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Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Enhancing teachers' engagement response-ability through the motivation-readiness matrix

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This paper introduces the motivation-readiness matrix which we have found to promote constructive discussion about a teacher's agency in influencing student engagement. We locate student motivation in previous theories of student motivation and performance and also adapt insights from situational leadership theory which uses a similar matrix plotting skill against will in recommending appropriate leadership styles. Using these theoretical frameworks, we aim to reframe engagement as a key role of the teacher rather than solely a responsibility of students, thereby increasing a teacher's response-ability to their students.

To provide ways for university teachers to better understand their students and use that knowledge to improve learning design, we delivered workshops helping teachers plot perceptions of student motivation against readiness. We then addressed difficulties of personalising the learning experience of students in different categories. Following our workshops, 94% of participants reported increased confidence in supporting learning or enhancing belonging. 77% of respondents reported implementing something new to respond to student motivations, with 90% of those saying they considered motivation and readiness of their students in tailoring this response. We are now supporting teachers to design digital and face-to-face learning experiences that emphasise their enhanced response-ability to their students.

Keywords: student engagement, teacher agency, motivation, readiness, personalisation, qualitative

Introduction

Student engagement is generally conceived of as "a series of conceptual commitments, teaching strategies and behavioural orientations expected of students" (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 1). Engagement is increasingly seen to encompasses psychological constructs like self-efficacy, belonging and well-being as well as more measurable learning behaviours like attendance and engagement in online fora (Zepke, 2021). Kuh (2009, p. 683) defines engagement as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes...and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities." In effect, engagement is the interplay between the design of learning and the experience of learning.

The aim of this paper is to share a tool – the motivation-readiness matrix – used at Western Sydney University (WSU) to promote constructive discussion about a teacher's agency in influencing student engagement. The tool was developed as part of an institution wide Engaged Teaching Project (ETP) which aimed to support teaching staff to develop contextually relevant strategies to increase student engagement in both online and face-to-face environments. While still a work in progress, the motivation-readiness matrix is proving to have significant impact on engaging teachers to engage with students.

The ETP has found that many teachers view student motivation and engagement as a responsibility of students. The teachers we have worked with are quick to identify engagement as meaningful classroom (or online) participation, and disengagement as the opposite. This is not surprising, since early research into both engagement and retention saw these as owing to attributes of the student (Tight, 2020). In this paper we offer an alternative perspective, one that locates student motivation in the pedagogy literature, most notably the work of John Keller (2010) and his model of student motivation and performance. We also adapted insights from work in organisational behaviour, where situational leadership theory uses a similar matrix plotting skill against will in recommending an appropriate leadership style depending on where team members fit on the matrix. Using these theoretical frameworks, we aimed to reframe engagement as a key role of the teacher and increase a teacher's response-ability to their students.

It is useful to have empirical evidence that teachers can influence motivation. As well as providing for the psychological needs of students' autonomy, competence and relatedness, teachers can directly affect motivation by emphasising relevance, learning goals, time management and self-efficacy (Prananto et al., 2025). A key part of supporting teachers to address engagement is providing teachers with tools to meet the expectations of their students (Su & Wood, 2012). Our starting point in providing teachers with strategies to improve engagement was the interaction of engagement with motivation. Motivation helps us understand the complexity of engagement by getting beyond cognition and behaviour, introducing variables external to the classroom such as social and familial influences (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Keller's (2010) macro model of motivation and performance highlights four avenues through which teachers can increase motivation:

(1) Attention: teachers play a role in maintaining the sustained interest of the learner and building curiosity through active learning, variety in presentation, humour, use of conflicting ideas and real-world examples.
(2) Relevance: teachers underline the relevance of subject matter by connecting with the learner's goals and interests using links to prior knowledge, relatable student pathways, and links to assessment or future learning.
(3) Confidence: teachers can influence student self-efficacy and resilience by helping them set realistic learning goals, breaking learning into small tasks, and providing formative feedback. This feeds into an increasing level of intrinsic motivation through a sense of agency.
(4) Satisfaction: teachers provide a challenging but fair learning experience ensuring the difficulty of learning material doesn't discourage students, but they find satisfaction in mastering material. Students find satisfaction in setting goals, working towards achievement, and shifting their control.

According to Keller (2010), by increasing motivation, and therefore effort, teachers can help students increase their performance. In turn, increased performance and satisfaction feeds back into motivation. Prananto et al. (2025) also found that teacher support influences student engagement. Like Keller's model of motivation, this relationship is mediated by both characteristics of the learner and the nature of the learning environment. The role of the teacher in first understanding and then responding to this relationship was the focus of our work.

The moments that led to the motivation-readiness matrix

To help teachers design adaptable learning environments that connect with students and meet their expectations, we commenced our work with a group of student partners to produce suggestions for teaching staff to engage students at 'moments that matter'. Those moments were identified by student partners as: (1) starting with inspiration, (2) helping students own their learning, (3) bringing the learning to life, (4) demystifying assessment; and (5) ending with reflection. We then designed a series of workshops to support staff to better understand and be able to enact the 'how' of engagement at these strategic points.

