

## **Have Students Believe They Can Dazzle You**

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### **Abstract**

There is a relationship between a student's perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes and the probabilities that he or she will perform well academically and take on challenging academic tasks. The likelihood that a typical community college student, who often enrolls at a two-year institution due to academic, social, and/or economic underpreparedness for college, will possess a sufficient level of self-efficacy upon entering college is low. A professor at an urban community college uses "Dazzle Me" assignments to address this situation.

### **Introduction**

A most disturbing aspect of being a college professor is that one can observe students wasting opportunities to do their best, or even to excel, in your classes. Today, when it is possible that a student's GPA and/or his or her placement in the graduating class may be a determining factor regarding whether or not he or she will get accepted into a first-choice four-year or graduate school, every grade counts. Yet, there are students who are content to "coast" to an A or B, seemingly pleased that they needed to do very little to earn those grades. And, at the other end of the spectrum, there are students with such low opinions of themselves as students and such low academic expectations that they make no attempt to accept academic challenges which they deem to be too difficult. In this way, they avoid receiving confirmation that they are incapable of achieving academic success.

This paper presents a challenging, but low-risk, technique for engaging students at both ends of this spectrum, and for those at every point in between, to the benefit of all.

When was the last time that one of your students approached you after class to say, "I was amazed to learn that I can discuss any subject presented to me with confidence"? When was the last time that you met a student at a college function and he or she told you "I expressed

my opinions in a way I never did before”? And when was the last time that a student dropped into your office to tell you that “You gave me the opportunity to show you my intelligence through something other than doing well on an exam”?

Ask me any of these questions and I would reply “Why, just this past semester!”

I have observed over the years that some of my students have “learned” that the best way to get through a course is to do the minimum that is required at the minimum level of acceptable performance, i.e., take a C (or D), and move on to the next course.

In developing what I call my “Dazzle Me” assignments, my starting point is the principle that some of my students are attending class just to get through the course, possessing neither a particular interest in the subject matter nor a belief that a good grade is possible for them. These students will invest a minimum amount of energy in a task which they have done numerous times before, i.e., cutting corners in a class, without a sufficient amount of emotional investment to excel. It’s like reading an eye chart. Just get through it.

And it is while I was reading an eye chart that the idea for the creation of “Dazzle Me” assignments first came into my mind.

Having worn eyeglasses since the age of seven, I estimate that I have had my eyes examined about seventy times in my life. Nothing special. You sit in the chair, the doctor says something like “Read the line underlined in red” and off you go. No emotional involvement. Just get the job done, get your prescription, and move along.

But my last eye exam was different. The ophthalmologist lit up the eye chart, leaned back on his seat, and said, “Dazzle me!” I couldn’t speak for what seemed to me to be at least a few seconds. Not a word. Because I was being *challenged*! I suddenly had an emotional investment in the process. I really *wanted* to dazzle him! Even knowing that there was nothing that I could do in the following few seconds to make myself see better, I really *wanted* to! And as I was reading out the letters, part of my consciousness was focused on “I wonder how I could get my students to feel like this?”

As a professor at an urban community college, I struggle with ways to improve my students’ academic self-concepts and their expectations for academic success. In this paper, I will describe a set of assignments that I have begun to use in my classes which have provided outstanding results. I call them my “Dazzle Me” assignments.

## **Literature Review**

Self-efficacy is defined as “the belief that one can master a situation and produce favorable outcomes” (Santrock, 2014). It has been related to the probability that students will perform

well academically (Bandura, 2006) and that students will accept challenging academic tasks (Schunk, 2012). The likelihood that a typical community college student, who often enrolls at a two-year institution due to academic, social, and/or economic underpreparedness for college (Valadez, 1993), will possess a sufficient level of self-efficacy upon entering college is low. And, to add to the difficulties that many of these students will face, Grubb (1999) reports that a percentage of community college students are not really very committed to attending college at all and choose a two-year school because they have no other socially-approved way to spend their time.

What, then, can the academic outcomes possibly be for these students? Even though many community college students are burdened by work and family responsibilities and some take breaks from their quests for college degrees as the pressures of their personal lives accumulate, the fact is that only 29.9% of students entering community colleges in 2007 were able to earn their two-year degrees within four years (National Center of Education Statistics, 2011). This is an indication that community colleges need to do more than just provide opportunities for higher education; they must also improve their students' rates of success. Increasing the low levels of academic self-concept these students possess is often overlooked as a means by which this may be accomplished.

Research has shown positive correlations between self-efficacy and academic success both in first-generation community college students (Majer, 2009) and in students at four-year institutions (Dispenzieri, Giniger, Reichman, & Levy, 1971; Lent, Brown, & Gore, 1997; Caprara, Fida, et al, 2008) and positive correlations have been reported between what has come to be called academic self-concept and academic achievement across many cultures and in a variety of countries (Marsh, 1990; Marsh & Yeung, 1997; Guay, Marsh, & Boivin, 2003; Arens, Yeung, Craven, & Hasselhorn, 2011). Also, students' self-beliefs (Chambres & Martinot, 1999) and ideas about what kind of students they are and/or might become (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006) have been shown to have an impact on their academic success.

## **Procedure**

For this study, on the second day of the semester of my second-level psychology classes (i.e., all students had already successfully completed Introductory Psychology and most were in their second semester of enrollment), beginning with a description of my experience during my eye examination, I stated that I have realized that I do not give my students an opportunity to go above and beyond what is expected of them often enough. This, I promised, was going to change.

