

# ASSESSING AND IMPROVING STUDENT MOTIVATION

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Motivating students has consistently been a concern of educators. In 1987, Howard Hendricks claimed that “the number one problem in education today is the failure to motivate students....to get them off the dime and into action.” A decade later, a survey of elementary school principals found that ninety-seven percent identified motivating students as either an important or very important issue in their schools. Motivation is defined as “the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained” (Pintrich and Schunk 1996). In the realm of higher education, student motivation can be thought of as the overall drive of the student to succeed in the classroom – *learning* is the goal-directed activity. It is not uncommon for teachers to blame students for lacking motivation when they do not achieve at the level their teachers would expect them to. However, the literature on student motivation indicates that teachers can have an extraordinary impact on their students drive to achieve and succeed in their classes. Most research on student motivation focuses either on student characteristics or teacher traits that impact, positively or negatively, students’ motivation to learn.

There is frequently debate in education circles on whether the teacher or the student is most responsible for student learning. Ultimately the student is responsible for his or her own learning, and certainly stands to gain the most from doing so. At higher education levels, it is admittedly a bit ludicrous that teachers should have to concern themselves with persuading students to do something for their own good. That said, it would be irresponsible for teachers to think that they do not bear at least some burden of responsibility for trying to make the classroom environment as conducive to students’ learning as possible. Increasing students’ motivation to learn is certainly a critical means of accomplishing this goal. Moreover, part of teaching includes helping students to value learning, to want to learn, and to value knowledge (Frymier 1970).

Many teachers have spent time researching how to best reach their students to motivate them to want to learn. Historically, attempts to change student behavior have fallen into two distinct categories – those techniques to simply increase students’ *extrinsic* motivation to learn, and those that attempt to go further by increasing their *intrinsic* motivation to learn. Increasing extrinsic motivation entails both positive reinforcement techniques („carrots”) and negative reinforcement techniques („sticks”). All too often teachers tend to use extrinsic motivators such as grades, awards, and other forms of tangible recognition (Lantos 1997). Such techniques may have immediate effects, but they frequently do not result in long term behavior changes in student motivation to learn. Only by increasing intrinsic motivation – that is to get students to value learning for learning’s sake, and to become more responsible for their own learning – can we expect to see any longer term behavioral changes. Although students will ultimately have to reach this stage themselves, researchers conclude that students can be influenced by their teachers to put energy into their learning and increase their intrinsic motivation to learn (White 1998, Lantos 1997, Sass 1989).

Teacher behaviors that can influence student motivation can be broadly grouped into two categories (although there is some overlap) – teacher behaviors in the classroom that motivate students, and structuring the course to motivate students (Davis, 1993). In some courses it might be feasible to give the students some input into what will be studied (Davis, 1993). Focusing teaching on what students are interested in can clearly increase their motivation. Even if the course concepts are not very flexible, giving students options into what case studies or examples will be used to demonstrate the concepts is a viable alternative. Because students learn differently, it makes sense that structuring the course to allow them to work from their strengths would increase their motivation to perform. Therefore, allowing students to choose from a variety of graded assignments – oral presentations, written presentations, even variety on exams – can increase students’ motivation to perform well. A course that is well-organized will also motivate students more than one that is not – if students perceive that the teacher has put a lot of effort into the course, they will often be likewise motivated.

Teacher behavior in the classroom by far has the biggest impact on student motivation to learn. Students consistently identify several common teacher behaviors that positively impact their motivation. In his survey given to multiple class sections involving over 700 students, Sass finds that students associate the following teacher behaviors with increasing their motivation: enthusiasm, relevance, variety of teaching methods, rapport with students, active student involvement, organization, and appropriate use of examples and appropriate difficulty level (1989). These same characteristics have been identified by several other researchers as well (Lantos 1997, Becker and Schneider 2004). An enthusiastic and encouraging attitude by the teacher is infectious. A variety of teaching methods allows the teacher to reach the many different learning styles of students while at the same time helps prevent the monotony that invariably diminishes student motivation. Flexibility is another teacher behavior that helps increase student motivation. Flexibility applies to teaching methods, a balance between structure and spontaneity, relying on feedback to adjust teaching style, and simply being open minded (Kendrick 1973, Lantos 1997).

A debatable issue is whether increasing students’ *extrinsic* motivation (through the use of „carrots“ and „sticks“ such as grades and other tangible accolades) can lead to increased *intrinsic* motivation. It is not clear whether teacher behaviors such as enthusiasm, rapport with students, or variety in teaching methods have a greater impact on extrinsic or intrinsic student motivation. To some extent it likely depends on the student – some will be only be inspired to do well in a particular teacher’s course that exhibits these characteristics while others might be inspired to embrace learning for learning’s sake regardless. In an attempt to get his students to read more of his assigned journal articles, Carkenord (1994) found that students responded favorably to a system of extra credit. Many teachers would abhor such an approach, and might even argue that such a system adversely impacts students’ intrinsic motivation. His conclusion, however, is that by linking students’ desires and expectations for tangible rewards, intrinsic motivation can increase over time as students realize the value and payoff of taking responsibility for their learning.

The benefits of teachers focusing on their behavior in the classroom and in their course design to help motivation are quite obvious. Students that are more motivated to learn tend to achieve more in the classroom. While this may seem intuitive, Carbonaro’s demonstrates its empirical

validity (2005). In his study of student performance in a system that segregates students by ability, students who exerted more effort achieved more. And as numerous other researches has found, students that are highly motivated will be more likely to put in more effort. Teachers bear a responsibility to teach their students more than just facts. Indeed, many teachers pride themselves on teaching students *how* to learn, rather than just *what* to learn. Teaching students to *want to learn* should be given its due importance, as it will critically impact both *how* and *what* students learn.