Our early interactions with students and teaching staff identified student motivation and readiness as key challenges to engaging students in a learning environment. Reports from teaching staff that many school leavers were presenting to university with limited disciplinary background knowledge (particularly in maths and science) and/or an increasing gap between school and university for mature-age students. They also reported a lack of engagement with learning between timetabled classes and not coming to tutorials prepared to engage in learning. This is consistent with students reporting increasing amounts of time spent on work and caring responsibilities and a growing awareness that many students have limited hours available for study.

In Keller's (2010) model, readiness is captured in abilities, knowledge and skills, which combine with motivation to affect performance, whereas we began to envisage readiness as a more dynamic concept which, like motivation, can vary over time, and is responsive to quality teaching and support. Motivation and readiness interact with each other. Readiness can refer to the skill level and academic background of the students but can also be impacted by the context or circumstances of a student (e.g., where they live, their health, finances, other commitments, stress). We recognise the problems with the deficit model when discussing student preparedness. Indeed, we agree with Smit (2012, p. 374) that "there is a sense in which higher education institutions themselves are underprepared for meeting the needs of the changing student body". On the other hand, emphasising the role of teachers and the institution is not to rule out the role of

student agency in their success (Larsen et al., 2020). Self-efficacy, for example, is not fixed. Keller's goal is better motivational design. Our goal was, in the first instance, to provide ways for teachers to better understand their students and use that knowledge to improve learning design and delivery.

Developing the matrix

To complement Keller's (2010) emphasis on motivation, we borrowed from situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988) to help make sense of what the combination of motivation and readiness was telling us about the engagement challenge. Situational leadership theory was pioneered by Hersey and Blanchard (1988). It is a relational theory of leadership which encourages the deployment of different leadership styles depending on who is being managed and the situation. It calls for a combination of diagnosis, flexibility and partnering for performance. The model sets out directing, coaching, supporting and delegating leadership styles to be used depending on the level of competence and commitment of employees. In an environment where motivation and readiness were important to both teachers and students, making use of situational leadership was a logical step, and led to the development of a matrix plotting student motivation against readiness. Our purpose was not to facilitate the deployment of distinct learning styles but rather to contextualise the classroom and use the motivation-readiness matrix as a heuristic for teachers to think through different dimensions of their student cohort as part of their reflective practice. This knowledge was then deployed in developing strategies for increasing motivation and considering levels of student readiness.

Worth noting is an increased interest in relating situational leadership to education. Salehzadeh et al. (2015) portray teachers as leaders in the classroom. Thus, the ability of a teacher to analyse a situation and assess students' needs can be studied as a form of situational leadership (Zavyalova, 2020). The status of university students as adult learners lends itself to an approach where level of maturity can be considered. Adapting one's approach to ensure both instruction and encouragement based on an individual classroom setting and the student in that setting is similar to the strategic use of teaching-centric and student-centric approaches to learning. An alternative approach is to adapt the situational leadership styles into teaching styles. For the purposes of teaching development workshops, though, we liked the simplicity of plotting student motivation against readiness, as represented in Figure 1 below.

