defined this power as a potential cost that any social actor must inherently induce upon another party, in order for that party to accept. Therefore, the dependence upon this power is a cost that the social actor is willing to allow and thus tolerate within any given exchange (e.g. relationship) to better ensure all is balanced as it should be, and no one social actor is left with the potential to carry more power than the other party involved has agreed (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2013: 177). An excellent example of this theory is the ongoing relationship and exchanges that take place between individual students and their teachers that can be observed from the level of single exchanges going all the way up to the overall social structure. Essentially, each in their own has some type of power over the other largely because they both need one another for the larger structure to exist and even work. When a balance has been achieved between exchanges of interactions, this is representative of the social structure as a whole working together because both sides need something from the other in order to maintain the system overall, just as in the classroom dynamic necessitating the need for both teachers and students in order to function efficiently as meant to.

One tactic that power-dependency exchanges can utilize to better ensure this balance/equilibrium remains, both in play and unaltered, is that each social actor agrees to accept and exhibit their vulnerability, in equivalence to the other party. By utilizing such a vulnerability approach, the network-wide dependency on specific structural positions allows for an escalation of the power-dependence theory from micro-premise (e.g. individual theory) to macro-applications (e.g. worldviews and real-world applicability). For example, a micro-oriented approach extends upon the social behavior that exists within a single dyadic exchange, for instance, student-to-teacher relations within a single classroom setting. However, if we take one step back and try to fuse it with a more macro-oriented approach, it begins to branch so that in the end, it would contain the entirety of the social-structure...which ultimately itself is a larger exchange network containing multitudes of smaller individual dyadic exchanges.

In simpler terms, when considering a classroom that standing on its own, houses a single-dyadic exchange, this illustrates the micro-premises of theory. While on the other hand, education institutions nationwide and/or worldwide as a whole are the actual seat to the larger social-structure, which thus would fixate it to a macro-

premise being that it contains an all-inclusive web that joins all exchange networks simultaneously (e.g. representative of all the college students and all the teachers/educators worldwide existing within one individual overall institution known as post-secondary education).

Therefore, in this study I qualitatively seek to explore the following research questions, so that I may acquire a more precise understanding pertaining to current college student attitudes towards learning within post-secondary education establishments. By allowing the development of a more thorough understanding of this issue, it would better serve experts with the specific insights needed to encourage the creation of a more fun and engaging learning environment for all college students and/or adult learners. This study seeks to find:

RQ1: What are students' current attitudes regarding learning and education, and how importantly does it rank in their lives?

RQ2: What are students' current attitudes regarding student-to-teacher relations and interactions in the classroom?

RQ3: Do students feel they have a voice in terms of input or collaborative strategies about their learning?

RQ4: How do students define the present structure and context of the university learning-teaching environment?

RQ5: Do college students believe that interactive learning environments are conducive to creativity and enjoyable learning experiences; more specifically, do they want to learn and attain a degree for its own sake?

Methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, semi-structured interviews were utilized to better provide the researcher with the depth of knowledge needed and necessary, in particular, pertaining to the real attitudes and opinions held by college students regarding learning in post-secondary education (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006; Glaser & Strauss 1967). In addition, the researcher scheduled two observational periods with two different instructors in order to observe firsthand, the dynamics pertaining to the learning setting, teaching styles, and student-teacher power dynamics that may or may not be present within the college campus classroom.

All official documentation related to observation recordings were kept secure within a Field Research Notebook, which is a journal instrument used in social science research to track all movements

related to the study; for example, research-related movements may be physical as what is done or said while out in the field or they may be non-physical as in the critical thinking processes along the duration of the study that relates back to analysis of data and observations. Consistency coupled with frequent journal entries are detrimental in securing a reliable, consistent research document for use during the analyses processes. Along the duration of study and in process of creating the field notebook, you must keep both a written and a typed version updated at all times.

