

Student Learning: Six Causes of Resistance

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A lot of students just don't seem all that interested in learning. Most faculty work hard to help students find that missing motivation. They try a wide range of active learning strategies, and those approaches are successful with a lot of students but not all students.

Stephen Brookfield writes about students who are beyond being passive about learning—they just plain resist it. He suggests that teachers can't respond successfully unless they are knowledgeable about the sources of resistance to learning. Here's a sample of possibilities that appear in his book *The Skillful Teacher*.

1. **Poor self-image as learners**—If students don't think they can learn, they often resist efforts that seek to make them learn. These are students who, at the first hint of trouble, abandon even fledgling efforts. Any negative feedback just confirms what they already believe: they aren't smart enough; they will never be able to figure it out. “Developing a strong self-image as a learner—regarding oneself as someone able to acquire new skills, knowledge, behaviors, and insights—is a crucial psychological underpinning to learning.” (p. 217)
2. **Fear of the unknown**—Some students resist learning because they are afraid. Students like doing what they already know. They hold on to beliefs that have served them well, especially those passed on from parents. “People committed to eternal verities can withstand years of dissonant experiences and mountains of contradictory evidence that call these [beliefs] into question.” (p. 218) For many students, the comfort and security of where they are causes them to resist going to new places, especially places where beliefs might be held more tentatively.
3. **Disjunction between learning and teaching styles**—Most teachers have experienced this: bright, capable students who resist what's happening in class. Once a student in my class said, with some passion, “I hate discussion!” “Why?” “I can't figure out how to take notes off a discussion. What are you supposed to write down?” He was an engineering major and talked often about how clear and organized the content was in his engineering courses. Content is configured differently across disciplines. Sometimes students resist when their preferred approach to learning is at odds with how the information is organized or is being presented.
4. **Apparent irrelevance of the learning activity**—Students resist learning when they don't see how or what an activity contributes to their efforts to learn. If it looks like busywork or a waste of time, students resist. Brookfield points out that this is particularly true when learners are paying for their education themselves.
5. **Inappropriate level of required learning**—Students get frustrated and angry when they can't understand the content. They object to unfamiliar language and the fast-paced delivery of complicated material. The frustration quickly becomes resistance. Brookfield also uses the example of teachers who transfer too much of the responsibility for learning to students too quickly. Students resist. The teacher is asking them to do what he or she is being paid to do.

6. **Students' dislike of teachers**—It's not a particularly pleasant thought, but sometimes students resist because they just plain don't like the teacher. Maybe objections to the teacher are justified or maybe they aren't, but sometimes teachers themselves cause resistance.

Brookfield's list is actually quite a bit longer, but these examples illustrate a variety of sources of resistance to learning. He points out that teachers should not expect to be able to "overcome," or completely dissipate, resistance. They should work to contain or mitigate its effects.

To do this, he recommends that teachers start by trying to sort out the causes of resistance and decide if the resistance is justified. If the instruction is being aimed at a level way above the level of most students in the class, the resistance is justified and the teacher can do something about fixing the problem.

He offers a number of other useful suggestions. For example, teachers need to build a case for learning. They should explain clearly and often why something is important, why it's relevant, and why it's something students need to know. For learners without confidence who are afraid of new knowledge, it helps to create learning situations in which they can taste some success early on.

Finally, teachers will deal more constructively with resistance to learning once they come to accept that it is normal and that students, in fact, have the right to resist. Students cannot be forced to learn anything. All teachers can do is to make the case for learning and work to create conditions that are conducive to it.

Reference:

Brookfield, S. D. *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom, Second Edition*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006. Brookfield's discussion of resistance to learning appears in Chapter 12.