I then provided the following information:

- 1) There would be a number of times during the semester when I would challenge students to “Dazzle Me” by responding to a brief assignment. The assignment might be to watch a youtube video or to analyze a quote, relating it to a concept from the course, or to read an article and provide and support an opinion related to the topic;
- 2) Students’ work would be graded in the following manner: One point would be awarded when a student submits a completed assignment with a professional appearance; two points would be awarded when a thorough and accurate response is provided; and three points would be awarded when it is clear from the response that the student spent an unusual amount of time considering and developing a good response to the topic at hand; and
- 3) Students may or may not have their “Dazzle Me” points included in the calculations of their final grades.

In structuring the assignments in this way, my goals were: 1) to have students perceive them as “low-risk” assignments for which any response at all would earn at least one point; and 2) to have them experience an increase in their academic self-concepts through the attainment of academic successes in optional assignments which did not bear the promise of any tangible reward.

[In actuality, it was always my intention to provide a reward for the students who chose to participate. At the end of each semester, I totaled the number of “Dazzle Me” points earned by each student and divided that total by 21, the maximum score possible (i.e., 3 points for each of the 7 assignments). After rounding up to the next highest number, I added that number of points to the students’ final exam scores. For example, if a student earned a total of 18 “Dazzle Me” points, 18 divided by 21 equals .85 and, rounding up, this represents a nearly 90% success rate. Therefore, this student would have 9 points added to his or her final exam score.]

### **Outcomes**

I examined four sets of data to determine whether or not my attempts to increase students’ emotional investment in my classes had been successful.

- 1) What percentage of the students took advantage of and submitted “Dazzle Me” assignments?

In the spring 2103 semester and the summer session which followed it, I presented the opportunity to complete “Dazzle Me” assignments to six of my classes. Of a total of 161 students who completed the courses, 148 submitted at least one of the seven “Dazzle Me” assignments offered. This is a response rate of 91.9% (only 13 students chose not to submit

any of the assignments), a clear indicator of the students' willingness to accept a safe challenge to shine.

2) What was the average number of "Dazzle Me" assignments completed by each student who participated?

A total of 658 "Dazzle Me" assignments were submitted. Of the 148 students who submitted assignments, 24 (16.2%) completed all seven and 105 (70.9%) completed four or more. The average number of assignments submitted per participating student was 4.4. When the average number of assignments per student was calculated using the entire population (and not solely those who chose to participate), the average number of assignments submitted per student was 4.1 out of a maximum total of 7. These figures show that, even though some students neglected to do any of the assignments at all, the average student submitted more than half of the optional assignments, another indication of students' willingness to bring their ideas to light.

3) What was the average number of points added to the final exams of participating students?

A total of 800 points was added to the final exam scores of participating students, averaging out to 6 points per participant. Students appreciated the extra points and the hope is that they will adopt the behavior of accepting academic challenges in their future classes as a result.

4) What was the reaction of the students to the offering of "Dazzle Me" assignments?

The answer to this question is the most interesting and encouraging of all. In truth, adding a few points to the final exam scores of students did not have a significant impact on the final course grades assigned to most of them. But the psychological and emotional impact of encouraging students to take academic risks by completing brief, but difficult, assignments could quite conceivably have a positive effect on them for the rest of their lives. And the fact that they accepted these challenges without the promise of a reward, only later to discover that they would reap some benefit for having completed the optional assignments, only adds to the experience.

For typical students' reactions, I refer you back to the quotes provided near the beginning of this article. But allow me to add just one more:

"I love having someone challenging me to do my best because I don't have that at home."

Dazzling.

**Conclusion**

Since professors realize that there are many factors which affect student success, we continuously struggle to find ways to reach our students and to have them become emotionally connected to our courses. Especially at the community college level, where some students begin their college careers with substantial disadvantages, there has not yet been an opportunity for many enrolled in our classes to develop a sense of self-efficacy related to their academic abilities. They approach our courses with more *hope* for success than an *expectation* of it, and the uncertainty that accompanies that hope often leads to an attitude of “Why bother?” when an opportunity to do additional work is offered.

The “Dazzle Me” assignments which I introduce to my classes early each semester, presented through a personal story that captures the students’ attention, offers interesting, risk-free opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding of the subject matter in creative, thoughtful ways.

Without expecting any reward for their efforts, more than 90% of the students in each of my four classes completed at least one “Dazzle Me” assignment, while over 70% completed more than half of the seven which were offered during the semester. With points toward the final exam being earned from their participation, this high level of response resulted in higher final exam scores which then translated directly into improved course grades. What cannot be measured, however, is the psychological and emotional benefit students received from accepting the challenge to do “extra” work without the promise of a benefit attached to it. Another outcome impossible to measure from these data, but one which is revealed through their statements, is the students’ appreciation of the professor’s interest in what their thoughts on specific issues and/or topics were.

One cannot say this with certainty solely on the basis of what has been reported in this paper (and following up on students like these in future semesters is being considered), but it is possible that the students’ experiences with these “Dazzle Me” assignments could have provided opportunities for them to view themselves, perhaps for the first time in their academic careers, as “college students” rather than simply as students who go to college.

And where this shift in attitude might lead could, once again, be dazzling.

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