Getting Hooked Early On: Motivating Student Learning in First Year Courses and Beyond

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Abstract

Students come to university with different backgrounds, with various expectations and values, and with a variety of personality and learning styles. However, traditional lecture-style teaching does not sufficiently take this into consideration and fails to engage most of the students.   In this paper I will suggest Viktor Frankl's approach to motivation – creating something meaningful, experiencing something as meaningful, reframing something in a meaningful context – as a basis to improve student learning. Furthermore, I will discuss the DiSC personality types and Kolb Learning Style Inventory as means of framing different ways of learning and the resulting different needs in terms of teaching and motivating student learning.   Finally, I will propose some conclusions in regard to learning outcomes, learning opportunities, assignments and assessment that may help better motivate student learning in general and particularly engage students early on in the learning processes.

Introduction

Supportive learning environments and student engagement have come to the forefront of post secondary education, particularly within the field of the scholarship of teaching and learning.   Furthermore, the growing trend to compare the learning environments of different universities in North America on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), among other instruments, has resulted in an increased recognition of the need to improve student engagement (Huber & Hutchings, 2005; Kuh, 2003).   University and college programs and structures, however, still reflect the traditional disciplinary focus on knowledge development and transfer.   Conventional ways of teaching and the still dominant lecture style do not sufficiently recognize that students come to university with different backgrounds, with various expectations and values, and with a variety of personality and learning styles. As a consequence, student satisfaction with the existing learning environments in many universities both in Canada and the US still demonstrates a large potential for further improvement (Gonyea & Kuh, 2009; NSSE results, 2008).

In the following sections, first Viktor Frankl's approach to motivation will be presented as a basis to improve student learning.   Second, the DiSC personality types and Kolb Learning Style Inventory will be discussed as means of framing different ways of learning and motivation.   Finally, some conclusions will be made regarding how to help better motivate student learning in general and particularly engage students early on in the learning processes.

Beyond Maslow, Freud and Adler: Viktor Frankl's Approach to Motivation as a Foundation to Improve Student Learning

Maslow's (1943) "hierarchy of basic needs" (physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization needs) often is presented as a sequential pattern of need satisfaction. Maslow states the "pre-potency" especially of the physiological and safety needs (i.e., the urge to first satisfy these needs and to ignore others) to be particularly significant in the state of severe deprivation; in times of relative health and wealth, the pre-potency weakens. Furthermore, Maslow emphasizes the existence of variations, whereby people prioritize the satisfaction of higher level needs in spite of lower level needs not being fully met. Also, any particular human behavior can simultaneously serve the satisfaction of various needs from different levels. Finally, Maslow preferably interprets the sequential character of his hierarchy as stages of psychological development. As recently verified (Reiss and Haverkamp, 2005), young people tend to focus on the lower levels of needs, whereas the need for esteem and self-actualization is prevalent within the group of mature adults. As to the most important motive of human behavior, Maslow did agree with Frankl (1959) that "man's primary concern is his will to meaning" (Maslow, 1966, p. 108).

In analysis of the approach of Freud and Adler, Frankl (1959, 1969) has pointed out that focusing on the satisfaction of the "will to pleasure" or the "will to power" are the result of the frustration of man's primary "will to meaning" and often lead to an "existential vacuum". While power can be a means to the end of finding meaning, and pleasure and happiness may result from the discovery of meaning, humans primarily search for individual meaning based on their personal situations. Frankl suggested that we discover meaning in what we do by realizing creative values (e.g., creating something at work or in our learning environment), in what we experience by realizing experiential values (e.g., experiencing meaningful relationships in our personal and professional lives), and in what we believe and think by realizing attitudinal values (e.g., developing new and healthy attitudes when suffering professional setbacks or personal crises). Furthermore, he proposes that we discover meaning by answering the questions 'why?' and 'what for?' based on our personality and on the situational context we find ourselves in; hence, our personal situation needs to guide our discovery. As a result, Frankl's motivational theory may serve as an anthropological basis for the importance of values and meaning in motivation in general and in regard to motivating student learning in particular (Mengel, 2008a).

Personality Types and Learning Styles

What is of value to an individual differs from person to person and depends on their respective situational contexts.   Furthermore, the way we learn is very much influenced by personal preferences for particular learning styles.   As a consequence, motivating student learning will depend on the educator's ability to appeal to different personalities and various styles of learning.   The DiSC personality profile (Mengel, 2003; Ritchey & Axelrod, 2002) and the Kolb Learning Styles (Kolb, 1984; 2005) lend themselves to discovering individual preferences for personal values and for particular learning styles.

