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Leveraging Pleasure to Enhance Learning

Karen M. Dougherty*

Recent advances in neuroscience have illuminated the pathways and mechanisms contributing to the experience of pleasure. While much of the energy and financial support for this work has come from an effort to understand and treat the problems of addiction, the new knowledge has also generated popular interest. Two recently published books, How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like by Paul Bloom (2010) and The Compass of Pleasure: How Our Brains Make Fatty Foods, Orgasm, Exercise, Marijuana, Generosity, Vodka, Learning, and Gambling Feel So Good by David J. Linden (2011), offer entertaining enlightenment about the pleasure circuit of the human brain. The advertising industry has long been a leader in leveraging pleasure for its own ends, and the new data has only served to sharpen the focus of commercials, as well as the design of everything from cars to casual dining spots. Virtual voices in all forms of digital media continually scream for our attention: “Look at me! I can make you feel good.”

Educators, particularly college educators, have been slow to sign on. I enlisted two of my colleagues at Hopkinsville Community College to explore how we might use the power of pleasure to enhance our students’ learning experiences. As Pat Riley, Professor of Mathematics, and Anne Stahl, Instructor of Psychology, and I prepared a presentation for the Kentucky Community and Technical College System’s 2012 New Horizons conference in Louisville, Kentucky, the resistance we met from some colleagues and administrators surprised us. Clearly, not everyone in academia is comfortable with leveraging pleasure as an instructional strategy. A look at the biologic foundations of the pleasure circuit might help us to understand that reluctance. Early on in The Compass of Pleasure, Linden (2011) observes: “It [the understanding of the biologic basis of pleasure] calls for a reformation in our concepts of such virtuous and prosocial behaviors as sharing resources, self-deprivation and the desire for knowledge. Crucially, brain imaging studies show that giving to charity, paying taxes and receiving information about future events all activate the same neural pleasure circuit that’s engaged by heroin or orgasm or fatty foods.”

As both Linden (2011) and Bloom (2010) note in the opening pages of their books, we are all born with pleasure circuits in our brains, and some of these circuits are pre-programmed or “hardwired.” Behaviors that reward those circuits help to ensure survival of the individual or the species as a whole. Thus, newborns

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arrive with a taste preference for sweet substances, as Alexandra W. Logue (2004) explains in *The Psychology of Eating and Drinking*. In fact, the sensation of sweetness, particularly the intense sweetness associated with the simple sugar fructose, is a very reliable indicator of safety and caloric content in foodstuffs. If it’s sweet, it probably won’t hurt us, and it will provide the energy we need to stay alive. As any veteran dieter will attest, it is difficult to resist the siren of sweetness. Despite the growing evidence that the amount of sugar in the American diet is problematic, we are still comfortable with cupcakes, even devoting a popular television show, *Cupcake Wars*, to their construction.

The continuation of the species is another matter. To state the truth bluntly: sex feels good so that people will engage in sexual activity, ensuring a continued supply of tiny new people. While this strategy has obviously been wildly successful, it has also attained an aura of naughtiness, escalating to the point of taboo in some cultural contexts. The word “pleasure” is associated with “sex” in many people’s minds, and we were told that we shouldn’t talk about that. Although a prominent national grocery chain touts its stores as places “where shopping is a pleasure,” the whole idea of highlighting pleasure struck some of our colleagues as risqué.

**Pleasure and Classroom Experiences**

Forging bravely ahead, we scoured the literature and identified six sources of pleasure that might have relevance to the classroom experiences of college instructors: sensual pleasure, surprise, humor, belonging to a group, meeting an achievable challenge, and owning something of value. These six categories allowed us to organize our thoughts about pleasure, to research the biologic roots and cultural origins of each pleasure, and to explore how each might be used to enhance our pedagogy.

