

How Do I Motivate My Students?

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Introduction

Motivating students is one of the greatest challenges instructors face. While it is true that as instructors we have little, if any, control over external factors that influence our students' behavior and engagement, we do play a vital role in shaping what occurs in our classroom. In fact, our instructional choices can make a positive impact on student motivation.

The purpose of this paper is to provide instructors with a general understanding of student motivation from a psychological perspective and to recommend specific strategies to help motivate students in the classroom.

A Framework for Understanding Student Motivation

According to Jere Brophy, a leading researcher on student motivation and effective teaching, "Student motivation to learn is an acquired competence developed through general experience but stimulated most directly through modeling, communication of expectations, and direct instruction or socialization by others (especially parents or teachers)."

Before exploring some practical applications for motivating students, we should examine the issue from a theoretical perspective. One thing to consider is the expectancy-value theory as it serves as the underlying theme for a number of the strategies we suggest to enhance student motivation. According to this theory, the degree to which a student is motivated to engage in an academic task is jointly determined by his/her expectancy for success and by the value that he/she has attached to a specific task. This theory suggests that students can be successful if they apply reasonable effort and appreciate the value of the learning activities.

Expectancy-Value Theory Summarized

*Why am I doing this? +
Will I be successful at it? → Level of
student motivation*

Strategies for Increasing Student Motivation

Given the insight gleaned from motivation theories such as the expectancy-value theory discussed above, we should consider what steps instructors can take to maximize student engagement and success in the classroom. As instructors, we can create an optimal classroom environment that is conducive to learning, and research suggests this is most effectively achieved through instructional behaviors and course design. In the following sections, we will offer strategies that you can implement in your own classroom to capitalize on student interests and encourage course engagement.

Course Design

As Barbara Davis writes in *Tools for Teaching*, "Students respond positively to a well-organized course." Therefore, it is important to be mindful of the fact that how you structure the course and the teaching methodologies you use can greatly affect your students' motivation to learn. By providing students with

a basic framework of expectations and guidelines, students often remark that they feel empowered and are better able to shape their semester. The following are some strategies to consider when planning your course and creating lessons (Brophy, 1987; Cashin, 1979; Davis, 1993; Forsyth and McMillian, 1991; Svinicki, 2005):

- *Set the tone early in the semester.* Your syllabus should clearly state your learning objectives, course goals, and student expectations for the course. Explicitly communicate to your students what they need to do to be successful in the class and achieve their personal goals. You want to capitalize on your students' initial curiosity with an enthusiastic introduction of the course. This can easily be done by conducting class surveys or administering diagnostic tests to get a sense of what the students already know or believe about the course. These strategies can be used on first day of class and also when introducing a new topic.
- *Vary your teaching methods.* Instead of the traditional lecture, you can incorporate academic activities that get students to actively participate in the class and allow for more immediate feedback. Incorporating problem-based learning, collaborative learning, experiments, and the use of technology such as clickers, allows for greater student interaction and the opportunity for students to practice newly acquired skills and knowledge. Supplementing your lecture with guest lectures, a panel discussion, or student presentations can break the monotony and minimize passive observation.
- *Give students options in the classroom.* Empower students by giving them a sense of autonomy and helping them develop skills for self-directed learning. Whether it's allowing students to select a research topic or getting their input when designing an evaluative rubric, students' motivation is increased if they feel that they have control of their learning outcomes.
- *Create assignments that are appropriately challenging.* It's important to consider your students interests, background knowledge, and abilities when designing coursework. You want to provide students with the opportunity for early success and gradually increase the degree of difficulty with the assignments and exams as the semester progresses. The key is to strike a balance so that every student feels that he/she, with reasonable effort, has the capability to succeed while still being challenged to stretch his/her limits.

Teaching Idea: Using the Minute Paper for a Background Knowledge Probe

(Adapted from Angelo & Cross, 1993)

Purpose: information obtained helps instructors determine appropriate starting point and instructional level for lesson

Procedure: Prior to introducing a new topic, ask the student to respond to a few open-ended questions you have prepared. Since they have limited time for which to write, you'll want to instruct them to provide concise and specific answers. Stressing that this assignment will not be graded should encourage your students to give more thoughtful and candid responses.

