



Live with Ben Blood: Metacognition—The Bridge to Student Success

Speakers: Tierney King, Ben Blood

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. Ben Blood was a presenter at our Teaching Professor Conference. He's an English instructor at Northern Pennsylvania Regional College, and today, he's here to give us some insight on first year students success and non-academic instruction. So at the conference, you showed us this really interesting chart on possible reasons that a student might drop a course. And one of those reasons that a student might drop a course was because they could have trouble balancing both school and work. So kind of take us through this chart. Why is this information so important for instructors to keep in mind?

Ben Blood 00:54

Yeah, I love this chart from Peter Adams. It was published in composition studies and it's really a survey that he gave his students asking them to rate how likely certain things, certain aspects, of school or work or life would cause them to drop a course. And it was funny to me, coming at it from a non-academic obstacle point-of-view, I saw that the highest rated things weren't labeled this way in his chart, but they actually were non-academic issues. So 34% of students said that it would be likely that they dropped a course because they had trouble balancing school and work, or they they had the needs of their children that took them away from their schoolwork, and only 3.5% of those things were academic resources, as students rated them. So it was like the course was boring, or they might have trouble with the teacher, those things were so low down in the 2% and 3% of students rating those things as likely to make them drop a course, and the very high rated issues were non academic. And what that says to me is straight from the horse's mouth, as students are saying, "These issues are what we need help with. These issues are what are causing us to not be successful." And I think maybe we should start listening to them.

Tierney King 02:08

And so you intentionally integrate kind of these five umbrella topics that you cover specific student skills into your classes. So you integrate these topics into your classes, and you intermix teaching your first year students these skills instead of only focusing on the content of the course. So why do you intermix these first-year student skills into your classes?

Ben Blood 02:30

Yeah, well, just to clarify, I do touch on these skills in all my classes, but where I teach them most specifically is in my support courses. So I work in an open enrollment college, so like a community college, and everyone is accepted. But they go through some sort of placement standard, and depending on where they're placed, they get placed either in composition I or algebra I or math I, you know, straight off, or they get put into these support courses. So these support courses are taught all over the place. My support course focuses on these things, because a few years into my teaching, I'd never taught one of these courses before. My focus in grad school was metacognition and how to use it in the composition classroom because I felt that that was the way to help students be successful. And as I was teaching for a few years, I was an adjunct, and I was trying to pick up all the classes I could, and they came to me and asked me if I would teach these support courses. And as I taught them for a couple semesters, I realized my students didn't have so much trouble, I could teach them how to write, create a thesis statement, create an organized essay, that was sort of the easy thing. But it was if I could get them to show up to class, and if I could get them to do the homework. So I started sort of shifting my focus to how can I help them be successful and be responsible and sort of adult in college, you know, so those are the non-academic things. So I started sort of inventorying them and looking at them and categorizing them. And these five skills that we're going to talk about today are sort of, as you said, the umbrella topics that I saw students having trouble with. So when I started focusing on those, that's when I started seeing my students improve.

Tierney King 04:02

And so one of the topics that I know that you get really excited about is metacognition. So I think that's one of your favorite ones. And so why is this skill so critical? And then how do you kind of integrate and teach this skill to your students?

Ben Blood 04:16

Metacognition, my wife says, "Don't explain it to people, they already know." But just just to make sure that everyone knows that metacognition is the awareness of mental processes, and the ability to sort of organize them and coordinate them. I believe it's the bridge. For me, I love the work of Carol Dweck, who talks about growth mindset. I love the work of Barry Zimmerman who talks about self-regulation. And that's what I'm working my students toward, I want them to have a growth mindset. I want them to be self-regulated learners, but I feel like to get to that point, to get them to there, the bridge is metacognition. We have to start with conscious awareness, in lieu of conscious awareness, in the absence of it, students end up winging it, right? So a lot of my first generation students, a lot of students that don't have experience or don't have college success strategies modeled for them or talked about with people, they're just kind of hoping for the best and doing what they do. So when I start to lay it out for them that everything is a process, right? The writing process, just the general academic studying process, that there are steps that we take to complete a task or steps that we take to achieve a goal. When they're aware of those steps, they can say this step worked, this step didn't, change this one, keep this one. So I really think it's got to be the first step just to start having conversations about successes isn't a happy accident, people actually take steps to get there. And how I do that it is really a lot of conversation, a lot of reflection, and a lot of saying this word to them over and over again that they've never heard before. So by the time they leave, it's a quirky word that, you know, they've heard so many times that they remember, but it sticks with them that it's thinking about thinking. It's