Based on a model introduced by the American psychologist William Moulton Marston the DiSC personality model was developed and applied successfully, particularly within the scope of self-development. The model differentiates between four styles of behaviour, based on the corresponding four basic types of personality (Mengel, 2003):

- Dominant behaviour (task oriented and extroverted),
- Influential behaviour (human oriented and extroverted),
- Steady behaviour (human oriented and introverted), and
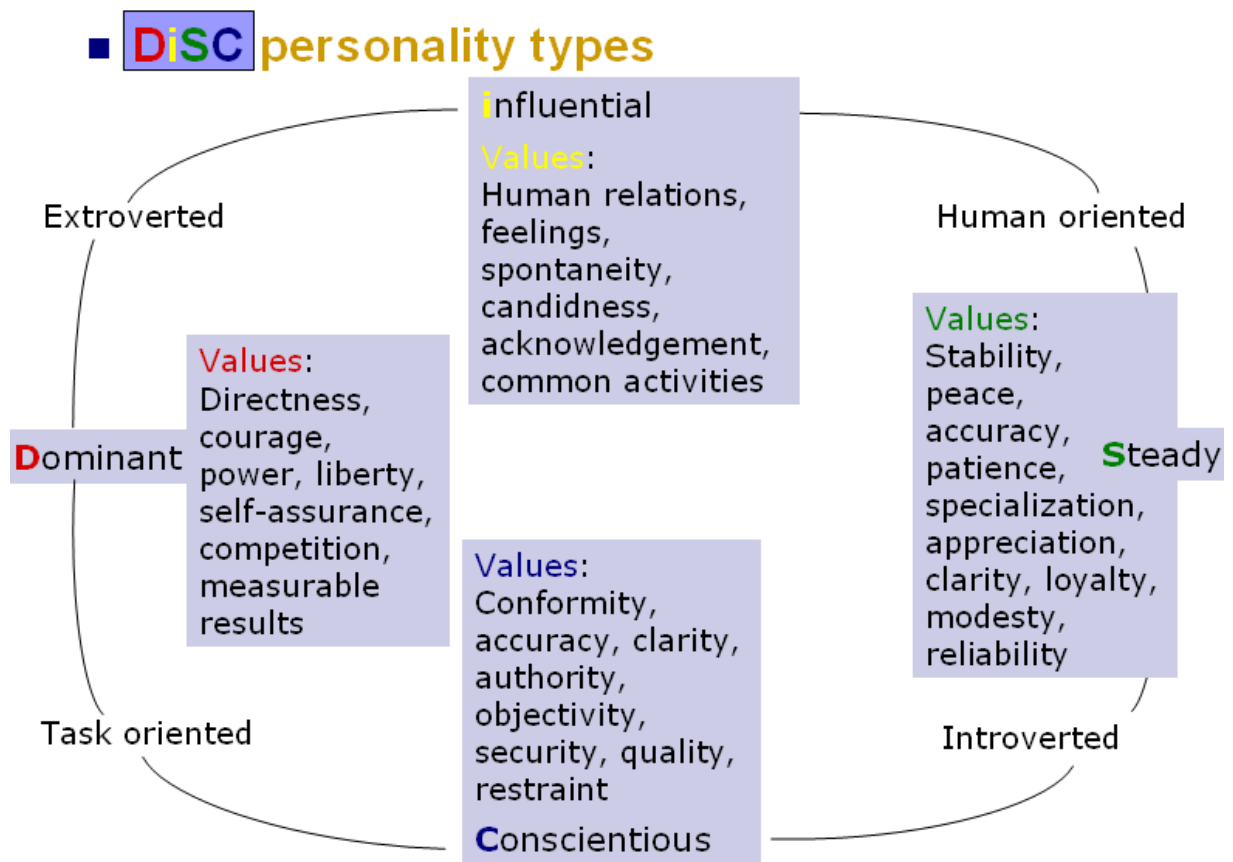- Conscientious behaviour (task oriented and introverted).

