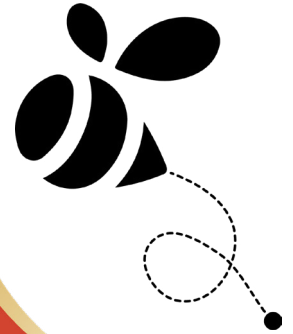


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Can Boredom in the Classroom Enhance the Learning Experience?

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Have you ever been in class and felt restless, disinterested, and that time was moving slowly? Most students have had the unpleasant feeling of trying, but failing, to pay attention and keep on task while in class. Feeling bored at school is incredibly common. Research suggests that when students are bored, they struggle to pay attention and they do not do well on tests. So, researchers are trying to figure out what causes boredom at school and how we can prevent it. The link between boredom and poor academic performance is strong and well known. However, the authors of this review argue most studies have not done a good job of measuring boredom in-the-moment, and that there is actually little to no evidence that boredom directly causes failures in learning. In view of these drawbacks within the literature, the authors propose an alternative view: that boredom itself is not detrimental to learning, but rather a sign that learning is already failing, and that boredom may even be an aid in learning. This notion is groundbreaking because it suggests that the common way of handling boredom in the classroom - eliminating it as quickly as possible - may actually be counterproductive to students' learning. This review describes three ways in which boredom can enhance learning and outlines well established approaches to managing students' boredom in the classroom.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

There is a lack of evidence for the claim that experiencing boredom (in the classroom) negatively impacts attention and academic performance. The authors of this chapter argue that boredom can enrich the learning experience in three ways. Firstly, students' boredom serves as a signal to teachers that learning is no longer occurring. Thus, this signal prompts teachers to modify elements of the learning environment so that students can successfully re-engage with course content. Secondly, since boredom is an aversive state, individuals are motivated to reduce their boredom by focusing their attention on an activity or subject matter. It is in this manner that boredom may enable an individual to become interested in a topic they have never explored. Thirdly, boredom can motivate students to re-engage with course content if they respond adaptively to the boredom signal. For example, students can utilize cognitive approach strategies in which they alter their perception of boring material to make it more appealing to them.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers wanted to gain a clear understanding of the relation between boredom and learning in academic settings. To accomplish this, they conducted a comprehensive review of studies that investigated

this association. They also critically examined research on whether boredom causes attention problems or vice versa. Finally, they reviewed research that examined the efficacy of boredom coping techniques in a classroom setting. They argued that disengaged attention is the cause of learning problems and that boredom is merely a symptom of the problem rather than a cause. Moreover, as an early warning that attention is disengaged, boredom may actually be a useful emotion to guide the learning process.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

While many studies assert that boredom plays a negative role in students' learning, these findings are bound by a particular way of measuring boredom. The authors of this review found that most studies claimed to be measuring *in-the-moment* boredom, but instead were asking participants to report how bored they *generally* are, or how bored they had been days or weeks ago, when in various learning contexts. Therefore, most research that has claimed to find a negative relationship between boredom and learning outcomes, does not provide adequate support for this notion. The researchers also found no evidence that in-the-moment boredom causes attentional disengagement. Two studies actually suggested the opposite relationship to be true—that attentional disengagement causes boredom. These results challenge the previously conceived notion that students' boredom in class actually causes them to lose their focus - it seems to go the other way around. Lastly, the researchers concluded that "cognitive approach" strategies were the most effective boredom prevention strategies in the classroom. Cognitive approach strategies involve getting students to change the way they think about a potentially boring task to make it more meaningful or valuable to them, so they can maintain engagement. For example, if a student reminds himself/herself of the importance of a math lesson, ("If I pay attention, I'll be more likely to get a good grade and attend the university program of my choice"), they may pay better attention to the lesson and thereby, reduce their boredom.

WHAT ARE THE RESEARCHERS PROPOSING?

Previous research has failed to consider the notion that boredom is a signal that learning is not happening rather than a direct cause of learning failures. The authors of the review propose that in-the-moment boredom can be used as a learning tool in a variety of ways. For instance, the researchers argue that boredom is a signal that a student's attention is disengaged and can be used by a teacher to make changes to the learning environment that may enhance attentional engagement. Moreover, teachers can help students understand and interpret boredom as feedback to redouble efforts to engage attention with the material at hand rather than evidence of dislike for the material.

On the other side of the desk, boredom can be helpful to students. Since boredom is unpleasant, students are motivated to engage with an activity or material to reduce their boredom. Thus, boredom may aid in learning in the following two ways. Firstly, when bored individuals are searching for intriguing content, they may become interested in a novel topic (such as bugs, history, etc.) which they have never engaged in before. Once they develop initial interest in this topic, they may become motivated to re-engage with similar content in the future and deepen their understanding of it. Secondly, the unpleasant feeling of boredom may motivate students in the classroom to re-engage with the course content. However, if students are unable or unwilling to become engaged with the course content or are concerned with eliminating boredom in the fastest and easiest possible way, then they are likely to attend to other activities unrelated to course content (such as their phones) and this behaviour will hinder learning. Therefore, if boredom is to improve learning, students and teachers must respond adaptively to the boredom signal rather than try to eliminate

boredom in the most convenient and fastest way. One strategy is for students to recognize when they are feeling bored and to use cognitive approach techniques, such as those mentioned above, to remain engaged.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Contrary to previous research, this review paper highlights a potential positive effect that can come from feeling bored. Specifically, this review encourages individuals working with people who struggle with boredom (i.e. educators, counsellors, and parents), to view the experience of boredom as a source of information about the current environment and as something that can help direct individuals towards advantageous pursuits (such as exploring a new topic). Moreover, this research suggests that educators and students should aim to address the underlying factors that brought about boredom, instead of focusing solely on eliminating boredom. When the primary motivation is boredom elimination, students may seek engagement in off task activities and educators may try to become more entertaining - neither of these strategies is likely to enhance learning. In contrast, teachers should collaborate with students to determine why they became disengaged and how the learning environment can be altered to accommodate the student's learning style and academic needs going forward. This research has also revealed that cognitive approach strategies are the most successful way of coping with boredom in the classroom. Therefore, future research should investigate the efficacy of these techniques in a variety of different settings, such as non-academic settings and different cultures.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Jhotisha Mugon is a PhD candidate in the department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo. Dr. John Eastwood is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at York University. Dr. James Danckert is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo.

KEYWORDS

Boredom, Attention, Education, Students, Teachers

CITATION

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