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How Can We Nudge Our Students in Better Directions?

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When my first-year students write bad papers, I assume they are bad writers. If they don't revise, I assume they don't want to do it. If they don't pay attention, I assume they don't care about my course. Again and again, I assume that my students' actions are based on conscious decisions, that they flow from their characters, and that they express their values.

I should know better, given what behavioral science has taught us about human decision making. People often don't act rationally. We're easily knocked off course. We fail to sign up for retirement plans even though they are great deals; we take the elevator instead of the stairs even when we're trying to get in shape; and we eat junk food we don't like that much just because it is there.

Talking to my students gives me the distinct impression that they are typical human beings. They don't *decide* to underperform in my class. *Stuff* gets in the way. Those bad papers were written in a rush at 3 a.m. the night before they were due. My students look uninterested not because they dislike my class but because they are freaking out about their financial accounting exam.

Many of their actions aren't based on conscious decisions, they don't flow from their characters, and they don't express their values. Things just sort of *happen.*

So, can we make better things happen instead? Like, better papers? Sometimes. Many of the factors that influence our students' performance are of course outside our control. I can't stop COVID-19, I can't fix my students' mental health issues, and I can't make all the scary political stuff go away. I can only be aware of how they affect our students (and me) and find ways to work with and around them.

And I *can* tweak the situation in my class, nudging my students towards doing the right thing.

Richard Thaler coined the term "nudge," and he describes it as an intervention that "gently steers the individual towards the desired behavior." The classical example is saving for retirement. Informed by behavioral science, many retirement plans now automatically sign people up unless they actively opt out. Nudges abound in our society. To encourage people to take the stairs, make them attractive and well-lit and place the elevator off to the side. To encourage us to watch several episodes of *Bridgerton* back-to-back, autoplay them. An effective nudge makes it easy for people to do what we want them to do.

Nudges work. How can we use them in our classes?

So far, I've used them mostly around writing. In despair over all those 3 a.m. papers, I have started requiring drafts in all my classes. They are due a few days before the actual paper, they count for almost nothing, and I don't read them. I tell the students that I assign drafts to force them to start the papers earlier and explain why starting early is useful. They can opt out at minimum cost, but very few do. And the papers turn out better.

Once I started requiring drafts, I also noticed that I encountered less plagiarism. I suspect it is because my students really aren't bad people who think cheating is OK. When they plagiarize, it's usually a last-minute decision, made in despair at 3 a.m. Eliminate that last minute panic, and students are less likely to plagiarize.

I've also started using nudges to get weaker students to ask for help. Here's a recent triumph: This spring, I had a student who kept doing poorly on his papers and didn't seek out help. I sent him a brief email: *Your writing needs work. Would you like some help figuring out how to do it? I'm happy to help; just email me back if you're interested.* I heard back within ten minutes, he got help, and his next paper was a C+ instead of a D.

There was nothing magical about the words in my email. I had written the same thing on his graded papers, and I had said it to the whole class. The email was more effective nudge because it made it so easy to reach out for help: Just click reply and write "yes please."

I used to think that this type of approach was paternalistic and enabling. Students should choose to ask for help, they should plan their own time, and they should suffer the consequences when they don't. And if they are the sort of people who cheat, let them—and then punish them harshly.

I keep backsliding into that way of thinking, and I have to remind myself that I know better.

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People aren't fully rational, and situations affect behavior. As Thaler points out, we and our students are being nudged all the time -- by advertisers, friends, and social forces. Many of these nudges are in directions that are bad for us. Given that, why not be intentional about using nudges in a way that might help students pass their courses?

Using devices like nudges seems especially important since there is an equity issue at play here. Some students don't need nudges and guidance as much because they feel at home in college. They find it easy to ask for help from the professor; they have been taught good study habits; they have had stellar writing instruction. But others don't and haven't. If I avoid nudging my students, I make it harder for those who desperately need guidance in order to succeed. I don't want to do that. It's hard enough for them already.

Sources:

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