awareness of mental processes, so that you can coordinate them to success instead of just just hoping for the best and see what happens.

Tierney King 05:58

The other skills that you integrate into your courses, we've got time management, self-discipline, help-seeking, and then resilience and perseverance. So take us through those. And then what specific activities or lessons do you integrate to help teach students these skills?

Ben Blood 06:14

Yeah, so the first thing that I work with my students on is time management. I've taught a diverse range of students. And I've taught at a few different places I taught at a four year SUNY, State University of New York school, I've taught at community colleges. And now I teach at a very small start-up college, Northern Pennsylvania Regional College. And so I've had students that come from the inner city to come play sports, I have international transfer students, I have first-generation students, I have young students, I have non-traditional students, all of them that come to me, it seems that time management is something that they really need to work on. So what I what I basically tell them is time doesn't just appear, right? We can't just think and hope that sometime by Sunday night, the day before my course, I'm gonna have some time to finish this. So the very first week of the semester, we sit down and make a grid schedule. And again, this is metacognition and basically visualization to lay it out and have them show themselves and make it a visual representation to themselves of the responsibilities that they already have kids and work in school and social life, too, right? We want to balance everything so that we don't burn ourselves out. So the first step, we make that grid schedule, you know, I started at seven in the morning, and we go to maybe nine or 10 at night on a grid, and they lay out what their time usually looks like. And that shows all the things that they have, pulling out the responsibilities and things that have pulling on their time. And then the second step is to find pockets of time within there, if they can do an hour or two of work here are there all throughout the week so it's not all piled up into the weekend, so it can be sustainable, and it can be something that doesn't burn you out and make you resent doing that schoolwork. So time management is something we have to work on, because it doesn't just appear, and I'm creating that schedule; I get a lot of good feedback from students that that really helps them to be conscious of their time. So self-discipline, you know, creating the schedule is fine and hearing about all this stuff in class and the skills we talked about is fine, but you have to actually do it. Right? So that's the next step. So self-discipline is, I tell them don't think of the Marines or something, right? It's not boot camp when we're talking about discipline, but you do have to say no, sometimes, you know? There will be a time you can't play fortnight for six hours every night, or you can't stay in bed that extra three hours every day when you want to. Now sometimes you need to. Sometimes you need to do that thing. Sometimes you need to stay in bed, but you have to say no, sometimes. You have to forego the instant gratification for the longer goal, right? So we talk about selfdiscipline, how important it is. But then how do you get people to be disciplined? How like, what's the strategy I can give teachers to say this is how I teach it. I just do a lot of talking and a lot of reflecting with students and I use the term "find your why." One of these entrepreneurial books or millionaire success habits, I think was the book by Dean Graziosi, that I read, Find Your Why. And it's really that motivation. Why are you in college? Why is it important to you, because if you're going to make that choice over the instant gratification, there's got to be a carrot right at the end that you're chasing. So I do a lot of reflection and talking and sort of support group-talking, too, in class, in that it's