Moving back towards the actual observation periods, the two classroom observation periods took place within a building housing largely social science departments at a mid-size technical university in the Southeast. One of the instructors that was observed was male, and the other was female, to account for any variations within the power dynamic according to gender. The male-instructed class took place within a computer lab due to the quantitative nature of the course (e.g. the course was regarding statistical techniques and testing for use in social science research; while the female-instructed class took place in a generic classroom setting and pertained to the instruction of group dynamics within social settings. The female-instructed class lasted approximately 55 minutes in length in comparison to the male-instructed class, which was much longer, lasting an hour and 25 minutes in length. The female-instructed class was mainly comprised of honor students enrolled in an upper level elective class in the social sciences, while the male-instructed class was comprised of average level seniors whom were enrolled in a required course pertaining to their major, and was a necessity to their graduation.

While significant variation existing within the power dynamics and perceptions of authority and control pertaining to the variable of instructor gender, was largely observed here, it was not addressed any further within this study: aside from only notating its apparent importance due to its possible future research implications in Sociological research and the social roles and expectations pertaining to gender.

In addition to the naturalistic observations of the traditional college classroom dynamic, approximately ten interviews were completed, consisting primarily of student responses to questions pertaining to their own college experience and their own personal attitudes towards learning as a unit. Prior to beginning each interview, both the participant and researcher completed two forms that would provide the researcher with informed consent. Informed consent is a systematic form in which a research participant signs physically thus providing the acknowledgement and agreement to participate in a re-

search study; informed consent can be revoked prior to, during, or after the study, upon expressed request from the individual participating. Additionally, two identical copies of one consent form were completed per participant, thus allowing both participant and researcher to maintain a private copy for their own records. Lastly, upon the participants implying their informal consent to participate in the current study, the interviewing process swiftly entailed thereafter.

A semi-structured interview protocol was implemented, enabling the researcher to better facilitate a more equilibrium “give and take” relationship with the participants. This also allowed for the interviews to flow smoothly, while almost not seeming like an interview at all; the objective here was to ensure all participants felt safe and supported while also knowing they could speak openly and honestly, without fear of the consequences associated with one of their educators overhearing. By ensuring the interviews progressed along more-so as a back-and-forth conversation, additionally assisted with helping participants to feel comfortable and not like they were being interrogated. Upon completion of interviews, the participants were quickly debriefed as to information regarding the study topic and goals, and later thanked for their time and cooperation in the current study. Lastly, participants were pleasantly reassured that if they had any questions later on pertaining to the study, to please feel free to contact the primary investigator at any time. During the duration of time that interviews were being completed and processed, another research techniques was simultaneously performed. All interviewee recordings were transcribed into Microsoft Word, thus creating a transcription database that provided the researcher with actual physical documents reflecting the interviewees responses [verbatim] for use during data cleaning, coding, and the final analyses. All physical transcription documents were organized by interviewee assigned numbers into a research binder to ensure ease in later retrievals.

In terms of ensuring that the current study followed all appropriate research guidelines and protocols, the current study implemented a research strategy coined Grounded theory. As opposed to quantitative research approaches that typically begin with a theory and thus later must find support for this theory and their related predictions, the current study implemented a qualitative approach in which the research process begins with in the field real-time examinations of the empirical world. In the beginning, the researcher is immersed densely within the social worlds relative to their research topic and chosen subjects to examine. Only upon the researcher remaining in the field for a long period of time, do you begin the actual theory development stage. Utilizing a grounded theory technique is a per-

spective in which you develop theory while in the field; this research strategy is also known as the grounded theory perspective (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2000). The researchers first and primary focus when initiating the grounded theory process, entails deep thought on the research setting that will be used, how will the researcher access their chosen population, will they have access to the setting, etc. Upon firmly establishing a clear and precise research plan, then the researcher moves on to developing rapport with potential research subjects that will be interviewed later during the research process (e.g. to ensure that participants are comfortable and are ready to answer questions during the interview entirely free and honestly, the researcher utilizes the field experience time wisely by coupling setting observations with developing a more intimate relationship with the people in the setting and any potential and/or likely subjects. Likewise, it is additionally vital to note that when using the grounded theory social science technique, the researcher will develop research questions and not actual predictive hypotheses. The research questions maintain the sole utility of guiding the researcher throughout the study while ensuring that the findings reflect directly to the questions that were initially asked early on in the study. This technique increases both validity and credibility on part of the researcher.