Figure 1: DiSC Personality Types (adapted from Mengel, 2003)

Most people tend to put their emphasis on these basic types and styles of behaviour or some combination of two of these types.   Our crucial task as educators is to notice what motivates our different students, what attracts them, as well as what appears to be reasonable and important to them personally.   Thus, the typical styles of behaviour of our students and their characteristic value systems can be identified and differentiated in regard to the basic types of personality.

For example, a student with a 'dominant' profile will predominantly value directness and courage, power and liberty, self-assurance and competition, as well as adventure and any kind of measurable results.   Yet, an 'initiative' student will be especially attracted by human relations and feeling, spontaneity and candidness, as well as by personal recognition and common activities.   To the 'steady' student stability and peace, accuracy and patience, specialisation and appreciation, clarity and loyalty, as well as modesty and reliability are of importance.   Finally, for the 'conscientious' student conformity and accuracy, authority and clarity, objectivity and security, as well as quality and restraint are substantial.   If we identify the basic types of personality of our students and their typical behaviour and value systems, we can appropriately adapt the teaching and learning environment and individual teaching styles and techniques to the needs of a particular class and of individual students.

According to Kolb (1984; 2005) a well-rounded learning process cycles through four different phases (see figure 2 below):
- Concrete Experience (CE): Learning by experience, relating to people, sensitive to feelings;
- Reflective Observation (RO): Learning by reflection, observing before judging, viewing from different perspectives, looking for meaning;
- Abstract Conceptualization (AC): Learning by thinking, logically analyzing, planning systematically; and
- Active Experimentation (AE): learning by doing, get things done, take risks, influence through actions.

While many people identify two neighbouring phases as their favourite learning preference, some may demonstrate a balanced pattern of two opposing (CE and AC or RO and AE) or even of all four learning preferences (CE, AC, RO, and AE).

The preferred entry point may be different depending on the preferred individual style of learning that Kolb identified based on the four phases:
- Diverging (Learning approaches including CE and RO): imaginative, many perspectives, broad cultural interests, specializes in arts and humanities, info seeking;
- Assimilating (Learning approaches including RO and AC): create theoretical models, assimilate disparate observation, inductive reasoning, likes abstract concepts, basic science and math oriented, acting on intellectual understanding;
- Converging (Learning approaches including AC and AE): practical application of ideas, well on conventional tasks, hypothetical / deductive reasoning, engineering / physical sciences; and
- Accommodating (Learning approaches including AE and CE): puts into action, adapts well, intuitive, practical / technical (business).

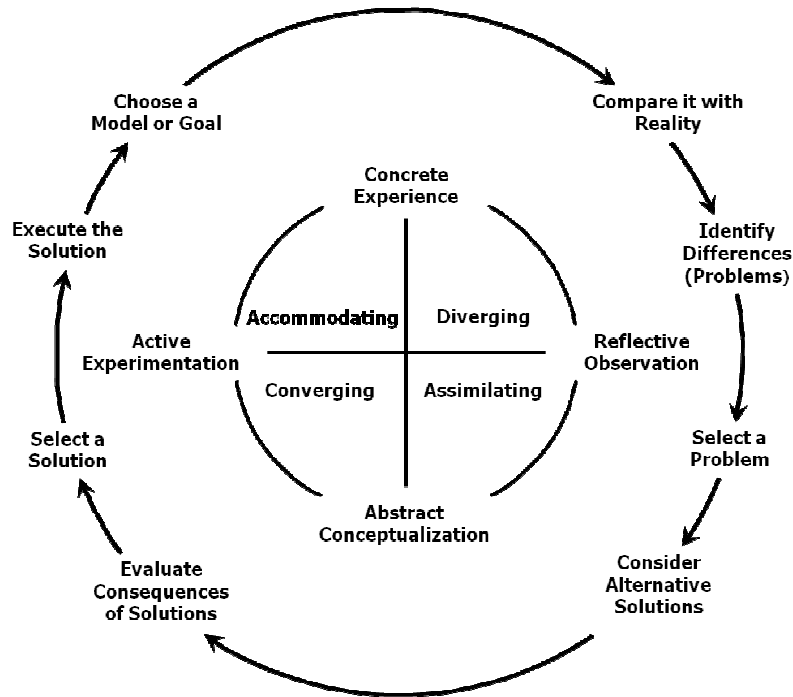## ■ Kolb Learning Style Inventory

Figure 2: Kolb Learning Style Inventory (Kolb, 2005, p. 12)

As indicated, most people have two strong learning style preferences that influence their motivation to learn.   For example, a person with a strong emphasis on 'diverging' and 'assimilating' will most likely prefer to learn by reflective observation. Since this is true for both educators and learners, facilitators of learning processes with one particular learning style (combination) need to make an extra effort in regard to their teaching approach to not solely depend on their own preferred learning style but to address all learning styles existent within their particular class; most likely this will indeed include all existing learning style combinations.   Again, this can elegantly and easily be accomplished by walking students through various learning activities covering all four phases of the learning cycle thus addressing all different learning styles.

