

Peers, more than teachers, inspire us to learn

March 21 2017, by Cary Roseth, Andy Henion



In a Michigan State study, students who were given a rationale for why learning is important from their peers got much better final grades than students who were given the same rationale from the teacher. Credit: Michigan State University

"Why do I have to learn this?" It's a common question among youth, but new research out of Michigan State University suggests students perform much better academically when the answer is provided by their peers rather than their teachers.

University students who were given a rationale for why learning is important from people similar to them—in this case actors posing as young professionals—wrote more effective essays and got a significantly better final grade than students who were given the same rationale from the course instructor.

"These findings suggest that what instructors were good at was getting across cold facts, while the peers seemed to be tapping into an identification process," said study co-author Cary Roseth, associate professor of educational psychology. "In other words, as a student, I can identify with my peers and imagine myself using the course material in the same way they do. This gives the material meaning and a sense of purpose that goes beyond memorization. When I hear a peer's story, it connects to the story I am telling myself about who I want to be in the future."

The research, published in the *International Journal of Educational Research*, was conducted in an online college course. Online course enrollment has grown dramatically during the past decade, and more than a third of all U.S. higher-education students - 7 million-plus - have now enrolled in at least one online course.

The study is the first to investigate the effects of peer and instructor rationales on [student](#) outcomes over an entire semester, let alone in an online setting.

For the experiment, students in an MSU introductory-level [educational psychology](#) course, which is required of all teacher education students, were randomly assigned to receive either the peer rationale, the instructor rationale or no rationale for why the course was important and beneficial to their potential careers as teachers. The peer and instructor rationales were scripted and identical.

When it came to final grades, students who received the peer rationale scored an average of 92 percent - significantly higher than the 86 percent scored by students who received the rationale from the instructor.

Interestingly, students who received no rationale averaged 90 percent for a final grade, which is still higher than those who received the instructor rationale.

"We found that receiving the instructor rationale led to lower final grades than both the peer rationale and no rationale conditions," Roseth said. "This gives support to the idea that, motivationally, the fact that instructors control [grades](#), tell the students what do to, and so on, may be working against their efforts to increase their students' appreciation of why the class is important."

Thus, this study suggests that it may be beneficial for instructors to provide students with peer rationales.

Provided by Michigan State University

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