Findings

The following is a clear representation of a scientific analysis specifying how the interviewees personally feel about learning experiences in college, as well as their overall experiences with teachers and teaching styles as a whole. More specifically, it quickly became obvious that there were three general themes that arose during interviews, all of which remained pretty consistent across all interviews performed during the duration of this study. Additionally, each specific theme was further broken down individually and later found to contain three subfields that aided a more precise illustration of what the totality of that specific theme comprised. All themes and subfield findings are introduced and explained in order to provide a more detailed description and better understanding pertaining to how these themes were identified by the researcher, and how each may relate or contrast with another discovered theme and/or subtype. These are the interviewees and this is their stories.

Inflexible Time Constraints and Time Management

A majority of the interviewees extensively expressed how the need to manage time wisely due to such inflexible time constraints and deadlines, often left them feeling as if they never really would catch up on their projects and assignments. Oftentimes, an impending

result of the rushed feeling that most students perceive, ends in them completing the project or assignment largely below their normal par. Many expressed that even when met with an intriguing project that they could not wait to dig deeper into, their earlier motivations often left them quickly and losing this initial interest because they were not allowed the time to fully engage themselves in their work like they really wanted. Students consistently reported that they felt as if they are dragged through entire semesters on end. This frustration was often expressed as if they were literally playing a game of dodgeball, and teachers were the ones throwing balls at them, hoping that one or two might hit or stick; with the balls representing the learning material thrown out during lectures and the game of dodgeball representing college overall, as a whole. As one college student quickly exclaimed,

“Um...free-time...what free-time...like during school I do not even get to spend time with my daughter, better yet, I do not even get to see her every day, most days” (P08).

The literal race for the A—overall, college students interpret gaining a post-secondary education as being the equivalent of a literal race for the A. Due to conflicts in scheduling, often a result of having to juggle several projects or papers alongside studying for exams and maintaining either part-time or full-time employment as well, in turn, often results in students doing “just enough” to hopefully earn an A. Some expressed that while they really wanted that A, most would settle just for a B or C if it meant that they didn’t have to lose sleep or miss work in order to possibly gain the A. One interviewee contended,

“Also, the pressure of doing well...and a C counts more in college, so you have to make A’s and B’s to get the job you want later on...so it was very stressful trying to keep the GPA up” (P07).

Additional support for this issue was further illustrated by a different interviewee who questioned early-on during the project and implicated,

“Oh yeah, like you do not get, you do not have...have the time to like, let it sink in good” (P01).

Simultaneous commitments—It was pretty obvious long before the interviews were complete, that the typical traditional college student had come along ways from how they once were defined. In the past, typical college students often resided on campus in dorms with parents still footing their bills, allowing them the needed free-time to study and take care of themselves. However, today’s typical college student in no way resembles what they once were. The

new typical college student resides off campus in an apartment or house, works a part-time to full-time job, or even multiple jobs in some cases, while also having young children and family back at home that they are responsible for also. College kids aren't fully dependent upon their parents anymore like it once was, and are now beginning to live responsible adult lives at even earlier age. Most college students provided insight into how they are required to work while going to college, in order to survive and support themselves along the way. One recent college graduate described their experiences as,

“I would work in the mornings, or I would have class in the mornings and work in the afternoon...I would have 3 to 4 classes every day because I always took around 18 credit hours a semester, just to get through on time” (P06).

A sophomore further contended that,

“um, overall...class, homework, study, and work...just about every single day, so lots of study time for sure and I do have to make time to sit down and do projects...so I am ready for bed, exhausted, and am so ready to go to sleep” (P03).

