

Is Your Educational Psychology Class Boring? A Review of Teaching Methods to Engage Your Students

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Judith Warren Little, an educational researcher, once said: “School improvement is most surely and thoroughly achieved when teachers engage in frequent, continuous and increasingly concrete talk about teaching practices...” (Hammonds, 2010). In the spirit of continuing this critical dialogue, I have researched and reviewed a number of articles, which exemplify best practices to engage students in educational psychology courses.

I use many types of activities to engage students in educational psychology. For example, I have used children’s picture books to enhance instruction. Specifically, I have used the book *Leo the late Bloomer* by Robert Kraus (1971) to introduce educational psychology theory. This book also builds background knowledge, makes theory concrete and understandable, and creates images of concepts for students. Most importantly, it helps students make connections between the class lesson and real-world

application of common theories of psychology (e.g., biological, psychodynamic, sociocultural, cognitive developmental, behavioral). Students read the story, then break into groups to discuss the above mentioned concepts. After 10 minutes of group discussion, students present their responses orally to the entire class and engage in another round of discussion and debate. Because of the engaging material in the books and how easily it applies to the concepts, my students are often completely immersed in the activity.

Using the above example as an exemplar, I selected 14 excellent articles designed to engage students in educational psychology to review and annotate. Then, all the articles were summarized into one easy-to-use table (see Table 1). Finally, the chapter ends with a general critique of the reviewed articles and directions for future research as well as suggestions for practitioners.

Table 1. Summary of Articles on Engaging Students in Educational Psychology

Citation	Topic	Activity Type	Method Assessed	Learning Materials
Alderman & Beyeler (2008)	Motivation	Discussion, Writing	Descriptive	Yes
Boyatzis (1998)	Math Instruction	Collaborative project	Descriptive	No
Ceynar Rosell (2004)	Social & Emotional	Discussion, Observation, Role Playing	Descriptive	Yes
Cohen (1984)	Motivation	Discussion, Demonstration, Writing	Descriptive	Yes
*Deemer (2009)	General	Interviews, Writing	No	No
*Engle & Faux (2006)	General	Case Study, Discussion	Inferential	
*Florez (2010)	General	Case-Based Instruction	Inferential	No
Hagan & Richmond (2009)	Constructivism	Writing, Role Playing, Demonstration	Inferential	Yes
Hanich (2009)	Motivation	Interviews, Discussion	Descriptive	No
Harper (2009)	General	Discussion	Descriptive	No
Jeffries & Maeder (2006)	General	Discussion, Vignette	Inferential	Yes
Nirula & Peskin (2008)	General	Case Study, Films	Descriptive, Inferential	Yes
Ormrod (2005)	General	Discussion, Case Study, Student Artifacts	No	Yes
*Reynolds-Keefer (2010)	General	Discussion, Observation, Writing	No	Yes
*Seifert (2010)	General	Writing	Descriptive, Correlation	Yes
Sugar & Livosky (1988)	General	Observation, Writing	Inferential	Yes
Suter (1991)	General	Discussion, Assessment	No	Yes
*Vacc & Pace (1983)	Special Education	Writing	Inferential	No
*Zambo (2007)	General	Action Research, Writing	No	Yes
Zambo & Hansen (2005)	General	Case Study, Demonstration	No	Yes

Note. (*) denotes articles that were not fully annotated.

Annotated Bibliography

Upon a thorough review of the articles, five major themes emerged for improving student involvement in educational psychology courses. These themes included how to use technology as an engagement tool; how to use experiential learning to engage students; how to use illustrative examples to engage students; how to engage students out of the classroom; and how to engage students through classroom discussions.

Lions, Tigers, and Technology...Oh My! Using Technology to Increase Engagement

Technology is quickly becoming one of the most popular modes of engaging students in the classroom. Technology as engagement tools discussed in this section range from the use of electronic feedback systems more commonly known as 'clickers' (Harper, 2009) to the use of video-capture technology to record interviews (Nirula & Peskin, 2008).