**Sensual Pleasure**

Sensual pleasure, as expressed in objects or activities that delight our five senses, was an easy target. Teachers of young children are often experts in enticing their pupils’ senses. Their classrooms are bright and full of visual learning triggers. They know how to modulate their own voices to maintain attention and direct behaviors, and they often play music to engage young auditory cortices, encouraging rhythmic movement as an aid to memory. They invite their students to engage in touching and feeling with their hands, stacking blocks, tracing letters in sand, finger-painting scenes from stories. They use taste and smell to make learning experiences more vivid. Bloom (2010) observes that babies “are suckers for a pretty face and prefer to look at one from the very start”
A consistent marker of beauty is symmetry, and, Bloom notes “it is hard to be symmetrical, and bad things such as poor nutrition, parasites, and simply the ravages of time eat away at it. It is a mark of success” (p. 66). Pretty not only sells; pretty helps us learn.

We noticed college instructors often inhabit classrooms that are visually barren. PowerPoint slides may be the only visual invitation that we extend beyond our own physical or virtual presence. Music is for Music Appreciation. Taste is for Culinary Arts. Smell and touch…well, let’s just not go there. My Anatomy and Physiology classes offer me an advantage by giving me a room full of interesting and colorful models and charts to invite exploration, but I try not to rely solely on the visual experience. I play “jock rock” as students enter my lab on the first day of class and on exam days. I had suspected that my students found this to be incredibly hokey, but exit surveys revealed that the music relieved stress and lifted spirits. I spray room fragrance to illustrate the diffusion of molecules. The difference in peanuts and peanut brittle illustrates the difference in epithelial and connective tissues. Finding ways to engage all five senses can become a source of pleasure in itself.

**Surprise**

Even the most exciting stimulation of the senses will eventually become less effective as habituation occurs, so we recruit the second identified element of pleasure, surprise. The human brain is wired to attend to novel stimuli. Simply put, we are intrigued by surprise, as witnessed by the enduring popularity of the jack-in-the-box. Surprise doesn’t require fireworks or cymbals; the addition of elements that pique curiosity or deliver content in unexpected ways is a valuable tool. Offering surprise rewards during class in the form of extra points, candy treats, or special privileges makes a big impression. Guessing games and puzzles with novel solutions enhance attention. I may appear in tiara (to illustrate the coronal suture of the skull) or toss a student a collection of differently textured rubber balls (to show how cells recognize one another by their surface structures). Changing my position as I speak and varying the order of classroom activities are less dramatic but effective ways to help students learn. As one of Anne’s students wrote in an exit survey: “It’s a riot…you never know what to expect.”

**Humor**

We felt that a particular type of surprise, humor, merited its own place as the third category of pleasure. Behavioral scientists have struggled to determine exactly what makes funny, well, funny. They agree that humor is a specialized form of surprise, uniquely appreciated by humans. The study of ancient jokes
reveals a pattern that persists to the present: our brains are led down a predictable path that suddenly takes a sharp turn, leading us to an unexpected destination. Oddly, we find this very pleasurable. Advertisers and after-dinner speakers know that humor works to hold attention. People often remember their favorite funny movie scenes in great detail and will reprise them at any opportunity. (In anatomy class, the phrase “medulla oblongata” reliably sparks competing Adam Sandler imitations.) I use the famous candy factory episode from “I Love Lucy” to illustrate transport maximum for glucose in the renal tubule. An amusing commercial from YouTube can serve as the introduction to an intimidating topic or help to underline an important point. A cautionary note: Humor must never be used aggressively by the instructor or by class members. Garrison Keillor may poke fun at the folks of Lake Woebegon, but he is careful to identify himself as one as one of them, replete with their characteristic foibles. Gentle, self-deprecating humor is often most effective and helps to put students at ease.