Acceleration of student burn-out—A often frequent conclusion or result of college students literally juggling their daily commitments in and outside of the school setting is that they are left with little to no time to take care of themselves physically or emotionally. Students must sacrifice their sleep and their need to eat healthy and regularly in order to squeeze the most out of every second of their day. They must always put themselves last, oftentimes going months without a single day to themselves to refuel and charge up. When students consistently experience burn-out, a consequence of this arises in the form of them being unable to perform and apply themselves to the best of their ability. Ultimately, in this situation, even the best of the best college student is never quite able to fully apply and give their very best work. One interviewee expressed support of this issue and argued that,

“In one class I was just so overwhelmed that I didn't actually learn anything, you have to pray and get this one done and that one done...on a constant, I just feel I cannot keep up with it because deadlines are so close together” (P04).

Another loudly contended on further that,

“I have to give myself an hour and a half to drive here...I will start at 6am and arrive back home at 9pm, still with homework to do...so I get to bed at 2am just to wake up less than four hours later, to do it all over again” (P01).

Authoritative Standards: My Way or The Highway Dilemma

Many of the interviewees, excluding just one in particular, emphasized how upon their arrival within a classroom setting, the context of the environment seems almost staged to imply that students are there to listen, be told what they will be learning, thus resulting in students perceiving that they have little-to-no input in facilitating their learning experience.

Supporting a one-size fits all policy—The style of teaching that the majority of students claim to have experienced in college settings pertained to the typical ‘traditional-styles’ of lecturing and note-taking; the overall structure of the environment almost speaks to students that they all must face to the front while the teacher is at the head of the room, obviously and blatantly in charge. Research has shown that no one person learns the same way as the next, and oftentimes many will require multiple styles of teaching that are integrative and/or even accommodating to other relevant learning material. One college student exclaimed their frustrations with this learning-design by stating that,

“The normal way and style of schools support a one size fits all, and that you either get the material or you don't...” (P03).

An additional interviewee also justified feeling this way by further explaining that,

“well, it is kind of forced on you in order to make anything of yourself...like I knew I had to go to college, but it wasn't something like I wanted to go, it was I had to” (P09).

Jumping back onto what the first interviewee emphasized pretty firmly that,

“some professors do really good...some you have got to sit there and be bored to death, just to go home and read the whole textbook and guess what will be on the exam because they all [professors] like, do their own little thing based on their own personal beliefs and opinions” (P01).

No voice—One student whom is a junior-level college student whom does not live locally, went on to describe their experiences as feeling like they always hit a brick wall in terms of the many challenges that students endure, but never having any voice or say in their future,

“group work is always a challenge for me, my schedule is crazy and makes it difficult to get done...I just rather do it by myself...they

can never meet when I can, so I end up having to take off work and driving over an hour to meet them on their time” (04).

However, one interviewee illustrated some non-support for this issue and went on to communicate that she did feel as if she does have ‘some say or choice’ in terms related to her college education. She went on further to express that,

“having a voice really depends on the teacher, but I feel like I got a choice just because I chose my major...in high school you don’t get to choose your major but while in college you do, so you get some say in what you learn...some classes I felt we didn’t need in the major...I haven’t used these once since being in the field this year” (P07).

Teaching styles—

“I think it would be something good to do at the beginning of the year when everyone gets their books, so say, hey skim through your book and pick a topic that you’d like me to go over this year and I will fit it into my schedule...but the only suggestions we do get is the last week of school and they fix it for the year after, not us” (P07).

Another provided their personal experience in regards to moving through the different levels of college and the foundation that is provided them during this difficult transition,

“sometimes I will remember a concept being brought from an old class, but it is never evaluated fully and I feel we just gotta catch on to this because this is the standard of how it is for everyone” (P02).

Power Dynamics in Full-Play: The Student -versus- The Experts:

While some college students did express that they can perceive a power dynamic present in the classroom learning environment, a few others contended that they do not perceive this in their study or major. For instance, one nontraditional student whom is studying in the Human Ecology of Child Development field had stated that her professors maintain a more open and equal playing field between student and teacher, often offering them the needed social support in order to succeed in life. When asked if she perceived any power dynamics, she quick-witted replied back that,

“I have never felt like that, I really feel like a lot, especially the human ecology majors and professors, are able to relate with each other and um, they kind of take the time to get to know us and what is going on in our lives...I think they take the time to know how you learn so I feel it’s easier, I think it is just easier to get through

college if you are comfortable with your professors...they are just really encouraging while very professional, but at the same time” (P08).

