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Student Apathy



The author of the following article saw relation between "underachievement" and apathy and reports the purpose, method, and results of a study of student apathy. An associate professor (B.S., New York State University College, New Paltz; M.A., Columbia; Ed.D.,

New York University) he is back at Glassboro New Jersey State College after a term as visiting professor at the University of Hawaii.

By MELVIN LANG

APATHY, a student's dullness or indifference, is expressed by a lack of response to normally challenging classroom situations or course activities. Such students appear not to be paying attention and to be thinking of something else during a lecture or class discussion. At times they appear to be looking out the window, daydreaming, doodling or playing with keys, a purse, or a pen.

In classes there are a few students who, every once in a while and perhaps too often, seem to be bored, indulging in reverie, or just thinking about nothing. They sometimes ask their instructor or other students to repeat things. These students do not really appear to be interested in what is going on and they would rather stay on the sidelines and let others do the participating. When confronted with a situation that requires some real thinking, they may even copy, from others just because they are not interested enough to figure out what to do on their own. These apathetic students do not seem to enjoy their college work. In their classes they display less enthusiasm, involvement, and fewer ideas than is normally offered by their classmates.

We exhort them to become interested. We tell them (in our judgment) they are not doing as well as they could. We reassure them that if they would only get started doing assignments their grades would improve. And sometimes we preach about the undesirability of their attitude of "not caring." But these efforts to get them interested are of little avail.

At Glassboro (New Jersey) State College an investigation was undertaken to (1) determine the incidence of apathetic behavior, (2) identify students who were apathetic, (3) try to understand

the basis for this behavior, and (4) develop some techniques that classroom instructors might use to lessen apathetic behavior which would result in these students having more self-direction and purposefulness in their college classes.

We believed that if the results of our study were to help classroom instructors to deal with student problems, it seemed reasonable that we should turn to these same instructors to identify the problems and students. We provided each instructor with a description of apathetic behavior similar to the one at the beginning of this article. Eighty percent of the instructors replied that they had at least one student in their class who could be described as behaving in an apathetic or indifferent manner. We then asked each instructor to identify the students and to describe their behavior.

Examples of some of the remarks of instructors who identified apathetic students may make clearer the kinds of students with whom we were concerned. Instructors' remarks included:

"She doesn't seem to have any initiative or inspiration. She needs to be drawn out more."

"She won't exert any effort or go out of her way to do anything."

"I'd like to give her a shove. Her grades range from A to D. She has ability but doesn't seem to care."

"Seems to lack initiative."

"She has missed some quizzes and doesn't appear to care whether or not she makes them up."

"Very unenthusiastic and doesn't get involved in much."

"She studies and participates very little. Her facial expressions indicate complacency and little emotional involvement in what's going on."

"Absent quite a lot, and doesn't pay too much attention when she's here (in class)."

"He looks so bored much of the time."

"She often appears to be 'off in a cloud'; no real enthusiasm."

"He's competent, but just doesn't give a damn!"

"I rarely see him. He doesn't show up in class too often."

"He doesn't strain himself. He's not in 'the swim of things' and participates little."

"A bright boy but works only on four cylinders. Absent a lot. A nice boy that needs to be properly motivated."

"Not very dependable or responsible, and cuts classes a lot."

"Passive; if she would only get started."

"She has an attitude problem. She doesn't know what's going on in class."

". . . disinterested—shows by her appearance—almost sleepy."

"A vegetable."

"Seldom volunteers but will attempt an answer when asked."

"A nothing."

"You have this boy well described." (See opening paragraphs above.)

"I honestly wonder if she knows what it's all about."

It should be understood that these students did not *always* act in the ways described, and that any one apathetic student did not behave in *all* the ways mentioned. They behaved in some of the ways, perhaps more often than they should have in the opinions of their instructors.