nice in that support course for composition I, we do have some time built in where we just talk about why are we here? Why are we in college? When you have that in mind, it's easy to forego that instant gratification. Help-seeking is the other one of the other skills that we're talking about here. And that one seems so simple, right? If you need help, if you don't understand something, go ask questions about it and go get help. And again, back to my work with a lot of the students I work with are first-generation students and I'm a first-generation student. The bottom line is that college is scary when you're a first-generation student and nobody's ever told you about it before and you don't know what to expect. And you're walking those halls for the first time, and you're meeting college professors quote unquote, for the first time, it's, it's a very intimidating experience. So they don't seek help when they need to. They sit by themselves and sort of say, I should already know this, I should be good enough at this. And that's a growth mindset versus fixed mindset. To get students out of that fixed mindset, to sort of paraphrase Carol Dweck here, fixed mindset is if you fail at something, it's a signal, it's a sign that you should quit, right? You're not good enough for it? Well, we want students to seek help if they have trouble and not think that they already should know everything. So there's a barrier there between students knowing that they should actually go in and get the help. So one thing that I do is, as a writing teacher, it's sort of an easy fix, or an easy step. For me, I require mandatory conferences, students have to meet with me at some point in the semester. Sometimes I do that all in one assignment, like say that if I have a lower number of students for the semester, or sometimes I'm teaching some higher level courses, and I only have a couple of comp sections, so it's easy to say, "Everybody's going to set up a half hour with me and meet during this first assignment." If I have a larger group of students throughout the semester, then I can spread it out throughout the semester and say, "At some point, for one of these assignments, before you turn in your final draft, to sit down with me, so we can have a conversation. And I can sort of diagnose and help you with specific things that you need help with." And that really helps to break the ice. Because if I just say everyday at the end of class, "Remember, I'm available. Come see me." You know, it doesn't doesn't always work that way. So actually requiring them, I've had a lot of good luck with. Finally, now all of a sudden, they're signing up with me three more times throughout the semester to come see you. Because that help was so useful. And I always tell them, I don't think you'll ever leave my office with a lower grade on your paper when you came in, right? You always leave knowing something more in doing better. So why not do it? And then the last one is, it's very, I guess, affective, or emotional or non-academic, right? It's resilience and perseverance. How do you get students to be tougher, for a lack of better word, which isn't really what I'm going for there. But that's what those words sort of, the connotation that comes up. But really what I'm getting at there is, it's surprising to me how much students feel like they won't fail when they come to college. And I don't mean failing like get an F in a course, but sometimes I have students that get a B and just melt down because they didn't get a perfect 100% on it, an A. And I took college. It's hard, right? I mean, if it wasn't hard, everybody would do it. And getting a degree wouldn't mean anything, right? It's hard. It's an accomplishment when you get through it. So you're going to fail. And again, resilience, perseverance just really rolls back into this growth mindset, this idea that if you fail, it's not a signal, it's not a sign that you should quit. It's not a flare being shot up to tell you you're not worthy of college, right? Instead, we need to use our failures as opportunities for growth. And the way you do that is circling back around and incorporating metacognition into that cycle, right. So if you fail, you're going to fail again if you do the same thing; the same process will produce the same results. So by using metacognition, by having a growth mindset, we're helping, I'm helping students, we're trying to help them realize that they won't always succeed, but they can always grow for the next time and use it as a

teaching opportunity. And I always tell them, there's a quote I heard somewhere that I can't, I can't attribute correctly right now. But it's, "Take success to the heart and take failure to the head," right? So learn from your mistakes as you move forward. And then sometimes I just tell them, even with all that, even with all that practical advice about metacognition and growth mindset and all you learn from it, it still hurts, you know? Absolutely. So we all hurt when we fail, and it's emotional. But sometimes you just stay in your feelings for a while, and then you got to get back up and keep moving. And that's going to happen in college. And then again, when talking with students, and the very sort of social nature of this particular class, other people speak up and say, "I, you know, last week, I was affected by it in this way." And this week, you know, you can see that people do get through it. And just sort of that communal nature helps students. Specifically, there's one assignment that I do that I call the reflect and adjust activity, where at the end of after each assignment, we sit down and look at the rubric and look at the grades and look at the feedback. And I sort of force them to sit there and say, "What sections of the rubric did I get high grades on? What sections of the rubrics did I get low grades on? What steps in the writing process were responsible for those things? And how will I change those steps moving forward?" So again, all very metacognitive. It all starts with conscious awareness. Because like everybody else, I had students so often hand back papers, and then I go to leave the room and I see a couple of them on the floor with footprints on them, that nobody even looked at and they just run out the door and don't pay attention to that feedback. So we have to learn how to teach students and help them learn how to reflect and grow from even a bad grade.