Using technology-enhanced feedback. Over the course of two studies, Harper (2009) investigated whether two separate technology based feedback systems could enhance engagement in an educational psychology course. In the first study, Harper provided one class oral (digitally recorded) feedback on both in and out-of-class written assignments and provided the other class general written feedback. The qualitative results reveal that students believed the digital feedback was more personal, easier, gave a sense of confidence to the student, and was perceived as beneficial. Students who received the digital feedback also had a general trend in increased perceived competence, autonomy and intrinsic motivation. In the second study, clicker technology was used to enhance engagement. One class was trained how to use clickers (electronic feedback from students) during class lessons, while another class did not use clickers. Descriptive data suggested that those who use the clickers had higher rates of class enjoyment, slightly higher academic performance, and higher attendance. Students were also more prepared by reading and had increased verbal responses when compared to the class who did not use the clickers.

Video-capture of expert teachers. Nirula and Peskin (2008) presented two studies that attempted to utilize video case studies to demonstrate expert teachers' reflections on case studies. In the first study, students in an online class watched a series of videos of expert teachers thinking out loud while they read two case studies. Students then participated in several online discussions about the video case study. Descriptive data suggested that the

videos helped students apply class content to the elementary classroom, caused students to be more confident about their own ability to teach, and clarified their understanding of class material. In the second study, secondary education students either discussed the application of the case studies and wrote a brief paper (control group) or watched the video-capture of the expert teacher. Next, students briefly discussed the case study and wrote a brief paper (experimental group). Again, when students used the video-capture technology, they were able to apply class content, were more confident in their ability to teach, and understood class material better than the control group. Additionally, students who received the video-capture wrote significantly more than students in the control group. The authors suggested that video-capture is a valuable tool for enhancing engagement and teaching in educational psychology classrooms.

Living is Believing: Using Experiential Learning to Engage Students

Over 2000 years ago Julius Caesar (52 B.C) said: "Experience is the teacher of all things." Thus, educators have effectively used experiential learning as an instructional tool. Described below are four exemplars of experiential learning used in educational psychology classes (e.g., Alderman & Beyeler, 2008; Ceynar Rosell, 2004; Cohen, 1984; Hagan & Richmond, 2009).

The motivational toolbox. In an innovated class activity, Alderman and Beyeler (2008) focused on how to motivate students to learn motivation theories. The authors engaged students by having them analyze their own learning about motivation theory, and reflect on their own motivation and how they may motivate their future students. Through cooperative learning activities, classroom assignments, and classroom observations the authors had students create a large class assignment dubbed the "Motivation toolbox." Students wrote five personal motivational tools that they use and that they would have their future students use. For each tool, students were required to write a definition and purpose of the tool. For example, some students described goal setting and self-efficacy tools for themselves while creating attributional feedback and learned helplessness tools for their students. In a qualitative analysis, students reported that the assignment was useful, made the material concrete, and understood how to apply the course content to real-world situations.

Role playing bullies. In a creative role playing activity, Ceynar Rosell (2004) had students act as parents affected by bullying in their school to demonstrate and experience how future teachers

might deal with such situations. In the format of a murder mystery party, one student was assigned to be the principal of the school while the other students were assigned parents of students in a 5th grade class. Each student was given a script to use during the activity. Some of the scenarios that were given to select parents focused on a group of girls socially isolating other girls, or boys' name-calling. Students acted as parents to discuss whether these were incidents of bullying, and if so, how severe. They also considered if bullying is different for boys than girls. Students reported that the activity was interesting, that they enjoyed the discussion, believed it to be a good use of class time, and wanted to participate in more role-playing activities. No data was reported on whether the activity increased knowledge of bullying and bullying prevention.

Reflecting on and experiencing your own motivation. Cohen's (1984) experimental study was intended to not only demonstrate and enhance knowledge of intrinsic motivation in the elementary and secondary classrooms, but to motivate students themselves in educational psychology. Cohen used three activities to achieve these goals. In the first assignment, students were asked to describe goals for their educational psychology class and about a past learning situation that was exceptionally motivating. They then engaged in a 10-minute highly structured, yet ambiguous, tension causing activity. Students then contrasted (in group discussion) the two activities. The instructor facilitated the discussion to illuminate the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

In the second assignment, students analyzed their initial goals for the class using the motivation theory. This analysis continued throughout the semester when appropriate dilemmas occurred between goals and course objectives. In the third assignment, students completed a classic experiment (see Deci, 1975) to demonstrate the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Students reflected on the results by discussing how they relate to various motivation concepts. As a result of these three assignments, the course and teacher had significantly higher ratings when compared to a class that did not experience these assignments. Cohen did not evaluate the efficacy of these assignments on students' knowledge of motivation theories.

