

# **Enhancing Learning Interactions by Reducing Student Resistance**

Anton Tolman  
Utah Valley University  
POD Conference, Montreal  
October 27, 2017  
[Anton.Tolman@UVU.edu](mailto:Anton.Tolman@UVU.edu)

Trevor Morris  
Ursula Sorensen  
Office of Teaching and Learning  
Utah Valley University

## What is Student Resistance?

Student resistance is an outcome, a motivational state in which students reject learning opportunities due to *systemic factors*. The presence of resistance *signals* to the instructor the need to assess the systemic variables that are contributing to this outcome in order to intervene effectively and enhance student learning.

Tolman, A.O. & Kremling, J. (2016). *Why Students Resist Learning: A Practical Model for Understanding and Helping Students*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Sibley & Ostafichuck (2014, p.179):

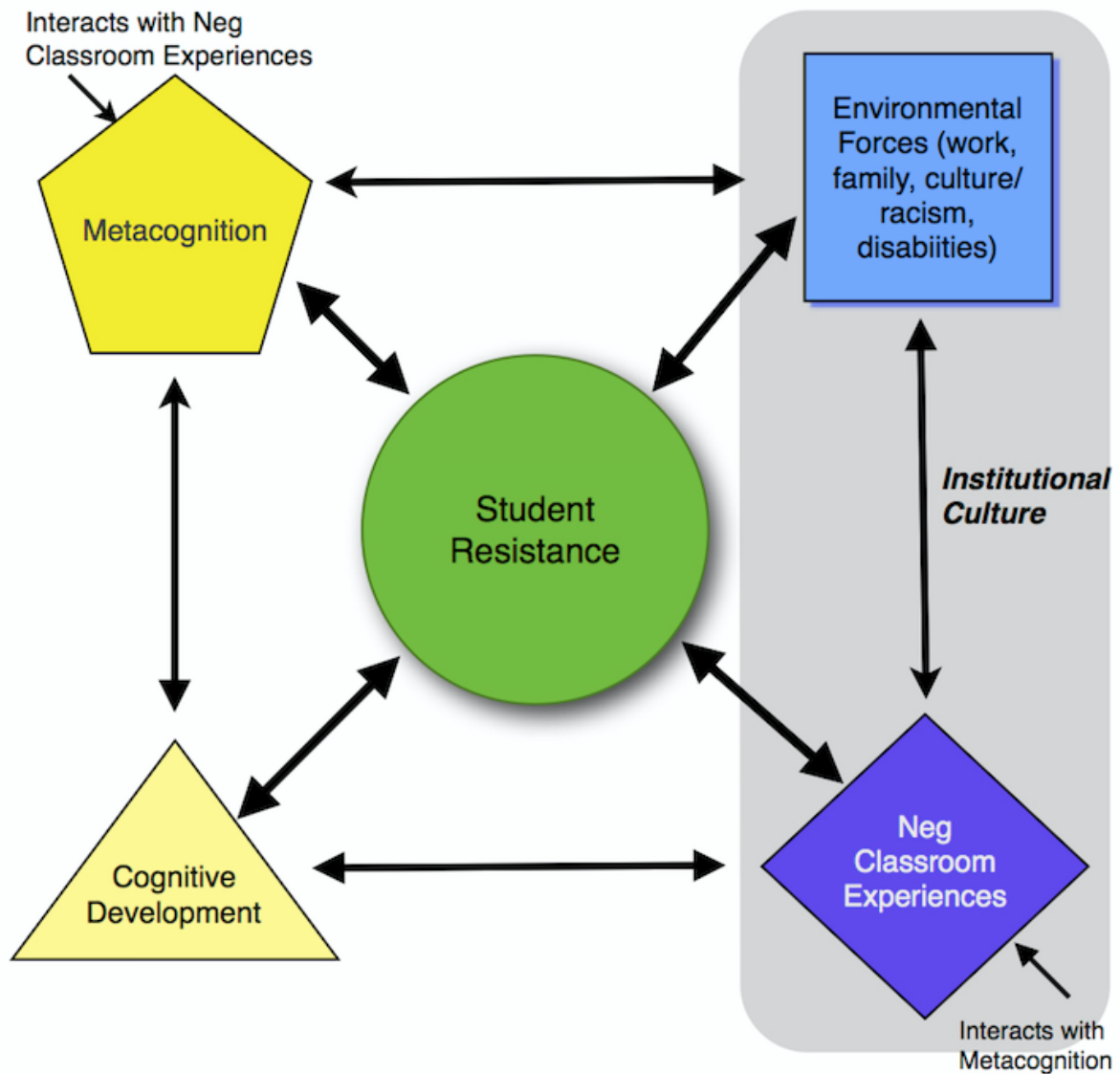
- The question is not whether resistance will occur (it will)
- The question is *when* and *how intense* it will be
- Plan for resistance
- Orient and prepare students for the learning environment
- Remain positive
- Respond effectively to student concerns
- Quoting a faculty member: "...it takes you two or three rounds to get to the point where you say, yeah, that's okay"

