

Some Ideas for Motivating Students

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With so many attractive alternatives competing for students' attention, motivating them to focus and perform is increasingly difficult. This article provides a few ideas for increasing student desire to work hard at the learning tasks they need.

1. Explain. Some recent research shows that many students do poorly on assignments or in participation because they do not understand what to do or why they should do it. Teachers should spend more time explaining why we teach what we do, and why the topic or approach or activity is important and interesting and worthwhile. In the process, some of the teacher's enthusiasm will be transmitted to the students, who will be more likely to become interested. Similarly, teachers should spend more time explaining exactly what is expected on assignments or activities. Students who are uncertain about what to do will seldom perform well. To the question, "When will we ever use this?" there are several answers. (1) You never know when knowledge and skills will be useful. (2) Whether or not you ever use this specific knowledge is less important than the fact that you are learning how to learn, learning the discipline of focusing on a task, learning how to work on a task that might not be interesting to you--and perhaps you are learning how to make such tasks interesting. There is an exercise in basic training where recruits step back and forth into old tires rapidly. No one ever asks, "When will we ever need to know how to step through tires?" because they know they are building agility. The same is true for many subjects. A student might never use calculus later in life, but the mental training--problem solving, thinking, precision--those sharpened skills will be.

(In a study conducted on one college campus, a faculty member gave a student assignment to a group of colleagues for analysis. Few of them could understand what the faculty member wanted. If experienced profs are confused, how can we expect students to understand?)

Part of explaining to students might be telling them what they will need in order to succeed in a rapidly changing, ever more competitive world. For some ideas, see "[How to Be Successful in Life.](#)"

2. Reward. Students who do not yet have powerful intrinsic motivation to learn can be helped by extrinsic motivators in the form of rewards. Rather than criticizing unwanted behavior or answers, reward correct behavior and answers. Remember that adults and children alike continue or repeat behavior that is rewarded. The rewards can (and should) be small and configured to the level of the students. Small children can be given a balloon, a piece of gum, or a set of crayons. Even at the college level, many professors at various colleges have given books, lunches, certificates, exemptions from final exams, verbal praise, and so on for good performance. Even something as apparently "childish" as a "Good Job!" stamp or sticker can encourage students to perform at higher levels. And the important point is that extrinsic motivators can, over a brief period of time, produce intrinsic motivation. Everyone likes the feeling of accomplishment and recognition; rewards for good work produce those good feelings.

3. Care. Students respond with interest and motivation to teachers who appear to be human and caring. Teachers can help produce these feelings by sharing parts of themselves with students, especially little stories of problems and mistakes they made, either as children or even recently. Such personalizing of the student/teacher relationship helps students see teachers as approachable human beings and not as aloof authority figures. Young people are also quite insecure, and they secretly welcome the admission by adults that insecurity and error are common to everyone. Students will attend to an adult who appears to be a "real person," who had problems as a youth (or more recently) and survived them.

It is also a good idea to be approachable personally. Show that you care about your students by asking about their concerns and goals. What do they plan to do in the future? What things do they like? Such a teacher will be trusted and respected more than one who is all business.

4. Have students participate. One of the major keys to motivation is the active involvement of students in their own learning. Standing in front of them and lecturing to them (at them?) is thus a relatively poor method of teaching. It is better to get students involved in activities, group problem solving exercises, helping to decide what to do and the best way to do it, helping the teacher, working with each other, or in some other way getting physically involved in the lesson. A lesson about nature, for example, would be more effective walking outdoors than looking at pictures.

Students love to be needed (just like adults!). By choosing several students to help the teacher (take roll, grade objective exams, research bibliographies or biographies of important persons, chair discussion groups, rearrange chairs, change the overhead transparencies, hold up pictures, pass out papers or exams) students' self esteem is boosted and consequently their motivation is increased. Older students will also see themselves as necessary, integral, and contributing parts of the learning process through participation like this. Use every opportunity to have students help you. Assign them homework that involves helping you ("I need some magazine illustrations of the emphasis on materialism for next week; would someone like to find one for me?").