- *Make your lessons relevant.* Research suggests that students display greater enthusiasm and interest for a course if they can relate the content and course activities to their daily lives. By connecting the material to real-world experiences or their educational goals, either through examples or in-class activities, you will deepen their understanding of the material and allow the students to see the value of what they are learning.

Instructor Behavior

The role of the instructor is to facilitate learning, and it is often a formidable and time consuming task to find ways to motivate students that will achieve the academic goals you've established for the course. Of all the variables in the motivation equation, your behavior is the one for which you have the greatest control, takes the least amount of time, and can have an immediate and visible impact on student motivation. In order to enhance your students' learning and motivation to learn, consider the following as it relates to your actions in the classroom.

- *Show enthusiasm.* As the instructor, you are a major source of stimulation for the course content and the overall tone of your classroom. Therefore, it is important for you to model the behavior you want to see your students display. If you appear bored and uninterested in the course, your students will most likely respond to that negative energy and apathetic attitude by duplicating it. Being excited about the content, presenting the information and activities in an organized and interesting way, and showing a genuine interest in teaching will go a long way in maintaining student attention.
- *Avoid excessive competition.* While students need opportunities to interact with their peers, and many students claim to be inspired by competition, you don't want to create an environment that is conducive to comparison, divisions, or derisive dialogue among students. These intense and extremely competitive types of classroom settings can induce performance anxiety which can interfere with student learning, thereby counteracting your goal of motivation.
- *Communicate an expectation of success.* Students will rise to the instructor's expectations which are communicated by your level of engagement and interaction with your students. This can be something as informal as using students' names in class to a formal evaluation of their work. Subtle forms of behavior, even if unintentional, can be a powerful influence on student performance.
- *Provide constructive, timely feedback.* Students want to be recognized for the hard work and effort they put into their classes, and whether we like it or not, many view grades as a primary incentive for their scholastic efforts. By returning assignments quickly and by constructively communicating positive and negative feedback, you are able to acknowledge the students' hard work while still encouraging them to strive for more. If students don't receive feedback on their work, it is often difficult for them to know whether or not they are fully meeting your expectations and learning the material. In addition, if you neglect to explain why something was wrong or point the student in the right direction by further articulating your expectations, the student may not make any additional effort to succeed as he/she doesn't know what direction

to take. Since your ultimate goal is for students to learn the course material, consider underscoring or deemphasizing the grade earned by prioritizing and shifting the focus from the grade to the detailed comments and feedback you provided on their work.

Conclusion

While it is unlikely that one single agent or event will dramatically alter a student's motivation to learn, or will positively impact *all* of your students, it is important to acknowledge that student motivation is dynamic. Through your own behavior, course design and teaching practices, you can create classroom conditions that encourage engagement and motivation to learn on a variety of levels. By implementing an array of strategies that fit your teaching style and classroom environment, you can greatly stimulate and sustain students' motivation to learn both in your classroom and within your overall subject matter. In addition to the resources on motivation provided below, the TLTC offers workshops throughout the academic year on topics such as student motivation, student engagement, learning styles, and classroom management.

Online Resources

Vanderbilt Center for Teaching

<http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-guides/interactions/motivating-students/>

Vanderbilt University's Center for Teaching provides a list on motivating students that is similar to that of the Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center. This website explores the advantages and disadvantages of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as how learning styles effect motivation. Strategies, such as how to learn student names, are found throughout the center's website.

"Capturing and Directing the Motivation to Learn," from *Speaking of Teaching*, Stanford University's Center for Teaching and Learning's newsletter on teaching. Vol. 10, No. 1.

http://ctl.stanford.edu/Newsletter/motivation_to_learn.pdf (PDF)

This newsletter reviews the literature on student motivation and provides techniques and methods that can be incorporated into your instruction which can improve student performance.

Davis, B.G. (1993) *Motivating Students. Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/motivate.html>

This chapter is on motivating students from Barbara Gross Davis's book. It was referenced in preparing this document and offers some great strategies for keeping students involved in the classroom. We have this book available in the TLTC library, but if you want to read just this chapter, you can access it online at the UC Berkeley website.

Svinicki, M.D. (2005) Student Goal Orientation, Motivation, and Learning. *Idea Paper #41*.

http://www.theideacenter.org/sites/default/files/Idea_Paper_41.pdf (PDF)

This paper looks at the impact teachers can have on student motivation and offers specific suggestions for positively affecting it.

Additional References

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