It was decided that, in order to try to understand the basis of behavior of the apathetic students, we could probably do this best by going to the source—namely, the students themselves. We asked each student to meet individually with an investigator for about fifteen minutes once a week for a semester. We told the students: "We want to know more about the attitudes and beliefs of typical college students. We think we can learn more by talking to you than by questionnaires." No mention was made of the study or of apathy itself. The students did not know the real reason of the meetings.

About one-third of the eighteen apathetic students expressed a lack of interest, and declined to participate. Another third said that they did not care much one way or the other, but that they would participate if we really wanted them to. The other third consented without reservations.

The unwillingness by most of the students to "become involved," tended to strengthen our belief that apathetic students were characterized by attitudes of "Who am I to judge?" or "What difference does it make?" We thought that we could probably find out more about their attitudes, beliefs, interests, feelings, and aspirations if we used non-directive techniques. The purpose of our questioning was to try to stimulate meditation and get the student to ponder and speculate about his expressions of purposes or interests.

We responded to a student's statement or answer by asking such questions as:

Can you give me an example or illustration of what you mean?

Is this something you really want to do?

Can you tell me more about this?

How did you arrive at this conclusion?

How will this affect your life?

I don't quite understand. Could you summarize your views about this?

Let me see, is this what you mean?

What is your purpose behind or in doing this?

Do you do this often?

Last week you said or wrote one thing and now you say another.

How are these points or views alike or different (or consistent or inconsistent)?

We reacted to the students' oral answers by simply saying, "I see," "I understand," or "It's clearer to me now."

The technique then was to react to a student's remarks by gently challenging but not disputing; by provoking reflection but not disapproving; by leading but not directing; by esteeming without praising; or by guiding, without prescribing, to examine what he said.

As the interviews continued, and as each apathetic student saw himself in relation to the topics being discussed, they often remarked about themselves. Although the discussion topics were not limited to college related issues it was understandable that the students would often express themselves on these topics. Their remarks describe, more than any narrative could, how they viewed themselves. Typical remarks included:

"I don't talk much in class because my instructors and lots of other students have so many opinions about things and I don't."

"I don't see why everyone gets so excited about things."

In response to the investigator's question of, "What would you like to talk about next time?" a student answered, "If you leave it up to me we would never talk about anything." (It turned out that for this student the next session revolved around three well thought out topics that *she* initiated and wanted to discuss.)

"I do pretty well on objective examinations because I'm a good guesser." (The implication here was that she wasn't interested enough to learn it on her own.)

"When I take a test I don't take too much time to think or organize my thoughts. I just write whatever comes into my mind."

"I don't know how I did on my exams. I won't feel too bad if I flunk out. It just means that I'm not college material. I'll probably get a job doing something."

"I think my poor grades are due to poor study habits and too much socialization. I'm determined to do better next semester."

"Lots of times the class period is up before I get a chance to say something. It's hard for me to focus on what's going on."

"I had to write a report comparing two books of the same author. I found someone who had read another novel by Wolfe and got them to tell me about it, rather than read it myself."

"Rather than put a lot of energy into writing, I'd rather talk about it."

"I'm bored with most of my classes. It doesn't seem important to say anything in class because most of the time they don't talk about what I'm interested in."

"I don't often feel strongly about things but I admire people who do, and who fight for them. I wish I had some real, crucial problems or goals in life."

The remarks of the last student indicate the theory and rationale for the study.

Our hunch was that apathetic behavior was related to an individual's self-image or sense of self and that when students got to know themselves better and began to understand or maintain some goals and commitments in their lives then their apathetic behavior would diminish and their lives would tend to reflect more self-direction and purposefulness and that their activities, including college classes, would begin to have more meaning for them.

What, then, were the results of the clarification sessions with the students? Because of the small number of students involved in our study the post-study ratings made by instructors were not appropriate to statistical inference. What will be offered here are the findings in terms of the theory and its techniques, developments of methodology, and reactions of the students and their instructors.