Student-teacher Relations—

“you need a supportive relationship with them where you feel like you can approach them with any problems” (P05).

Visible Hierarchies—One student further explained that sometimes this seems apparent just in how the entire structure of the learning settings are put together in such a way to convey that the teacher holds all the power and say,

“it just most times doesn’t seem equal at all and you get some that make that apparent, that they are in charge...with night teachers who aren’t so traditional, I found it easier to feel equal with them because they will joke with us, the ones that are here during the day were always very structured” (P02).

Lack of Social Support—the first interviewee contended in response to her having no social support systems to rely on outside of the school domain, that she felt as if she really had been pretty lucky to have met one teacher in particular who has kind of guided her away from a prior life of abuse by her father and manages to keep her close-by under wing,

“my professor and advisor named Dr. Andy...she wanted to make sure I took positive psych this semester because its positive enlightenment and would help with all the negativity...and I really, I should have taken that class when I took stats [emphasized to communicate importance], maybe it would have balanced it all out” (P01).

Discussion

RQ1: What are students’ current attitudes regarding learning and education, and how importantly does it rank in their lives?

In general, while faced with many challenges and barriers, the college students whom were interviewed largely felt that it was all worth it in the end. Most understood that in order to achieve a long-term goal, such as a four-year degree, required that they put off any short-term declarations of joy and satisfaction. One thing they felt may have better prepared them for their time in college perhaps would entail offering more introductory type courses during the first semester of their freshman year that went over proper studying habits and techniques, along with how to adequately manage ones limited time they are given per day. Many complained

that upon their arrival to college it was often expected and assumed that they all already had the proper foundations in education to begin building their college degrees upon, however, students coming from counties with smaller schools and less resources didn't always come equipped with this type of foundation in place. Rather, some of the students who expressed less positive attitudes towards college overall were in fact the students who had dealt with these struggles early on in their college careers.

RQ2: What are students' current attitudes regarding student-to-teacher relations and interactions in the classroom?

Overall, students do not feel that teachers are very supportive of them and their learning, aside from the rarity of a couple occasions in which certain faculty members did take that extra step in providing the student with social support. Several students that were interviewed indicated that they currently had no family or outside social support systems and felt that the university should have a larger role in ensuring its students feel encouraged and supported while they are enrolled in their courses. Several also made some suggestions into this idea that would provide the university the open opportunity to extend a hand of support to the student body. When students feel that they are supported and that someone within the school has their backs in a sense, it positively influences them to succeed and perform better within classes. Once students gain the motivation to perform while feeling supported in their efforts, it allows them the ample opportunity to feel that they can have fun and engage the learning material. Ultimately, better bridging the fun sphere to the learning sphere.

RQ3: Do students feel they have a voice in terms of input or collaborative strategies about their learning?

To some degree, students do feel that they have a voice in their own education. For example, most feel that since they hold the responsibility of choosing what major and field of study to partake in, that in a sense they are free in choosing what they learn. However, most feel that the actual curriculum and material introduced to them within the classroom is based largely upon the teachers own personal beliefs and opinions. Many students felt that there should be something in place that ensures the material they are learning is more objective and open to all, not just tailored according to the professor. Additionally, most feel that current curriculum structures in place are tailored to fit a one size fits all audience of students, which is most certainly not the case. Students are individuals and therefore each learn in their own individual ways, and by allowing students to help facilitate their own learning serves to better fit their wants and needs.

RQ4: How do students define the present structure and context of the university learning-teaching environment?

Somewhere around 80% of the students that were interviewed indicated that the present structure and context surrounding the university learning-teaching environment was in fact geared towards a more authoritative power dynamic. Of the students interviewed, 20% did not feel that the college structure that they had been exposed to was authoritative or power dominating at all. However, the remaining 20% that identified in the latter all belonged to the field of study of human ecology and child development. Therefore, this indicates that a possible change in direction is underway within this field of study, that perhaps has not made its way across to other fields of study. The majority of students that identified with authoritative power dynamics of teaching belonged to the fields of study such as: Psychology, Sociology, Mechanical Engineering, and Business Administration.

