



Teaching the One: A Path Out of Student and Teacher Apathy

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NICK'S STORY:

It was my senior year in college, and I had been studying education for over a year and a half. I anticipated putting into practice, as a student teacher, some of the pedagogical lessons that I studied at the University of Michigan. I excitedly introduced myself to my students. Everything was going well until fifth period sociology, where I met Nick, my most challenging student. Each day, he sat in the back of the class and complained, "Mr. Austad, this is the worst assignment and class, ever!" As a young teacher, filled with enthusiasm, I tried not to let Nick detour me. I felt that I could change even the most hardened student, but my disillusionment soon met harsh realities. No matter what I tried, Nick would say, "Mr. Austad, this is the worst!"

After a couple of months, Nick and I eventually worked out a nonverbal agreement: I would no longer approach him, and by so doing, I would no longer have to hear his complaints. As the semester came to a close, though, I became nostalgic about my teaching experiences and reflected on my successes and failures, and I saw

Nick quietly sitting in back of the room with his usual disgruntled glare. I resolved to try one last time to engage Nick in the material, hoping his heart would change. I walked over to his desk and said, "Hi, Nick. Do you need any help?" Without hesitation, Nick looked up and said, "Mr. Austad, this is the most pointless assignment ever!"

For me, that was it! I cast all my educational training aside momentarily and scowled, "Why do you come to class, Nick?"

Surprised by my new forceful tone, he replied, "Uh, they make me come."

"Who makes you come, Nick?"

"My parents and the principal."

"Do, I make you come?"

"Uh, I guess not."

"If you don't want to be here, Nick, that's fine with me. In fact, if you don't want to come to class, I would prefer that you didn't. I don't want you here if you don't want to be here."

On the way home, I reflected on this encounter. I worried that I was too hard on him and that I would never see him again. I envisioned that he may end up in prison one day because of me and have my picture on his cell wall, and, when he did chin-ups, he would say my name. Ultimately, I knew that I again failed to reach Nick. The next day of class, however, something strange happened. Nick approached me. "Mr. Austad, I really want to do well in your class. Is there anything that I can do to make up all the work that I missed?" Shocked, I told him that if he completed all his homework by the end of the week, I would accept it. He said "thank you" and went back to his desk. On the way home I again thought of Nick. Could he make up an entire semester's worth of work in a few short days? Could he really change?

Two days later I was again at my desk when Nick approached me. "I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to make up these assignments," he said. He gave me a handful of papers. I was speechless. He asked if there was anything else that he needed to do to get an A in the class. I told him about the upcoming final exam, and that if he did well on it, he would do well in the course. He promised to study hard.

On the day of the final, I worried about Nick. He had worked so hard, and I feared that if he did not do well on the test, he would become discouraged and return to his hardened demeanor. Nick finished the final in twenty-five minutes. My heart sank; he must have not known the answers and left the test blank. As I began to grade the exams, I noticed that Nick's test was at the top of my pile. I quickly moved his exam to the bottom, because I was not emotionally ready to deal with him. But, after grading everyone else's exam, I had to deal with Nick. Surprisingly, not only did Nick do well on the exam, he received a perfect score. By the time I left Milan High School, Nick earned the highest grade of all my students that semester.

I have learned over the last sixteen years that stories like Nick's are extremely rare. Apathetic and disinterested students rarely change, and I have adopted the mentality that I cannot reach every student and resolved to focus on those who are interested. I often rationalize that in each class there will be one-third who may love the material, one-third who may dislike it, and one third who may be indifferent. I usually decide to teach to the interested third and let the others simply pass their time. However, I wonder if this is the best attitude. Perhaps I have become somewhat apathetic in my teaching practices.