Interestingly, the various phases of the learning cycle – and the associated learning styles – appear to correspond well with typical personal behaviour and values as captured by the DiSC profile (see figure 3 below; for the details regarding the values most likely associated with the individual personality profiles, please refer back to figure 1 above):

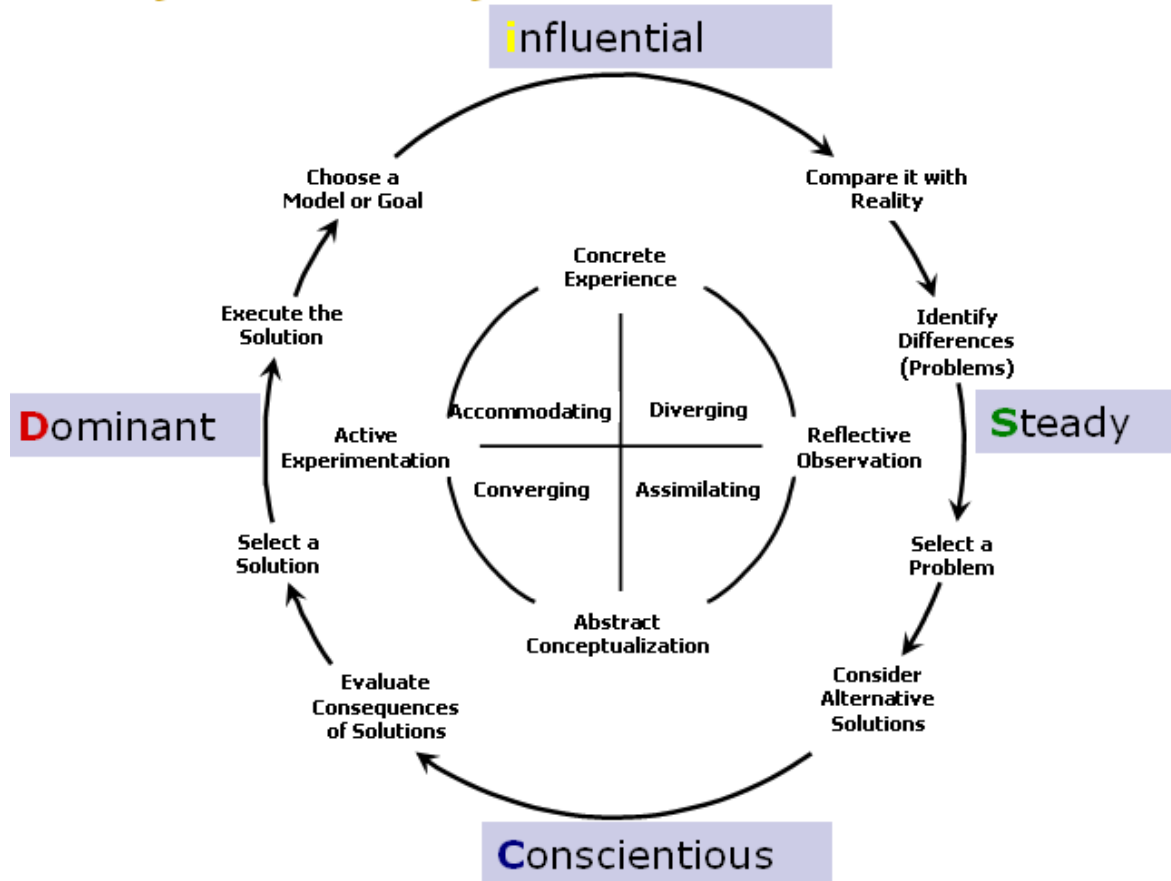## ■ DiSC personality types and Kolb Learning Style Inventory

Figure 3: DiSC personality types and Kolb Learning Style Inventory (Adapted from Kolb, 2005; Mengel, 2003)

By designing the learning environment and teaching approaches holistically with a balance of the four different phases of the learning cycle and by considering the four basic personality types with their typical motivators (values), we will be more likely to address the individual motivation of all of the students in our classes.   Furthermore, applying this combined model may help us address the basic human motivation of creating something meaningful (e.g., by creating a concept or a solution), of experiencing something meaningful (e.g., in relationship with other learners or in regard to the 'beauty' of a solution), or of developing a meaningful attitude (e.g., by developing a new understanding of oneself, of others, or of the context).

