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COMMENTARY

Practicing what we preach and serving whom we teach

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Kath et al. (2021) provided detailed calls for action regarding changes that industrial and organizational (I-O) instructors should make to their courses and teaching styles; however, these suggestions give little to no attention, beyond a needs analysis, to the personal and individual differences of students. Consideration of students' lives and needs provides a dynamic context for every lesson. In a parallel to research or statistics, although their paper gives us direct effects, it lacks the indirect effects that are needed to become an exemplary educator. In this commentary, we advocate for a student-focused, empathetic approach in conjunction with the improved teaching methods that are suggested in the focal article. Expanding our focus to students' diverse backgrounds and individual differences will provide fair and meaningful opportunities for work and life enrichment. In this commentary, we will discuss student-centered needs including empathetic policies, meaningful learning with transferable skills, and work–life balance.

Empathetic policies

A major pitfall in the development of coursework is the one-size fits all approach. Many academics fail to appreciate the diversity in their classrooms when presenting material despite student demographics that are known at the university level. Tailoring examples and activities to better serve our student populations shows students that we are invested in them and their success. Material that caters to a predominantly White, affluent, or younger audience will not equally benefit those with diverse identities including non-White, English as a second language, or older students (Yamauchi, et al. 2016). Similar to avoiding racially biased SAT questions, allowing flexibility in the presentation of materials provides equal opportunity for engagement to all students.

Strict course attendance policies are another example of a common practice that harms students with diverse needs. Although mandated attendance, through discussion, in-class assignments, or pop quizzes are great for enforcing attendance, it is not uniformly believed to be better for learning. Regarding social justice, it can even be argued that these policies can adversely affect students, particularly the ever-increasing percentage of "nontraditional" students who work full time, have families, commute long distances, or are from low-income families. Although it can be argued that attendance policies are not trying to systematically disadvantage these students, it is likely that many disadvantages are a byproduct of mandatory or pseudo mandatory attendance policies that do not allow for work to be submitted after an arbitrary due date has passed.

Related to this, many classes have policies for absences that require "evidence" of the cause of the absence (e.g., a doctor's note for an illness). This, at least in the United States, is discriminatory to students who are, more often than not, required to see a medical professional despite a lack of insurance or infirmary provided by their college or university. There are many who have experienced faculty who act as though their title serves as a moral platform to judge the merit of an absence. Ultimately, those who enact these policies increase the stress and school–work–life

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conflict that research has warned against for decades. Our willingness to be open to accommodating student needs can make the difference between success and failure. If policies encourage students to dismiss work rather than hand it in late, they will learn less than those who are given the opportunity to catch up. In the way a manager builds trust with their employee, we should try to give students the benefit of the doubt, build trust, and show empathy and support when needed. We must remember that even a small gesture of kindness or compassion can show students that we are invested in their success, which creates a success-focused environment that enhances motivation (Covington & Roberts, 1994).

Meaningful learning wth transferable skills

In contrast to meaningful hands-on experiences, busy work can be detrimental to students' perceptions of course meaningfulness. For each assignment, there should be a clear need and application of coursework to increase the students' understanding of learning objectives. If we assign work beyond what is necessary, we undermine the effectiveness that the work is expected to have on learning. A meta-analysis on the effects of homework found that it increased learning up to a point, where 1.5–2.5 hr of homework was optimum, but any more than that had negative effects on achievement (Cooper et al., 2006).

Meaningful work can contribute to life satisfaction (Williamson & Geldenhuys, 2014), and for many students their academic life dominates their personal life. In a study by Duffy et al. (2012), the relationship between students' perceived career calling and life satisfaction was mediated by academic satisfaction. Creating meaningful course work, grading fairly, and providing realistic applications can increase student satisfaction and perceived meaningfulness. For example, guest speakers had a positive influence on pharmacy students' learning and career opportunity awareness (Zorek et al., 2011). If you do not have practitioner experience, bringing in guest speakers can further develop academic content and help students make connections to real world applications. In some instances, guest speakers may provide realistic job previews.

Transfer of training

Within training and development, the concept of "transfer of training" is frequently emphasized (Baldwin et al., 2017). In the classroom, transfer of training falls short because tests and assignments focus on learned materials rather than soft skills and direct applications to the workforce. Tests and assignments should be designed as a checkpoint for transfer of training, which translates to performance in students' respective careers. In addition, lessons on theory and research should include realistic examples and a hands-on approach, such as flipped classrooms, which help students practice self-regulated learning when they are applying newly acquired knowledge (DeLozier & Rhodes, 2017). Flipped classrooms are structured so that students go over course material before class and then class time is used for hands-on activities and discussions. This environment allows students to practice soft skills that will foster a stronger connection to the material and enable a smoother transition into their career (Baytiyeh, 2017). Soft skills include non-technical skills that transfer to most jobs, such as communication, problem solving, self-motivation, and the ability to handle stress (Nusrat & Naz, 2018).