Tierney King 14:55

And you said, you know, college is hard and I think that's a good reminder to just, you know, kind of share that with students because it is hard not only just for students, but for instructors, as well. And so just kind of giving them that reassurance and giving them this feedback and teaching them the skills, do you see a difference in how some of your students proceed in class? Have you ever had someone come back and say, "Hey, I use you know, the calendar for spacing my time now or I use metacognition for this all the time?"

Ben Blood 15:25

Yeah, it's interesting. Well, first thing I want to say is, I like how you brought in instructors, because it is difficult for instructors, too. I mean, some of us do have second jobs, where some of us are teaching a full load, and then teaching an adjunct or an online course. There's something over here, as well. So it gets stressful and crazy for us at the end of the semester, as well. And so for people listening in, I tell my students, I use these skills. These aren't just things that I'm teaching people. And sometimes I tell my students, I want to call my class "Things I Wish People Would Have Told Me When I Was in College," like that's how I want to set this course up. So these are skills that made me successful after a while that I had to learn on my own. And I wish somebody would have given me these skills in the beginning. And I still use them myself. One of the things I love about reflection, sometimes I feel guilty, because I feel like the reflection assignments, I'm like asking students to tell me how great the class was, you know, I mean, like, for my own ego, but it's not. I mean, it does help when I get those comments. But again, it's all about raising consciousness, and metacognition and things like that. But yeah, at the end of the semester, and what's lucky for me now is I get students, I get repeat students, because we are such a small institution, and I teach so many courses that I sometimes I have them next semester for writing and next semester for business communication, and things of that. So I do

see students again, and get them to talk to me, or have the privilege of them talking to me about the things we learned in writing I. And yes, so often, and I tell you that time management is the one that always comes up, unequivocally, is the champion of all of the skills that we teach. They say, "It changed my life. I use it now, it makes things so much easier. My stress is so much lower." They love to show me how they remember the term metacognition every time they talk to me, right? Because it's such a quirky word. But yeah, I do get really nice feedback from students. And honestly, it was just last week, I got an email from a student that I haven't talked to since the end of the semester, but she just wanted to thank me again and show appreciation again. She said, "If I hadn't had you when I first started as a non-traditional student, if I hadn't had you, when I first started college coming back again, I don't even know if I would have gotten this far." So those skills have those particular skills. And I mean, I like to be supportive. And I like to be close with students too. But she mentioned specific skills, the time management, and metacognition and things like that. And I do get a lot of great feedback from students about continuing these things.

Tierney King 17:42

And then kind of lastly, you have all of these skills, and you have a blog on your own and everything. So just kind of, you know, share with us real quick where people can find this information and these activities or resources.

Ben Blood 17:54

Yeah, so I again, I teach all these skills in my support course for Northern Pennsylvania Regional College. But I also want to help more students. Honestly, I want to spread it out. And during the last year with COVID, and the leap that everyone took with their technology skills for the most part, I felt like wow, I could do this online and remotely for a lot more students than just the ones sitting in my class. So I have started a sort of consultant business on the side online: Accountability Coaching for College Success. And that is the URL as well accountabilitycoachingforcollegesuccess.com. I have a blog where I write sort of directly to students, as if I'm teaching, right? And use accessible language, not like a journal, like an academic journal. So I have a blog on there where I talk to students about sort of breaking these things up that we're talking about today and speak right to them. I also have the OER textbook that I use in my support core course that's posted on the website as well. So there's a lot of good information there. And there's a contact form on there that anyone can get ahold of me, students or anybody else looking for more information.

Tierney King 18:59

Awesome. Thanks so much for joining us today and sharing all these you know, tips and tricks that we can integrate into classes for students. Whether you're driving to work, or you just need a 10 minute think session, we hope Faculty Focus Live inspire your own teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode summary.