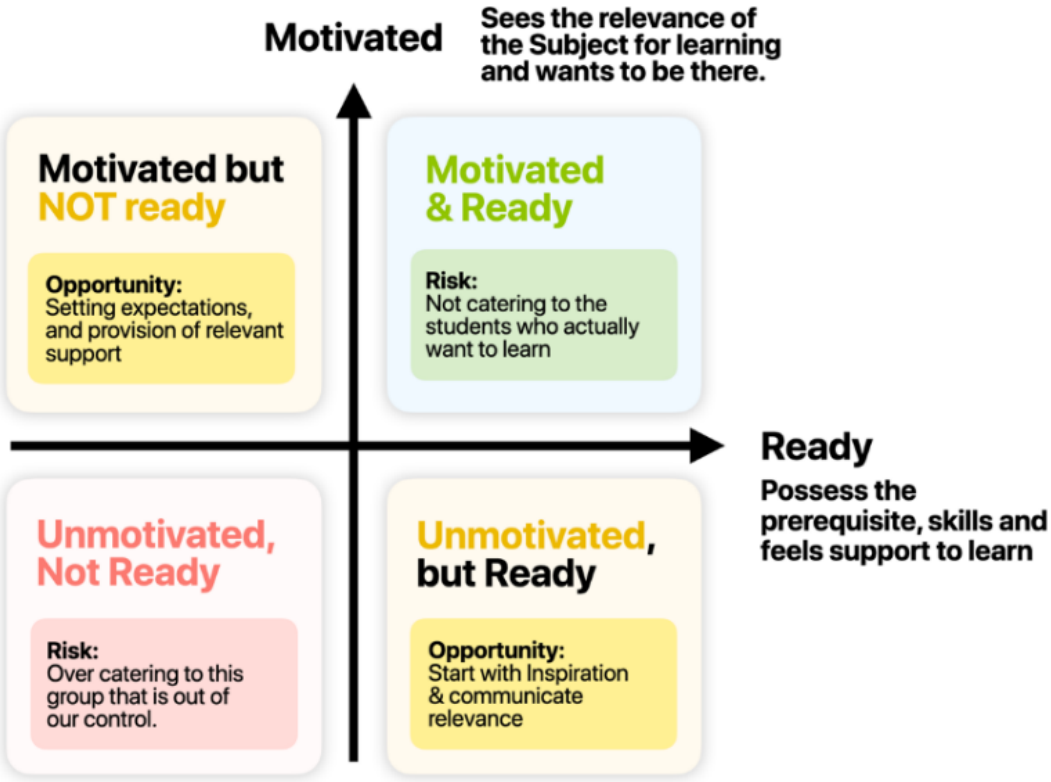

Figure 1. The motivation-readiness matrix used to plot and consider teaching contexts and student situations. Adapted from the Hersey-Blanchard model of situational leadership (1988).

The matrix underlines the difficulties of personalising the experience of students who might exist in, and indeed move across, different categories. Catering to students with high levels of engagement and readiness can alienate students in other categories. Similarly, students with low motivation and readiness often have poor attendance records, so there is concomitant risk in catering to them in the classroom. Instead, we recommended that teachers consider the other two quadrants that define students who are motivated but not ready and unmotivated but ready. We suggested this to drive ideation and innovation that would meet not only the broadest range of students, but optimistically also meet the needs of the outlying quadrants.

The engagement workshops

In the 2024 WSU Student Reflections Survey, 'receiving a personalised experience' was the top driver of students becoming net promoters (recommending the university to friends and family) of the institution; a key engagement metric for our institution. Hence the importance of knowing students beyond demographic and discipline data, was a focus of our work. Our workshops built on the concept of 'knowing your students' by modelling activities that promoted active learning to learners of different styles and interests and in both face-to-face and online environments. We encouraged teaching staff to 'meet students where they are' through heuristics such as the motivation-readiness matrix while aiming to increase student ownership of their learning. Or, in Keller's (2010) terms and consistent with self-determination theory, this means using extrinsic motivation to foster intrinsic motivation. We referred to this as 'shifting the curve': raising low levels of engagement while maintaining the engagement of those already highly motivated.

For a richer discussion of student engagement, we asked workshop participants to plot the quadrant in which they felt most of their students were located and the quadrant they wanted to learn to cater to more effectively. A preponderance of teachers thought their students were located in the 'motivated but not ready' category whereas they indicated that they wanted to better pitch their teaching to students in the 'not motivated but ready quadrant'. This indicates that teachers were unsure how to reach students lacking in motivation, and that our focus on that feature of engagement was welcome. Additionally, seeing that different people have different experiences, perceptions and aspirations within the different quadrants has led to us consider how these quadrants might provide the basis for a reflective practice and interventions to support teachers to address the quadrants they are encountering or feel underprepared for.

Discussion of the opportunities and risks associated in catering to students in each quadrant emerged without prompting. The matrix was a very effective starting point for discussion and reference for the development of different learning designs. Various methods for teachers to learn more about their students were introduced, such as understanding their confidence and goals, and reaching a mutual understanding of expectations inside and outside the classroom. After the discussion of motivation and readiness, we ran activities designed to get teaching staff working towards utilising this concept to consider their messaging and learning design around relevance, readiness and self-directed learning.

Post-workshop surveys found that participants used insights from the workshops to implement new measures to start their subject with inspiration and explain the relevance of assessment. Teachers indicated they considered and/or utilised the motivation and readiness of their students in tailoring this communication and in supporting them in their learning. Based on pre-and post-workshop surveys, participants were more confident to inspire and support their students. We found, then, that the motivation-readiness matrix helped us get past assumptions teachers may have about the causes of low levels of student engagement to focus instead of providing support to specific groups of students as they learned more about them.

Findings and future directions

The motivation-readiness matrix worked as a heuristic to promote discussion of pedagogy. It received a positive response from teachers in all faculties we worked with, suggesting that it is discipline neutral in its applicability. The tool was useful to move discussions past traditional conceptions of student engagement which provided little space for teachers to situate their approach and hold agency in their learning environments in ways that would help them to address the engagement challenge. Instead, they could exchange ideas about how to appeal to cohorts in different quadrants.

Participants reported increased confidence in supporting student learning and enhancing a sense of belonging. 94% of respondents said they felt more confident to contribute to at least one of these while 77% of respondents reported implementing something new to respond to their developing understanding of the broad range of student motivations to study. Of those reporting they implemented something new, 90% said that in light of the workshop they considered the motivation and readiness of their students in tailoring their approach.

Further research is required to build the connection between the positive response to the discussion of motivation and readiness and the increased confidence in undertaking the above tasks. The ETP is now working with teachers from across a range of disciplines to 'follow' their journey into knowing their students and designing learning environments that respond to their growing knowledge of their student cohort's motivations and levels of readiness for study. One application we are currently trialling is the use of Adobe Digital Storytelling to help teachers build an early sense of their students' motivations and the ways they learn best. We are working with teachers to build, interpret and respond to these student narratives to see if we can shift the engagement curve through a personalised and response-able approach to education. A current work in progress, the outcomes of this work will be reported on as part of the presentation of this paper.

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