Constructivism taught constructively. Hagan and Richmond (2009) conducted a study to assess whether teaching educational psychology students constructivism (i.e., individuals construct knowledge by incorporating their experiences with

new information into previously learned concepts; Byrnes, 2007) in a constructive manner would affect the way students learned and viewed the teaching method. During a semester, 34 students were taught the theory of constructivism by experiencing a modeled constructivist lesson. Students were asked to create and perform a constructivist micro-lesson (e.g., teach math to first graders by using the manipulative of counting candy), evaluate and critique micro-lessons, and write a reflection paper on the micro-lesson, as well as write a theory paper on the pros/cons of constructivist theory based on their personal experience. Students made significant pre-to-post gains (over 8 weeks) in their academic and self-reported knowledge of constructivist theory. Additionally, students reported that they enjoyed being taught constructively.

I Can See Clearly Now The Rain is Gone: Engaging Students Through Illustrative Examples

Using illustrative examples, such as the case study method to teach educational psychology is widely used and proven to be effective (Engle & Faux, 2006; Florez, 2010). Additionally, students have reported that these methods are engaging, additive to student learning, and useful for providing important feedback (Smith, Malkani, & Yun Dai, 2005; Zambo & Hansen, 2008). Therefore, three examples of these methods are annotated below.

Instructional and assessment vignettes. Jeffries and Maeder (2006) conducted a randomized experimental study to assess the effectiveness of using vignettes to teach educational psychology. Jeffries and Maeder questioned whether the use of vignettes would improve content knowledge and result in transfer of course material to the classroom. Over the course of several weeks students were taught educational psychology concepts using no vignettes (control), summarized text passages, vignette only, or either a scaffolded evaluation focused vignette or a scaffolded synthesis focused vignette. Eight topics were taught using these methods (e.g., vicarious learning, self-regulation, locus of control). Half of the topics were taught face-to-face, and the remaining half was taught online. Results indicated when students received vignette instruction, they had significantly higher academic performance and transfer of learning material than students who were taught via a non-vignette method. Additionally, students reported that the vignettes helped them learn and transfer course material.

Student artifacts as case studies. With the purpose of applying classroom material to the K-12 classroom, Ormrod (2005) provided four detailed examples of student and teacher artifacts (i.e., using

actual examples of student's work and teacher's comments of student) to be used as case studies. These artifacts covered topics such as learning strategies, metacognition, self-regulation, motivation, instructional strategies, and how to teach social studies. Specifically, the "Warhawks Artifact" is an eleventh-grade history oral report of the War of 1812. In the artifact, students could learn about how the students conceptualized history and the events in the war. It was used as a practical tool to create discussion on topics such as learning strategies, epistemological beliefs, and general concerns with high school social studies education. While an interesting exercise, there is no supporting data to validate the efficacy of using such methods.

Picture books illustrate educational psychology concepts. In this well documented article, Zambo and Hansen (2005) described several ways to use children's picture books to demonstrate and illustrate educational psychology concepts. The authors defend the motivational and cognitive benefits of using picture books and how to select and use the picture book. For example, the *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* (Henkes, 1996) or *A Weekend with Wendel* (Henkes, 1986) can be used to make Piaget's theory more understandable and create images of Piagetian concepts such as preoperational thinking. A detailed matrix of picture books and corresponding, theory, concepts and/or vocabulary was provided. One drawback to this article is that there is no data to evaluate the effectiveness of using this method.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind: How to Engage Students Out of Class

Although much of this chapter is focused on how to engage students in class, there is a great deal of learning that occurs outside of class. Consequently, a number of well documented out of class assignments can be used to engage students (e.g., Deemer, 2009; Hanich, 2009; Reynolds-Keefer, 2010; Seifert, 2010; Sugar & Livosky 1988; Vacc & Pace, 1983; Zambo, 2007). A select few of these articles are annotated below.