Tolman: By accepting the reality of resistance, we can reduce our biases and be able to act effectively.

| <b>Table 1</b><br><b>Forms of Student Resistance Matrix</b> |   |  |
|---|---|--|
|   | <b>Asserting Autonomy Pushing against external influence</b><br><br>Emotions: anger, frustration, resentment  | <b>Self-preservation Trying to accommodate to external influence</b><br><br>Emotions: anxiety, fear  |
| <b>Active Resistance</b>                                    | <p><i>Arguing or disagreeing with professor in the classroom</i></p> <p><i>Repeatedly asking for the rationale for assignments</i></p> <p><i>Saying they paid for the class and want it taught how they like</i></p> <p><i>Inciting other students to rebel or not collaborate; disrupting class activities</i></p> <p><i>Complaining to higher authority</i></p> | <p><i>Repeatedly asking for detailed clarification of grading criteria</i></p> <p><i>Taking over group assignments to ensure an adequate grade</i></p> <p><i>Arguing with the professor over grades received, seeking additional points or consideration</i></p> <p><i>Focus on surface approach to learning</i></p> |
| <b>Passive Resistance</b>                                   | <p><i>Refusing to come to class</i></p> <p><i>Refusing to participate during in-class exercises (does not get into groups, does not comply with assignment tasks)</i></p> <p><i>Does not turn in assignments at all or is consistently late</i></p> <p><i>Complaining about the professor to other students</i></p>   | <p><i>Expressing concerns about working with others</i></p> <p><i>Avoidance of conflicts and refusing to resolve situations or bring them to the professor's awareness</i></p> <p><i>Minimal participation in class (withdrawn, doesn't speak or give feedback, lets others make all decisions)</i></p>              |

From Tolman & Kremling, 2016

## Integrated Model of Student Resistance



## Student Resistance Reduction Plan

1. Pick a class that you will be teaching in the coming semester (new or taught before)

---

2. Anticipate and Analyze the resistance:

What types of resistance do you anticipate in this class (consider course level, size, general education vs. program course, similar course pedagogies etc)? Will resistance be mostly active or passive? What do you think is the motivational driver (assertion of autonomy or self-preservation)? If you have taught this course before, *what are the student behaviors telling you?* Explain:

3. Based on your anticipation and/or assessment of the motivational drivers and the type of resistance, examine the IMSR model. What underlying forces do you believe will be **primarily** generating the resistance? (Be specific and link it to one or more of the elements of the model). How can you validate and work with the motivational drivers using that part of the IMSR model? *What changes will you make now and what changes can you make for the future?* (See tips and strategies for some ideas)

Now:

Future:

**Some Tips and Strategies with the IMSR**  
**Anton Tolman, Ph.D.**  
**Utah Valley University**

**Institutional Culture**

- Shift tenure policies; acknowledge the value of teaching
- Recognize innovative teaching strategies and scholarship of teaching
- Promote a culture of application and relevance, not grades
- Reward participation in professional development

**Environmental Forces**

- Celebrate inclusion in the class and on campus
  - Validate and incorporate their life experiences
- Scaffold assignments in your course design – don't assume they know the basics
- Track at-risk students (underrepresented, first generation, on probation) and reach out
- Be aware of stereotype threat

**Prior Negative Experiences**

- Dialogue reasonable expectations without patronizing
- Create and utilize rubrics for grading of assignments
- Avoid instructor “misbehaviors”: incompetence, indolence, offensiveness
- Work to build your *immediacy* or interpersonal warmth
  - Share your own struggles and difficulties in the field and in school
- Consider power sharing – involving students in course policies, decisions, providing options in assignments so they can customize
- Give them tools to succeed – examples from successful students, tips for study group formation, etc.