Revise and resubmit procedures

Workplace performance management programs include opportunities to improve performance based on feedback. In contrast, assignments and exams do not teach students how to improve their work or how to accept and grow from criticism. One test should not define a student's grade; just as one aspect of an employee's performance should not define them as a worker. As such, a students' grade should be a holistic evaluation to identify their unique strengths and weaknesses.

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Therefore, having an equal weight for assignments, participation, projects/papers, and exams would create a more equitable system of grading. Offering a revise and resubmit policy mirrors workplace experiences better than the typical assignment, where feedback is only given once the assignment is submitted and there is no opportunity for revision. This model is directly related to many working positions where deliverables frequently go through several review and feedback cycles before delivery of the final product. The ability to accept, digest, and implement criticism and feedback is paramount to future performance in the workplace.

Within the classroom, instead of using punishment by lowering a grade for repeated mistakes, we should use grade-based incentives as positive reinforcement for incorporating feedback and making revisions. There is no benefit to spending an inordinate amount of time grading and commenting on student work for it to be ignored. If there is no formal system of revision, there is no way we can know that students even read the feedback, let alone whether they internalized it for future use. Implementing grading incentives by inviting students to revise their work based on our feedback and resubmit it for an increase in their initial grade can instill a positive attitude in students that is associated with the feedback (Garner & Shank, 2018). Further, for multipart assignments, this process reduces the amount of redundant feedback that is given. By providing different sources of motivation for students to succeed in the classroom beyond the intrinsic value of learning, we more closely mirror motivation to perform in the workplace.

Review and revise exams

If exams are a valued part of your classroom assessment, then it is imperative to review test items with item discrimination analyses (Boopathiraj et al., 2013). Anyone who does research on item development and survey construction knows how tricky it is to write questions. Yet there are professors who repeatedly use the same test without doing a proper psychometric analysis to determine the validity of the items that are used to assess student learning. One way to ensure the fairness of a test is to give points back for poorly worded/ambiguous items that the vast majority of students miss. Further, eliciting student feedback about test questions also provides necessary information to improve future tests. This allows us to explore our own weaknesses while also improving our ability to write valid questions and improving our relationship with our students. In some cases, the question itself is not the problem. Purely knowledge-based questions that are missed by most students signal that key points were missed from course materials, lectures, or assignments. These topics should be revisited in more detail to assess gaps in the students' knowledge and the source of the breakdown. As a further means of solidifying students' understanding, those knowledge questions can be included on the next test.

Instilling and respecting student work-life balance

At the end of the day, your class is not your students' only priority. They have other coursework and outside responsibilities. Many students must balance school, work, and family responsibilities that include, but are not limited to, full or part-time work, caregiving, or community responsibilities. We need to construct our courses such that material is accessible for every type of student in our classes. That does not mean we have to sacrifice quality, but it does require effort in constructing helpful and concise assignments, providing resources for students to use outside of lectures, and being available to assist students who reach out for help. Flexibility is critical to being able to accommodate students. Acknowledging that people have outside priorities and providing them with work–life balance can ease their anxieties, create a more open and honest environment for communication, reduce stress, and increase their motivation to do well in class (Sprung & Rogers, 2020). Making an effort to reduce the burden of your course, even if it is only by a couple assignments, can go a long way in terms of building a trusting relationship with students where they feel supported and are able to perform to the best of their abilities.

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Conclusion

When considering the future of education and our students, it is imperative that we move beyond simply meeting expectations. The rise of online and distance learning institutions has shown us that there are multiple formats for learning. Additionally, the recent pandemic has shown many that flexibility in the classroom is the only way for some individuals to be able to learn. It is our hope that this commentary encourages instructors to take a continuous improvement perspective when teaching and creating their courses. This commentary supplements the Kath et al. (2021) article by suggesting a student-centered approach in which we as instructors guide our teaching based on students' needs.

If you are unaware of what needs you are not meeting, we suggest that you gather feedback more frequently than is required by your university. Within each class, there are multiple opportunities to elicit feedback from students. Quick anonymous check-ins throughout the semester can help gauge whether students are grasping the material or have any feedback about the way that the class is conducted. Oftentimes, students do not know how to provide constructive feedback, so eliciting it multiple times throughout the semester helps them practice verbalizing what they need more effectively.

As I-O instructors, it is important to practice what we preach and serve whom we teach.

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