### **Annotated bibliography:**

Brophy, Jere. *Motivating Students to Learn*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 2004.

A great book – well organized and easy to read. Brophy's audience is teachers, and his goal is to present clear strategies to increase student motivation in the classroom. He uses a model that incorporates both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects to both understand existing student motivation and to develop potential strategies to help students whose motivation is lacking.

Carlenord, David M. "Motivating Students to Read Journal Articles." *Teaching of Psychology*, Volume 21, Number 3, p. 162-164, October 1994.

Carlenord explains a practical technique he used to encourage students to do more of the reading required for his class. He explains how by assigning extra credit to students who wrote summaries and critiques of assigned reading, he saw an increase in the number of students who came to class prepared. He also allowed students to use their note cards on exams as additional incentive to get them to accomplish the reading. Although it appears that such a technique only increases students' extrinsic motivation, it could also lead to intrinsic motivation, but he does not address this notion in his findings.

Carbonaro, William. "Tracking Students' Effort and Academic Achievement." *Sociology of Education*. Volume 78, Number 1, p. 27-49, January 2005.

This interesting article investigates the links between student effort and achievement, as well as „tracking“ and achievement. His discussion on the „tracking“ of students (the practice of grouping students into „tracks“ based on abilities or intentions) is most useful for school districts that have gifted education programs. His conclusions on the effects of student effort and achievement are important to all in the teaching profession, and confirm what seems intuitive. He divides effort into three different categories: rule-oriented, procedural-oriented, and intellectual effort. He is essentially adding nuance to the intrinsic and extrinsic delineations, and does not address specific techniques to attempt to increase each type of effort.

Kendrick, James G. "Techniques for Motivating Students." *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*. Volume 55, Number 4, Part 2, p. 762-766, November 1973.

An entertaining read on how to create an environment conducive to student learning. Kendrick provides several examples to demonstrate how to bring variety to the classroom, which his two most important requirements for effective teaching. The other is a flexible instructor who is willing and able to employ multiple teaching techniques to engage students.

Lantos, Geoffrey P. "Motivating Students: The Attitude of the Professor." *Marketing Education Review*, Volume 7, Number 2, p. 28-38, Summer 1997.

Lantos, a professor of business administration, develops nine principles to motivate students to become more active learners. Using the acronym PROFESSOR to illustrate the characteristics of motivating teachers, he provides some very good prescriptions to help teachers get the most out of their students. Particularly noteworthy are his examples ways to increase both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in students, and the controversial claim that the latter can help facilitate the former. Although geared towards teaching marketing students, his conclusions are broadly applicable.

McKeachie, Wilbert J. *Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning College Teacher*.

Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1978.

A comprehensive book for teachers new to the profession. McKeachie covers nearly everything a new teacher could think of, from course design, to meeting the class for the first time, to specific techniques of teaching and grading. Of particular use here is a short section on student motivation. He does a very good job of summarizing common intrinsic motivations of students as well as extrinsic motivations, and how to tap into both to get the most out of students.

Pintrich, Paul R. and Dale H. Schunk. *Motivation in Education: Theory, Research, and Applications*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1996.

This is a great and comprehensive book on motivation, broadly applied. It is designed for educational researchers and practitioners with some knowledge in psychology, but is applicable for anyone in the education field. The most helpful chapter for all teachers, and especially beginning teachers, is Chapter 9, "Teacher and Classroom Influences." Although it emphasizes the role of personal cognitions during teaching and learning, and therefore may seem too focused on psychology and less on teaching, nearly every chapter has an extremely useful section titled "Implications for Teachers."

Rivard, Bill and Richard Clodfelter. "Motivating Students to Learn Through Options Grading." *Techniques: Making Education & Career Connections*, Volume 72, Issue 1, p. 42, January 1997.

This short essay seeks to find ways to increase student motivation to learn. The authors sought to address the problem of students who do not participate in class, and who do not test very well. The reaction of most teachers is that such students are not motivated to learn. The authors present argue that by allowing students to have some input into their own grading system, they become more motivated because they are involved in the learning process.

Sass, Edmund J. "Motivation in the College Classroom: What Students Tell Us." *Teaching of Psychology*, Volume 16, Number 2, p. 86-88, April 1989.

Sass presents a short summary of an activity he used for eight years while teaching a Educational Psychology course to determine what his students find to motivate them. He simply had his students identify one recent class period where they were highly motivated, and one where their motivation was low. In nearly all of his samples, students identified the same eight characteristics that they found motivating. This quick read is probably most helpful for newer teachers.

White, Lourdes Ferreira. "Motivating Students to Become More Responsible for Learning." *College Student Journal*, Volume 32, Issue 2, p.190-197, June 1998.

This article highlights some new approaches to teaching graduate level accounting courses. Specifically, she discusses her team-based learning approach, some techniques to focus on oral and written communication skills, and the case-study method. Although clearly intended for accounting teachers, her team-based teaching approach can be incorporated into most other disciplines (with some modifications, particularly for undergraduate courses that are not typically 2 ½ hour sessions).

### **Additional resources**

Becker, Lana and Kent N. Schneider. "Motivating Students to Learn: 8 Simple Rules for Teachers." *The Teaching Professor*, August/September 2004.

Davis, Barbara Gross. *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993.

Frymier, Jack R. "Motivation: The Mainspring and Gyroscope of Learning." *Theory into Practice*, Volume 9, Number 1, February 1970.

Hendricks, Howard. *Teaching to Change Lives*. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1987.