5. Teach Inductively. It has been said that presenting conclusions first and then providing examples robs students of the joy of discovery. Why not present some examples first and ask students to make sense of them, to generalize about them, to draw the conclusions themselves? By beginning with the examples, evidence, stories, and so forth and arriving at conclusions later, you can maintain interest and increase motivation, as well as teach the skills of analysis and synthesis. Remember that the parable method of making a point has some significant historical precedent. (And speaking of examples, research has shown that providing more worked examples and fewer problems to solve increases learning. A great book to get is Ruth Clark's *Evidence Based Training Methods*.)

6. Satisfy students' needs. Attending to need satisfaction is a primary method of keeping students interested and happy. Students' basic needs have been identified as survival, love, power, fun, and freedom. Attending to the need for power could be as simple as allowing students to choose from among two or three things to do--two or three paper topics, two or three activities, choosing between writing an extra paper and taking the final exam, etc. Many students have a need to have fun in active ways--in other words, they need to be noisy and excited. Rather than always avoiding or suppressing these needs, design an educational activity that fulfills them.

Students will be much more committed to a learning activity that has value for them, that they can see as meeting their needs, either long term or short term. They will, in fact, put up with substantial immediate unpleasantness and do an amazing amount of hard work if they are convinced that what they are learning ultimately meets their needs.

7. Make learning visual. Even before young people were reared in a video environment, it was recognized that memory is often connected to visual images. In the middle ages people who memorized the Bible or Homer would sometimes walk around inside a cathedral and mentally attach certain passages to objects inside, so that remembering the image of a column or statue would provide the needed stimulus to remember the next hundred lines of text. Similarly, we can provide better learning by attaching images to the ideas we want to convey. Use drawings, diagrams, pictures, charts, graphs, bulleted lists, even three-dimensional objects you can bring to class to help students anchor the idea to an image. Another book by Ruth Clark that I recommend is *Graphics for Learning*. I'm a fan of Clark because her material is based on research studies (in cognitive psychology, learning, and so forth). Great stuff.

It is very helpful to begin a class session or a series of classes with a conceptual diagram of the relationship of all the components in the class so that at a glance students can apprehend a context for all the learning they will be doing. This will enable them to develop a mental framework or filing system that will help them to learn better and remember more.

8. Use positive emotions to enhance learning and motivation. Strong and lasting memory is connected with the emotional state and experience of the learner. That is, people remember better when the learning is accompanied by strong emotions. If you can make something fun, exciting, happy, loving, or perhaps even a bit frightening, students will learn more readily and the learning will last much longer. Emotions can be created by classroom attitudes, by doing something unexpected or outrageous, by praise, and by many other means.

The day you come to class with a bowl on your head and speak as an alien observer about humans will be a day and a lesson your students will remember. Don't be afraid to embarrass yourself to make a memorable point.

9. Remember that energy sells. Think about these problems for a minute: Why would so many students rather see *Rambo*, *Robocop*, *Friday the 13th*, or another movie like that than one on the life of Christ? Why is rock music more popular with youth than classical music or Christian elevator music? Why is evil often seen as more interesting than good? The answer is connected with the way good and evil are portrayed. Unfortunately, evil usually has high energy on its side while good is seen as passive and boring. We've been trapped by the idea that "bad people do; good people don't." Good is passive, resistant, reactionary, while evil is proactive, energetic, creative.

In a typical cartoon where Sylvester the cat is trying to catch and eat Tweety bird, the cat is highly creative, inventing several ways to get at Tweety. Meanwhile, the guard dog is passive and waits until the cat comes within range before spoiling his plans by beating him up. Here is the unfortunate problem: in the theological scheme of things, the cat is the devil and the dog is God. The cat is admired because of his creative energy; the dog is just a boring policeman. This problem is not new--in the seventeenth century, Milton's *Paradise Lost* was criticized because Satan was a more interesting character than God, because Satan was the one with the energy.

The lesson here is that we must begin to associate our heroes and our truths with energy. Don't portray Jesus as a wimpy good guy--the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild"; show him as dynamic, exciting, and energetic. Present his turning over the money changers' tables, his power and energy in multiplying the loaves and fishes, and so on. Likewise, make a point to show that evil is often lazy, uncreative, predatory, tired, recycling the same old boring temptations, etc. etc.

Why does heaven sound boring to a lot of kids, while they think that all the really interesting people will be in hell?

Being energetic in your teaching is a motivating factor in itself; adding energy to the ideas you want to convey will further enhance learning and commitment to the ideas.