

Case Study – Utility Value

Read the following case study and then discuss with your group the questions that follow.

Julia has been teaching full-time at PCC for 4 years now. When she first started as an adjunct in 2012, she had no idea that she would fall in love with teaching and wind up being a full-time instructor. From the very beginning, Julia has always enjoyed talking about teaching with her colleagues, and if you were to ask her about her own learning trajectory as an instructor she would openly share how that learning curve was a steep one for her. During the first couple of years, Julia says all of her energy and attention were dedicated to: (a) figuring out the various logistical processes and procedures connected with being an instructor at PCC (e.g., Canvas, adding and dropping students, PCC Connect, etc.), and (b) gaining a solid grasp on the course content she was responsible to teach. Only in the last year or two has she begun to think more explicitly about her own pedagogical and instructional approaches and the ways in which they might be shaping her students' success. Coincidentally, Julia's own refocusing of attention onto pedagogy and instruction has occurred at the same time that multiple college initiatives have begun emphasizing the need to improve student success rates, and eliminate observable equity gaps along the lines of race/ethnicity.

During the 2017-2018 academic year, the Academic Senate sponsored two student panels. One was titled: "Why I Dropped Your Class," and the other was titled: "Why I Completed Your Class." Julia attended both and was intrigued by what she heard at these events. During the second panel, one student named Villyam shared about the importance of students developing some personal connection to the course content and related disciplinary concepts.

"I know that sometimes we go through this process where [faculty] are just explaining, but there's always an underlying reason for where these concepts come from, and I think if a professor can articulate that and can articulate where is this applied, I think it exponentially increases the student's interest." This student then reflected on this further, sharing: "[The Instructor] would bring in industry examples...and it could [turn out to] be something that interests a student and she/he didn't even know about it...It's like, [you should] give them real-world examples...that's also really beneficial, and something that really intrigued me."

In reflecting on what she heard at these panels, Villyam's comments were most striking to Julia. She had recently begun to pay attention to the fact that not all students in her own classroom seemed interested and motivated in the way she wanted them to be. Determined to enhance student success and equity in her own classroom, Julia began exploring some of the literature on motivation in community colleges and found the evidence pertaining to "strategies that foster a student's interest in a course" to be quite compelling. She settled on a couple of easy strategies to try out in her own classroom—(a) frequently and explicitly connecting course content to real-world examples and issues, and (b) frequently and explicitly sharing ways in which the course content might be linked to students' own values—and immediately began to incorporate them.

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While all of the students who typically conveyed interest during class continued to do so, these new strategies seemed to have little immediate effect on the interest/motivation of those she was specifically trying to reach. This initial lack-luster result did not deter Julia, however, as she was convinced these strategies could improve motivation for all students. She consequently continued to implement these two strategies through to the end of the semester, but her success never really improved. Whenever she attempted to bring in real-world examples or connect the content to students' own lives and the things they might care about, the tone of response from students remained flat. Julia was perplexed. Why were her students not responding to her efforts? Was she doing something wrong, or entirely missing some key components of these strategies? Was this particular method for fostering motivation just another big idea that does not work in reality?

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on Julia's situation. What may be some of the reasons her implementation of these two interest/motivation-fostering strategies has not been entirely successful?
 - a. How does Julia know what she knows about her students? Is it possible that Julia might be making some inaccurate assumptions about her students? Explain.