Using student interviews as instructional tools for motivation. In a descriptive study by Hanich (2009), students completed an out of class assignment which focused on using student interviews to bridge the gap between theories of motivation and the practice of those theories. Graduate students in an educational psychology course selected at least two students from a K-12 classroom to interview. The students created their own sets of questions and protocol for interviewing. Some students focused on motivational concepts such as goal orientation while other students choose

to focus on motivational experiences. Students then transcribed the interviews and wrote a short paper summarizing what they learned. In class, students then formed groups and created a grading rubric to be used for assessing the assignment. Although no data was collected on assessing the efficacy of this assignment, students did report being motivated, having high interest and found value and enjoyment in this assignment. Many of the students also reported that the assignment was useful for understanding motivational theory and connecting it to the real world.

Using a preschool journal to engage your students. This article by Sugar and Livosky (1988), described how students could use a preschool journal to chronicle their observations and apply course content. After each observing preschool children for 1-2 hours per week, students applied their observations to content covered in class. For example, if students were learning about motor development, they then wrote about how their observations exemplified theories of development. The authors provide suggestion for setting up the observations, how to grade the journals, and discuss liability and ethical issues associated with this activity. The efficacy of this activity was not inferentially tested. However, students who elected to do the assignment did tend to increase their academic performance.

Bueller? Anyone? Anyone? How to Engage Students Through Discussions

As illustrated in the cult classic movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) it can be extremely difficult to engage students through classroom discussions. Fortunately, creative instructors have developed a few activities to engage students through discussions (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998; Suter, 1991),

Using cultural diversity to increase engagement. Boyatzis (1998) conducted a descriptive study to investigate the implementation of discussions and a collaborative project designed to demonstrate how culture plays an important role in child development and elementary and secondary education. In two class periods, students read journal articles comparing math achievement of American and Asian students. They individually wrote an analysis of the cultural differences using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and discussed (in groups) the cultural differences. Then, they formed heterogeneous groups to write a collaborative essay. In the final collaborative project, group members first generated a list of reasons for cultural differences in math performance and then generated five proposals to improve U.S.

math performance. Although the efficacy of this activity was not tested, students did report that the assignment helped them learn about cultural differences in education and understand the ecological model, enjoy the collaborative feature of the activity, and students rated the educational value as *excellent*.

Using the *What Works Test* to illuminate misconceptions. Suter (1991) used the assessment *What Works* (USDE, 1987) as a starting point to discuss student misconceptions of learning and classroom instruction. On the first day of class, Suter had students complete the 10-item true/false *What Works* test. At the completion of the test, Suter provided the correct answers and explanations for these answers. Subsequently, items such as “Moderate television viewing can help children learn (true).” (p. 43) were used throughout the semester to first introduce topics then to engage students in discussion on the relevant research, methods for collecting data, and other concepts in educational psychology. Suter did not collect any descriptive, inferential, or qualitative data on this activity.

Suggestions for Future Research

While there are a number of well-documented studies that explicate how to engage students in educational psychology (e.g., Hagan & Richmond, 2009; Nirula & Peskin, 2008), there remain a number of concerns with these studies that may be improved upon in future research. First, there is a lack of research that addresses unique and specific

concepts in educational psychology. Outside of motivation and general educational psychology topics, only four of the 20 articles reviewed, investigated specific concepts. Future research should focus on methods for engaging students in other educational concepts (e.g., behaviorism, group and individual differences, instructional strategies). Second, many of the articles reviewed, lacked ample description of “how” to actually perform the activities in class. Obviously this may be a result of limited space in print material; however, for instructors to implement these engaging activities, a modicum of description of procedure is necessary. Lastly, as illustrated in Table 1, much of the research reviewed did not assess the efficacy of the described instructional strategy. Although not absolutely necessary, evidence-based practices do increase the rigor and vigor of teaching in educational psychology.

Conclusion

Aptly stated by John Goodland “A teacher's failure to create an intellectually reflective, engagement for learning is not simply malpractice but it is immoral” (Hammonds, 2010, paragraph 4). This embodies my belief that as instructors of educational psychology, it is incumbent upon us to seek the best practice on how to impart knowledge to our students. Hopefully, the information contained in this chapter will, in part, do just this: help make us better teachers by engaging our students.

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