Frequently educators view impulsivity as a trait that must be managed and prefer the ability to delay gratification as a habit of the mind. Do you think there are times when impulsivity is okay, and possibly should even be encouraged? What might those times be?

So far, we've all mentioned the negatives associated with impulsivity, and certainly even Costa and Kallick focus on the more downbeat aspects of this behavior. "Consider how many times impulsive students interrupt the learning environment. How many office referrals are the result of students' impulsivity" (2000, p. 145).

I hadn't much considered the potential upside to impulsivity until I ran across a blog post by James Anderson, who is a Habits of the Mind consultant from Australia. In this post, called "Managing Impulsivity," he offers some ideas for managing the behavior, but then throws this tantalizing idea out there that there are times when we should encourage impulsivity. He doesn't develop the idea beyond that (Anderson, 2008).

So I went digging, because to be honest, I couldn't imagine many situations where impulsivity could be encouraged. I came across this blog post by Ann Holm, who is a cognitive communication specialist out of Minnesota. She works with people who need brain retraining after events that produce significant neurological changes (brain or spinal injuries, strokes, autism, etc.)

Holm posits that the two ideas of spontaneity and impulsivity are basically the same thing, but one is the good angel on your shoulder and the other is the devil. Spontaneity is enjoying the moment as it unfolds and a willingness to be being flexible, combined with a creative burst of energy (Holms, 2009). That sounds awfully like impulsivity, doesn't it? What Holms claims separates the two is that spontaneous actions are normally prefaced by a moment of restraint where a person takes a quick inventory of the circumstances and thinks about the bigger picture before proceeding. If that step has been skipped, you've left spontaneity behind and are now being impulsive (Holms, 2009).

I thought that was quite an easy way to separate the two, and it made me realize what I actually want my impulsive students to do. I don't want them to lose the spontaneous behaviors; I do want that creativity, that flexibility, and that open-mindedness that spontaneity produces. What I also want is that moment of consideration before acting. So to me, that has become the critical factor to focus on where impulsivity is concerned: helping students to build in that one, two, or ten seconds of rational thought before free-flowing energy takes over.

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References


Response to a classmate’s post:

(Note: this isn't a response to the previous post; rather, it's a general example of how to respond.)

Dave,

Correct me if I'm wrong, but what I'm gathering from your post is that you see self-directed behaviors as a way to address the economic polarization that's going on these days (Adams, 2009). I'm in complete agreement that this appears to be a major societal change. The poor seem to have less and the rich seem to have more, and the gulf between has widened considerably over the past years.

I see the other end of the spectrum; I'm at a preK-8 school of around 350 students that has just announced its 2010-2011 tuition: nearly $12,000. My students take for granted they will be successful. They are, at times, derisive of the opportunities they have and even dismissive of them. They seem respectful of the democratic process but all too often, I see their parents manipulate it so that it only looks like democracy. More often, it reminds me of Orwell's Animal Farm: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell, 1954).

Despite the polarized nature of our two environments, I find great comfort in the fact that we want the same things for our students -- to understand the world and to have a place in it; to live a productive life, and to work to the good of one's fellow man. Self-directed behaviors (monitoring, assessing, modifying) are the way to get there, according to Costa and Kallick, as they are the traits common to peak performers in all walks of life (2000.) Even though our populations are as different as can be, I share your hopes and am looking forward to the work of this course as a way to promote the habits that create better human beings.

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References