A survey of students' expressions revealed that during the second half of their meetings (the latter part of the semester), they expressed themselves in a more positive manner than in the first half of the sessions. As the sessions progressed, negative statements such as: (1) "I don't think . . ." (2) "I wouldn't care if . . ." (3) "I don't like to participate in . . ." and (4) "People shouldn't . . ." became fewer and positive statements such as: (1) "I'm very interested in . . ." (2) "People should learn to . . ." (3) "I like to work with . . ." and (4) "It just gives me a good feeling to . . ." became more frequent. The portion of positive statements in the latter half of the interviews was more than one and one-half times that of the first half. This relationship between clarification and increased purposefulness and positiveness was true for every student involved in the clarification process.

A second pattern that emerged from the sessions was that students were engaging in the process of reflection. They began to think more and more about their (1) ideas or activities they considered precious, (2) aspirations or long term plans, (3) feelings or expressions of emotions. Perhaps most importantly (4) they began to de-

liberate about the consistency and consequences of their choice of activities by testing them out.

In the atmosphere of the interview sessions where students found that their statements were not being judged and where there were no "right" or "wrong" answers, the students themselves revealed how the process of clarification was beginning to permeate their thinking. Samples of their remarks include:

"I don't know. I really haven't thought about it much."

In referring to a topic discussed during the previous meeting, a student remarked, "I've been doing a lot of thinking about it and . . ." "I'm not quite so sure anymore about my feeling about racially integrated marriages."

"I've thought about things a lot more."

"I've really thought through, back at the dorm, that idea that I was vague about before. I never realized that my ideas about children getting along with each other were so vague."

"In the past I haven't thought much about the future."

"One thing I thought about after our last talk was whether or not . . ."

"I'd like to clear up some of the things I said last time because I think I gave you the wrong impression."

"I never quite realized the commuter's point of view before."

"I spoke to some other students to find out what they thought about what we talked about last time."

"I'm not sure, I'll have to think about it some more."

"I think I gave you the wrong notion the last time we talked."

"Now that we have talked about it I'm doubly sure—that's what I believe."

The last remark shows that the clarification process was not intended for students to change their feelings, beliefs, etc. It sought only to get the students to examine what they said their attitudes, purposes, or interests were. In many cases, the process of examining resulted in students affirming their original expressions.

The students also reported a great deal of increased satisfaction and purposefulness in their college work as a result of the clarification process. They reported that they (1) had satisfied to some degree their previously felt need to get to know college faculty members better, (2) had more insight into their own lives, (3) would like to continue their meetings because they welcomed the chance to explain to someone their own points of view without having them judged, (4) felt that college life was less impersonal than their former perception of it.

As the study progressed several of our colleagues raised important questions about assumptions underlying it.

"Aren't you really manipulating the students because you see apathy as undesirable?"

We answered that our intention was to provide a setting where students could examine their values. If as a result of the clarification process, they began to display less apathy and more involvement in their college classes, then it seemed to us that it was the *students* who didn't find apathetic behavior desirable. When confronted with alternatives it was they who decided to change.

"Would the clarification process be effective in a classroom setting if the person asking the questions was the student's instructor, who, after all, would be in a grade giving position?"

The remarks of the students revealed that most of them would be willing to speak out in classes more, if someone was really interested in listening to them without judging or arguing about what they said. Perhaps they would not reveal as many personal and private feelings in class as they did in the individual interviews, but our hunch was that they would reveal enough value-laden propositions so that the clarification technique might be successful. If an instructor would ask clarifying type questions of each of the couple of apathetic students in his class then the reflective element of the interview sessions might also begin to take root in the classroom.

"Could it be perhaps that all these students need is to talk with a faculty member on a regular basis who is really interested in them?"

In order to account for this variable of personal contact per se we did two things. First, we interviewed previous instructors of the apathetic students to find out how much personal contact they had had with them. We found that several of the instructors who prized student involvement in their courses often spoke to these students. They gave them advice and urged them to get into "the swim of things." Since these students were subsequently identified as apathetic, the effect of personal appeals and friendly suggestions, for these students at least, was negligible.