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METHODS ON HANDLING TEACHER AND STUDENT APATHY:

Ryan, Moss, and Moss in "Attacking Student Apathy" (2015) explain some of the challenges that college students face today as they come to college woefully underprepared. "In general, they have not been challenged and arrive with poor reading and writing skills," they write (p. 282). High schools have not given college freshmen the necessary skills to read, write, and think critically. While this will not surprise any college professor, it is important to understand that we often assign coursework for students to read and assume that students will devote the necessary time to read and reflect on the material in a meaningful way. However, we often may not consider that students lack the tools to do so. Whether or not students will budget their time appropriately, they may not know how to effectively engage with the material. The result is that students come to class either not having read the material, because they could not comprehend it, or having read the material, but not thought about how it connects with larger course themes. We then spend valuable class time summarizing the readings rather than teaching deeper course ideas.

Some professors may assert that teaching students how to read is not within their expertise nor is it their responsibility; students should know how to study before they arrive on campus. While it is true that students should be better prepared for college, this belief denies the harsh statistical realities. True, we should not lower course expectations (although there is a growing national trend to do so). Instead, we should take more time at the beginning of the semester helping students to develop higher levels of cognitive thought, by teaching study skills that we have learned over our lifetimes. It may be false to assume that students are disinterested because they are apathetic. While this could be true in some cases, it also could be that some students have mentally checked out, because they feel lost, overwhelmed, and powerless to change.

Ryan et al. also indicate that college freshman lack self-awareness. "[T]hey have no self-knowledge and, as such, do not have appropriate and practiced levels of motivation and discipline," they write (p. 282). Again, this is of no surprise to most college professors.

We have become accustomed to students lacking discipline and motivation. This dilemma is a greater challenge than the last, because self-motivation must occur within each student. Yet, teachers can help students to find an inner passion through helping them to develop successful skills and implementing carefully crafted activities that engage students to critically think about course ideas so that they can reach Bloom's (1956) higher levels of cognitive thought (e.g. analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).

Eric Mazur's Peer Instruction (1997) suggests that teachers should lecture less (only about twenty to thirty minutes) and provide more opportunities for students to engage with the course material in more meaningful ways. Peer instruction helps students to learn the material because they are required to internalize it, which is an integral part of BYU–Idaho's learning model. Ryan et al. conclude that "The best place for initial breakthrough is in meaningful guided class discussion, wherein students are separated into small groups. However, for this approach to work, the student must be prepared for class" (p. 284). Once students learn how to effectively prepare for class, we can move to higher forms of learning in the classroom. With skills to succeed, students can be empowered to take education into their own hands and expand their academic horizons (i.e. success breeds success).

CONCLUSION

Let me return to lessons that I have learned from Nick. As I reflect on what made Nick's experience so memorable, I question whether stories like Nick's are rare because students like Nick are rare, or if my herculean efforts to reach disinterested students like Nick have become rare. Perhaps both are true. Some students are disinterested and apathetic because they choose to be and others may appear disinterested, because they lack the tools to succeed. I have learned that there is no magic bullet for dealing with apathetic or disinterested students. There are only methods that work occasionally. However, striving to know students individually helps me to know which pedagogical methods to utilize under specific circumstances. While there may not be a panacea to treat apathetic students, I can overcome my own apathy (i.e. the belief that some students are disinterested and cannot be reached) and do what I can to help individual students like Nick rise above

their disinterest and become better scholars. Being able to discern how we can reach out to all our students so we can help them individually is key to effective teaching. Nick turned from one of my most challenging students to one of my greatest teaching successes. With renewed energy to reach out to seemingly disinterested students, I hope to have many more experiences like I had with Nick throughout my teaching career. Teaching, No Greater Call admonishes, "Part of your work as a gospel teacher is to help learners understand and feel Heavenly Father's love for them. This cannot be done with words alone. It requires reaching out to individuals—those you see often, those you see occasionally, and those you would not see without making special effort. It requires reaching out to them whether they are cooperative, disinterested, or defiant" (p. 35). May this ever be our charge.

References

Ryan, Moss, and Moss (2015) explain: "Students gain power by complaining if the assignment is demanding.... The course evaluation process, while noble in its genesis, has become one of you scratch my back and I will scratch yours. One needs solid student evaluations and significant numbers of peer-reviewed research publications for tenure; so the professor takes the easy way out with homework, makes the assignments easier, and rigor suffers" (p. 283).

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