**Cognitive Development**

- Spend some time discussing the nature of knowledge, the purpose of education (not just content acquisition but skill development)
- Use examples and assignments that demonstrate application as much as possible
- May be helpful to use Bloom's Taxonomy (consider Tolman's adaptation below)
- “Nudge” them to higher levels of cognitive development
- Use peer role models to discuss the shift in their thinking across their education

**Promote and Encourage Metacognition**

- Discuss neuroplasticity and Dweck's mindsets early and refer to them often
- Use quick metacognitive instruments to help students self-evaluate where they are and how they could improve (e.g. R-SPQ, Tolman's TTM-LS and LSSA, Dweck's mindset surveys)
- Use tools such as exam wrappers or other short *reflective* assignments that asks them to evaluate their mastery and learning strategies

## Metacognition Innovation: Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM)

Adapted by Anton Tolman, Ph.D.

There are 5 key stages of change:

Precontemplation (PC1 and PC2) – no intention to change in the foreseeable future. The person may be unaware of their problems, or are referred by others for help, but they disagree. To move forward: the person needs to acknowledge or “own” the problem (take responsibility), increase their awareness of the negative aspects of the problem, and accurately evaluate self-regulation abilities; this may require consciousness raising.

Contemplation (CN) – People at this stage are thinking about working on the problem, but have not yet made a commitment to do so. They are evaluating options; they can remain in this stage for long periods of time. To move forward: the person must avoid chronic contemplation; they need to make a decision to take action (this may require looking at the pros and cons of making a decision and increasing their belief that they are capable of change).

Preparation (PR) – The person intends to take action in the immediate future; they begin making small behavior changes but not large significant changes yet. To move forward: The person needs to set goals and priorities. They need to select a plan of action and dedicate themselves to the plan. They may need to actively reward themselves for taking positive actions and work out some personal punishment for not achieving their goals.

Action (AC) – Person is actively modifying his/her own behavior or their environment to overcome their problem. This takes a lot of time and energy. The measure of action is if the person has actually completed or reached a significant step such as abstinence or consistency in the new behavior (e.g. exercise plan, studying) for a sustained period of time (e.g. six months or more). To move forward: person must make use of active change-oriented processes such as counterconditioning (replacing negative behaviors with healthy ones), stimulus control (changing the environment to reduce or eliminate cues for negative behaviors), and contingency management (rewarding self-change and punishing relapsing behavior). These skills help to disrupt habitual patterns of behavior. Also important is to identify situations or stimuli that might undermine success and act to prevent these triggers.

Maintenance (MN) – Person needs to work to maintain gains made and prevent relapse. For some problem behaviors, the maintenance stage may last the rest of their lives and requires ongoing vigilance. To continue progress: need to continue to make use of action oriented processes. Remaining free of problem behaviors or continued use of new behaviors for 6 months signals maintenance stage. Person must work to prevent relapse.

Recycling or relapse is a consistent issue; many (maybe most) people require multiple efforts before they move forward. A person may relapse back to an earlier stage or may even give up and move back to Precontemplation, although this may be avoidable with planning and awareness that this spiral cycle of change is normal and should not be interpreted as failure or lack of ability to change.

Note: The model also describes two underlying constructs that interact: self-efficacy beliefs in one’s capacity to change and decisional balance (pros and cons). The model also describes specific processes of change to help someone move from one stage to another.

See Prochaska, J.O. & Prochaska, J.M. (1999). Why don’t continents move? Why don’t people change? *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 9(1), 83 – 102.