For example, in one particular leadership class – Practicing Leadership in Community Projects – students are invited to initiate, plan, implement, control and close a project within a community of their choice (Mengel, 2008b). Within the context of their choice (concrete experience) they need to identify a particular challenge or problem (reflective

observation), develop and evaluate various options that might solve the problem (abstract conceptualization), and implement and evaluate the solution (active experimentation). This will engage all different personality and learning styles as they can see and experience how they can personally contribute to and benefit from this learning opportunity. Particularly, the need to inspire others during the initiation of the project motivates the influential personality and the challenge to identify and describe the problem appeals to the steady personality. On the other hand, developing a corresponding solution might be of particular interest to the conscientious personality whereas the dominant personality is especially engaged when it comes to implementing the solution. Many students will enjoy creating a meaningful solution for a real problem within their communal context. Some will also derive meaning from doing this together with and for others or by deep thinking and reflection throughout the process. As a result, students and their communal counterpart may develop a new or different understanding of the challenges encountered, the solutions developed, and of the process applied.

Conclusions: Concrete Applications in the Learning Process

In order to better engage students in the learning process we need to better address their individual motives for life and learning in our teaching endeavours. Especially, we need to extend beyond our own values, preferences and interests and comprehensively address values and learning preferences of other personality styles that most definitely will exist within our student body.

In particular, a learning environment that addresses those issues needs to be designed around the following principles:

1. Class sessions and learning activities need to be well balanced and spread around the complete learning cycle. For example, designing a course or a module to include various learning activities like group work, individual reflection, logical analysis, as well as active experimentation or fieldwork will help create a balanced approach that addresses all phases of learning.

2. Teaching and learning needs to appeal to different personalities. For example, while competitive tasks tend to appeal to 'dominant personalities', students with an emphasis on behaviour associated with an 'initiative personality' appear to prefer cooperative assignments. Similarly, individual assignments on social topics seem to be of special interest to the 'steady personality' whereas the 'conscientious personality' often prefers the same kind of assignment but on scientific, technological or business related topics.

3. Teaching and learning needs to include elements that are well designed to allow for, to integrate, and to evaluate the discovery of creative, experiential, and attitudinal values. The learning environment needs to encourage students to create important results and relevant solutions, to experience meaningful relationships, and to develop healthy attitudes particularly in the context of challenges, conflicts and crises.

4. Meaningful assignments will assess student learning based on respective learning outcomes that are clearly defined and significant within the context of students' lives and their professional futures (Zundel et al., 2006; Mentkowski, 2000).

Furthermore, they will consider various learning styles and personalities as well as relevant individual and community settings. Finally, these assignments will speak to creative, experiential, and attitudinal values both within an individual as well as within a community context.

5. Meaningful feedback will address student performance based on well-defined outcome criteria. It also will consider the student's learning style and personality by explicitly acknowledging strengths and addressing opportunities for growth. Finally, it will speak to instances (as demonstrated by the student within the assignment) and opportunities (yet to be developed) for the discovery and realization of values in regard to self, to others, and to the relationship between self and others.

Summary

This paper has first presented Viktor Frankl's approach to motivation to develop a conceptual understanding of 'meaningful learning' and to present a foundation for improving student learning. In their learning, students want to do something meaningful, they want to make meaningful experiences with something or someone, and, finally, they want to be able to gain meaningful perspectives on what they encounter, particularly if they experience it as personally difficult and challenging. Secondly, this foundation has been expanded by and connected to the personality types presented within the DiSC personality profile as well as to the learning cycle and respective phases and learning style preferences introduced by Kolb.   The resulting comprehensive model of meaningful and values-oriented learning may help students and educators alike to conceptualize their individual learning and teaching, respectively. As a result, the suggested five principles for the design of a student learning environment may better support learning that is meaningful to students and thus motivate them to more actively engage early on and continuously throughout their life-long learning process.

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