The second thing we did was to ask instructors, who knew nothing about the study, if they would each meet with one or two apathetic students on a regular basis. We indicated to

each instructor "that these students need some *advice.*" Could you *tell* them some things or *make suggestions* to them so that their academic work or attitudes might improve. We were really urging these instructors to use directive techniques contrary to the clarification process, in that they would be telling whereas we would be questioning. The results of these meetings confirmed our earlier findings that sincere and interested instructors who pleaded, exhorted, or reassured these students had little effect upon increased purposefulness of these apathetic students.

We are not suggesting that the role of a teacher as a reassuring confidant be abandoned or is not important. What we found was that it did not seem to be effective with apathetic students.

"How did you check on the originally identified apathetic students? Did their instructors in other courses also see them as apathetic?"

After several weeks each instructor who had originally identified, by name, an apathetic student was asked once again to rate each of them. A six point intensity and frequency scale was used. If the original student was rated (1) on the furthest point of each scale, indicating quite apathetic behavior, and (2) revealing this behavior as exhibited rather often, then the student was placed in a "suspected apathy" category. At this point we had a group of students who were identified as apathetic by one of their instructors. These already identified students were placed on a list together with an equal number of students randomly chosen from each of their other classes. Hence, each of the other four or five instructors who taught students who were suspected of apathy were asked to identify these students from a list of both apathetic and non-apathetic students. Only when at least three or four instructors again identified a suspected apathetic student, was the student considered for inclusion in the study.

"Isn't there a more efficient way to identify these students than by asking instructors, which is difficult and takes lots of time?"

From the many remarks that apathetic students made about their activities and purposes, plus the observations of instructors indicating these students' interests and attitudes, we are attempting to design a projective instrument that will enable students to identify themselves.

However, we believe that the difficulty some instructors had in identifying apathetic students was a significant finding in itself.

It appeared that instructors who (1) taught courses of longer duration (a year or semester rather than a quarter), (2) used teaching techniques and provided experiences and assignments that required students to engage actively in the teaching-learning process, and (3) were concerned with getting to know these students better—these instructors had little trouble identifying, rating and discussing their students.

Although instructors who taught classes with fewer students were also able to describe their students better than instructors of larger groups, we are not sure that size was as important a consideration as the orientation of the instructor to his role as a teacher, that is, most of these instructors had prized getting to know each students' strengths and weaknesses.

The process of identifying and developing methods of helping apathetic students understand their values by clarifying their attitudes, beliefs and aspirations was the essence of the exploratory

study. The theory was that as these students engaged in the process of examining their feelings, interests and purposes and as these became clearer to them, then students would begin to display more purposefulness in their college classes.

The findings tended to support the theory.

To each interested faculty falls the task of further testing the hunches and methods to see if "they fit" in their own particular institutional setting.

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Melancholy

"Moreover, at that very moment the world was undergoing so complete a revolution that it was impossible that there should not be a revolution in men's minds. Hitherto the catastrophes of empires had rarely reached the hearts of the people; it was kings who fell, majesties that vanished, nothing more. The lightning struck only in the upper regions, and, as we have already pointed out, events seemed to succeed one another with all the solemnity of the epic. In the ancient society, the individual occupied so lowly a place that, to strike him, adversity must needs descend to his family. So that he knew little of misfortune outside of domestic sorrows. It was an almost unheard-of thing that the general disasters of the state should disarrange his life. But the instant that Christian society became firmly established, the ancient continent was thrown into confusion. Everything was pulled up by the roots. Events, destined to destroy ancient Europe and to construct a new Europe, trod upon one another's heels in their ceaseless rush, and drove the nations pell-mell, some into the light, others into darkness. So much uproar ensued that it was impossible that some echoes of it should not reach the hearts of the people. It was more than an echo, it was a reflex blow. Man, withdrawing within himself in presence of these imposing vicissitudes, began to take pity upon mankind, to reflect upon the bitter disillusionments of life. Of this sentiment, which to Cato the heathen was despair, Christianity fashioned melancholy."

VICTOR HUGO
Preface to *Cromwell*. 1827.