RQ5: Do college students believe that interactive learning environments are conducive to creativity and enjoyable learning experiences; more specifically, do they want to learn and attain a degree for its own sake?

While few did express that they have always held a deep desire and love for learning, many others expressed their decision of going to college as being more of a matter of force or necessity, rather than an actual desire or want of learning for their own sake. One thing in particular that seemed to influence the attitudes that students held in this regard was that of how their own parents attached any value to attaining an education. Some of the questions towards the end were geared towards gaining insight into how the students own family felt in large towards post-secondary education as a whole. For example, one way of assessing for this entailed finding out if there was any presence of books within their homes while growing up. For instance, the more books that a family maintained in the home and the more books read to or with children, should better help indicate how importantly learning ranked in their lives overall. Upon analysis of interview responses, it did in fact indicate that the responses to this question accurately portrayed how importantly learning ranked in their lives and the lives of their families. Therefore, a result of how important education ranked in their personal lives also indicated the students level of commitment and time that they were willing to set aside towards learning new material.

Conclusion

By gaining a better understanding on a more personal level, pertaining to how college students feel [individually and generally overall]

towards learning in post-secondary education, shines the necessary light to help further direct this needed attention towards bridging the dichotomy that many college students today perceive. That is, that our home and personal lives are the fun and enjoyable division all while our work and educational lives are the tedious and boring division. However, by being active participants in ones' own learning experiences, while also extending on life knowledge, wisdom, and understanding regarding the many complexities of life, can be and already is for some: extremely fun and very rewarding. Therefore, all the more reason to better identify the specific contexts and factors that give young adults the impression that working towards a life goal, such as their education, only requires minimal effort to do well enough to pass for the grade and move on. The result of the just well enough to pass mentality is that adult students are not retaining vital knowledge accrued during their training, beyond the classrooms front door.

Until the atmosphere of power present inside the classroom and within the social exchanges taking place are nourished and allowed to evolve into a more supportive student-to-teacher-relationship fostering equality, I am afraid the two will remain unbridged. Sadly, when vital resources that are readily available thanks to technological advances, but just aren't being bridged and utilized within the learning environment, this ongoing pattern of appearing seemingly of two separate worlds and spheres will continue to be a reality inside the educational institution. More specifically, young adult students will continue to view their teachers and mentors as being of an entirely different species completely.

Implications for Future Research and Limitations

By better understanding the young minds that are being trained up to partake in society, allows us to better direct which doors to open when doing future research. By and in large, one area within the university setting that needs further research is that of how the power dynamics within the classroom context vary according to the gender of the instructor. If we are going to actively seek to tear down the walls that are power that are still present within the educational institution, we must first understand the many ways in which they work and are built in the first place. Additionally, how does ones' background and environment, for example: social class and level of education, affect how they may perceive the presence of power within the learning realm. These are all viable directions that are warranted in researching further.

Also, by utilizing a different outlook and design within the study could reap potential vital information not yet found, such as, using a more deductive design in addition to current qualitative efforts. If

findings could be quantified, perhaps we could tell just how statistically significant the current issue at hand is while also improving the overall validity and reliability within the data. Lastly, understanding how college students feel towards post-secondary education only provides us with one side of the spectrum because it doesn't account for how current educators, whom are also past students, feel in terms of what works and what doesn't inside the classroom setting.

It seems that if perhaps one were to effectively apply integrative-exchange theory in this regard, one would need to ensure the necessary requirement of mutual agreement and understanding on behalf of both student and educator, on a more intricate cohesive level. Any relationship is a two-way street and the student-to-teacher dynamic is no different in this sense. Lastly, the necessity and great need for pilot studies set up in different areas in order to work out any program kinks goes without saying, to ensure accurate consistent results in the end. There are a number of viable routes left that could be taken further with this study and this study is only the first of hopefully many more to come. The answer to the question of "can learning be fun and engaging" is YES! Learning can and should always be fun for the one learning...the only thing that remains untouched is the 'how, when, and where' do we begin?

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