TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Student Resistance to TL Instructional Practice

The snapshot above comes from fascinating and rigorous research done by Donna Ellis of Waterloo University and was shared as part of her presentation, "Why Students Avoid Risking Engagement with Innovative Instructional Methods," at the 38th annual POD Conference in Pittsburgh, PA. (POD is an international organization of faculty and organizational development professionals in higher education.)

Her findings may be of interest to faculty who try to teach in ways more likely to prompt Transformative Learning. Such instructional strategies can include flipped classrooms, collaborative/cooperative group work, active learning techniques, and so on.

In an elegant embedded case study research design that triangulated data collection (*N* = 172), Ellis sought answers to why students are sometimes resistant to such strategies. (A link to her dissertation, which describes the study and its findings, appears in the references below.) What she learned can help us as faculty know how to prepare our students to accept these strategies as useful and helpful for them.

If there were ever an appropriate environment for studying students resistant to instructional strategies other than lecture, 8:30 AM classes during winter term at the University of Waterloo in Canada is probably it: cold, dark, and snow do not comprise a motivating reception for students, especially compared to a warm bed in which one can snuggle. Yet these were the classes Ellis studied, attending as an observer, surveying students, meeting with the professor, and so on.

One of the things most interesting in Ellis' findings (2013) is the difference between student resistance as it was perceived at the start of the term and as it was experienced at the end of the term. In other words, Ellis sought to find out if actually *experiencing* the innovative strategies changed students' resistance to those strategies compared to how they considered the strategies, whether positive or negative, before they experienced them. The table below lists the biggest barriers to student acceptance of innovative strategies before class began and after the class ended (Ellis, 2013, November 8).

Perceived barrier, term start	Perceived barrier, term end
1. prefer non-innovative strategies	1. peers (bad group work experiences)
2. effect on grades	2. time required (incl. out of class)
3. innovations take more time	3. want to be passive in the morning
4. effect on learning	4. don't want my grade influenced by group work

As Keeney-Kennicutt, Gunersel, & Simpson (2008, p. 1) suggest, ". . . successful

implementation of new tools requires attention to potential sources of student resistance at the outset as well as active listening and response to student concerns." Ellis' findings outline the kinds of resistance students may have to the innovative teaching techniques you want to use in your classroom.

Further parsing of her results allowed Ellis (2013, November 8) to identify the top three reasons that the students most resistant to engaging in innovative learning strategies did not want their instructors to use these strategies:

1. Risk of negative consequences (students feared the risk of the unknown, preferring the devil they did know — lecture — to the devil they did not know)
2. Perceived lack of control (students feared innovative instructional strategies might lead to their grade suffering at the hands of other students; e.g., a lower grade received for group work due to lazy peers in the group compared to a grade dependent solely on the effort of the individual student)
3. Contravention of perceived norms (the new instructional techniques are different from lecture, and lecture is a form of instruction that students are used to and can accommodate regarding known study strategies in such classes)

Perhaps the most important lesson Ellis learned from surveying and talking to students and from observing the classes in which innovative strategies were used (and talking with the professor of those classes) is: "We can't just tell students this is a good idea" (Ellis, 2013, November 8). She makes the point that faculty must explain *why* different instructional techniques are efficacious. In the absence of convincing explanations, students' anxieties often get the better of them, and they jump to pejorative conclusions about faculty intentions.

One other important finding from her research is that student perception of faculty facility with the techniques makes a difference. This only makes sense: if an instructor is haphazard in his implementation of the innovative strategy(ies) and/or appears hesitant or unsure himself about using the techniques, students lose confidence they'll learn as much compared to the ways with which they're more familiar.

A good convincer strategy for students is to 1) be confident in your presentation of innovative instructional strategies as you're explaining them in advance of students using them, 2) provide some proof that the strategies are successful (e.g., your personal knowledge of your own or other faculty's success with the strategies and/or sharing information about good research indicating the strategies work), and 3) prepare a good explanation of how the strategy works and what they must do to succeed to the level of their expectations.

We owe it to students to employ instructional strategies proven in quality research to be effective, *and* we owe it to students to be good facilitators of such strategies. Yes, it will take us time as faculty to become good with different kinds of instructional strategies, but we can minimize the learning curve while at the same time ensuring the strategies are helpful for students by seeking and sharing information on how to implement these

techniques.

Our UCO colleagues who have already successfully implemented new teaching strategies are wonderful resources. We at CETTL as well as our great colleagues at CeCE can also provide help and support as you continue to expand your repertoire of innovative instructional strategies.

Ellis, D. E. (2013). *Students' responses to innovative instructional methods: Exploring learning-centred methods and barriers to change*. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Waterloo. Downloadable from: http://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/handle/10012/7414

Ellis, D. E. (2013, November 8). *Why Students Avoid Risking Engagement with Innovative Instructional Methods*. Concurrent session presentation at the 38th Annual Conference of the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education. Pittsburgh, PA.

Keeney-Kennicutt, W., Gunersel, A. B., & Simpson, N. (2008). Overcoming student resitance to a teaching innovation. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 2*(1), 1-26. Retrieved November 14, 2013, from http://w3.georgiasouthern.edu/ijsotl/v2n1/articles/Keeney-Kennicutt_Gunersel_Simpson/Article_Keeney-Kennicutt_Gunersel_Simpson.pdf