**Belonging to a Group**

The fourth type of pleasure, belonging to a group, probably developed because being ostracized or shunned from one’s group was a serious threat to survival for much of human history. Violating the terms of membership in the desired group triggers shame, the distinctly unpleasant flipside of belonging. Logos, team colors, speech patterns, “inside” jokes, and, importantly, shared knowledge may all be markers of group membership and thus sources of security. Television shows like “Cheers,” “Seinfeld,” and “Big Bang Theory” all attest to the power and pleasure of belonging to a group. We derive pleasure from vicarious membership as we watch and experience pleasure anew as we discuss the episodes with fellow fans. When we structure our classes so that everyone feels valued and welcomed, we create an environment where attendance is better and members facilitate one another’s learning. I use icebreaker activities on the first day of class to let students begin to know one another. Rather than being a waste of time, the activities quickly lead to the formation of study groups and contribute to an atmosphere of emotional safety and collegiality in the room. Along with my learning their names, students mention this as one of the most important ways that I facilitate the formation of a cohesive community in a short time.

**Meeting an Achievable Challenge**

Meeting an achievable challenge is the intensely satisfying fifth sensation of pleasure. Whether we tackle a home improvement project, a video game, or a marathon, we take great pleasure in achieving a goal. While every step toward
the goal may not be pleasurable, and some steps may even be decidedly unpleasant, successful completion of a challenging task feels wonderful. Educators can help their students to persist by structuring their classes to provide a series of achievable challenges for their students. A study of Harvard business school graduates conducted by Teresa M. Amabile and Steven J. Kramer (2011) indicated that the participants ranked “making progress” dead last in a list of potential motivators at the outset of the experiment. However, careful analysis of 12,000 of the same subjects’ journals over a period of several years indicated that incremental progress was, in fact, the most potent motivator for persistence in a task. (Students need frequent feedback from instructors who have structured their coursework to maximize the opportunities for incremental success. I received some stickers emblazoned with “You go, Girl!” as part of a magazine promotion and, on a whim, playfully attached them to the best papers before returning a routine quiz. Soon students proudly announced their entrance into the “sticker society” and encouraged me to award bigger stickers for more important exams. Now students regularly bring me stickers to add to my cache. This mark of achieving a challenge has incorporated humor and a sense of belonging as well.)

**Owning Something of Value**

As a sixth category of pleasure, we noted that we enjoy owning things that we believe to be valuable. Paul Bloom (2011) begins *How Pleasure Works* as well as a 2011 TED Talk with a story about Hermann Goering, the infamous Nazi war criminal, who was devastated to learn that his painting by Vermeer was, in fact, a forgery sold to him by Han van Meegeren. The painting was special to Goering because of its supposed relationship to the painter and lost all value when it was proven to be fraudulent. Memorabilia associated with celebrities brings astonishingly high prices at auction. The sheepskins handed to us at graduations are valuable because of the work they represent and their association with the institution that granted them. We offer our students something of value, even if they are sometimes slow to realize it.

Instead of tangible artifacts, we provide information and skills that connect them with leaders in their fields of interest and sometimes the celebrities they admire. Understanding what Pasteur or Watson and Crick discovered makes my students part of the same elite group of people. When we offer them opportunities to recognize and share the value of what they have learned, the learning itself becomes a greater source of pleasure. In my class, a student might report, “I took my child to the doctor, and I understood exactly what the doctor said. She asked if I was in the medical field!” Clearly, the student felt empowered by her knowledge and realized it had value for her and her child.
CONCLUSION

In the weeks since our presentation at New Horizons, we have continued to think about pleasure as a teaching component. All three of us contribute regularly to a blog, http://pleasureinlearning.com/, which features entries about pleasure in the classroom and highlights tools, websites, and video clips that may be useful to instructors, particularly at the college level. We have also considered adding autonomy as a seventh source of pleasure to investigate and use in our classes.

As we tackle the challenges of student retention and persistence, an awareness of the power of pleasure may help us to structure our classrooms and our colleges to provide experiences that offer maximum satisfaction. Far from being an impetus to merely entertain our students, a willingness to explore and enhance the pleasurable aspects of our teaching offers great benefits to our students and to us. Offering a pleasant learning experience, and seeing students benefit from our efforts, is a great pleasure in itself.
REFERENCES


