

Student Motivation

Robert W. Gregory

This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 2009.

There are three things to remember about education. The first one is motivation. The second one is motivation. The third one is motivation.

- Terrell H. Bell

Student motivation naturally has to do with students' desire to participate in the learning process. But it also concerns the reasons or goals that underlie their involvement or noninvolvement in academic activities. Although students may be equally motivated to perform a task, the sources of their motivation may differ. A student who is intrinsically motivated undertakes an activity "for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes" (Lepper, 1988). An extrinsically motivated student performs "in order to obtain some reward or avoid some punishment external to the activity itself," such as grades, stickers, or teacher approval (Lepper, 1988). The term motivation to learn has a slightly different meaning. It is defined by one author as "the meaningfulness, value, and benefits of academic tasks to the learner—regardless of whether or not they are intrinsically interesting" (Marshall, 1987). Another notes that motivation to learn is characterized by long-term, quality involvement in learning and commitment to the process of learning (Ames, 1990).

According to Brophy (1987), motivation to learn is a competence acquired "through general experience but stimulated most directly through modeling, communication of expectations, and direct instruction or socialization by significant others (especially parents and teachers)." A student's home environment shapes the initial collection of attitudes they develop toward learning. When parents nurture their children's natural curiosity about the world by welcoming their questions, encouraging exploration, and familiarizing them with resources that can enlarge their world, they are giving their children the message that learning is worthwhile and frequently fun and satisfying. When students are placed in an environment that nurtures a sense of self-worth, competence, autonomy, and self-efficacy, they will be more apt to accept the risks inherent in learning. Conversely, when students do not view themselves as basically competent and able, their freedom to engage in academically challenging pursuits and capacity to tolerate and cope with failure are greatly diminished. Once students start college, they begin forming beliefs about their school-related successes and failures. The sources to which children attribute their successes (commonly effort, ability, luck, or level of task difficulty) and failures (often lack of ability or lack of effort) have important implications for how they approach and cope with

learning situations. The beliefs teachers themselves have about teaching and learning and the nature of the expectations they hold for students also exert a powerful influence (Raffini, 1993). As Stipek (2001) notes, "To a very large degree, students expect to learn if their teachers expect them to learn." University-wide goals, policies, and procedures also interact with classroom climate and practices to affirm or alter students' increasingly complex learning-related attitudes and beliefs. And developmental changes comprise one more aspect of the motivational conundrum. For example, although less mature students tend to maintain high expectations for success even in the face of repeated failure, more mature students do not. And although less mature students tend to see effort as uniformly positive, more mature students view it as a "double-edged sword" (Ames, 1990). To them, failure following high effort appears to carry more negative implications--especially for their self-concept of ability--than failure that results from minimal or no effort.

Does it really matter whether students are primarily intrinsically or extrinsically oriented toward learning? A growing body of evidence suggests that it does. When intrinsically motivated, students tend to employ strategies that demand more effort and that enable them to process information more deeply (Lepper, 1988). Condry and Chambers (1978) found that when students were confronted with complex intellectual tasks, those with an intrinsic orientation used more logical information-gathering and decision-making strategies than did students who were extrinsically oriented. Students with an intrinsic orientation also tend to prefer tasks that are moderately challenging, whereas extrinsically oriented students gravitate toward tasks that are low in degree of difficulty. Extrinsically oriented students are inclined to put forth the minimal amount of effort necessary to get the maximal reward (Lepper, 1988). Although every educational activity cannot, and perhaps should not, be intrinsically motivating, these findings suggest that when teachers can capitalize on existing intrinsic motivation, there are several potential benefits.

Although students' motivational histories accompany them into each new classroom setting, it is essential for teachers to view themselves as "active socialization agents capable of stimulating...student motivation to learn" (Brophy, 1987). Classroom climate is important. If students experience the classroom as a caring, supportive place where there is a sense of belonging and everyone is valued and respected, they will tend to participate more fully in the process of learning. Various task dimensions can also foster motivation to learn. Ideally, tasks should be challenging but achievable. Relevance also promotes motivation, as does "contextualizing" learning, that is, helping students to see how skills can be applied in the real world (Lepper, 1988). Tasks that involve "a moderate amount of discrepancy or incongruity" are beneficial because they stimulate students' curiosity, an intrinsic motivator (Lepper, 1988). In addition, defining tasks in terms of specific, short-term goals can assist students to associate effort with success (Stipek, 2001). Verbally noting the purposes of specific tasks when introducing them to students is also beneficial (Davis, 2003). Extrinsic rewards, on the other hand, should be used with caution, for they have the potential for decreasing existing intrinsic motivation. What takes place in the classroom is critical, but "the classroom is not an island" (Maehr and Midgley, 1991). Depending on their degree of congruence with classroom goals and practices, university-wide goals either dilute or enhance classroom efforts. To support motivation to learn, institution-level policies and practices should stress "learning, task mastery, and effort" (Maehr and Midgley, 1991) rather than relative performance and competition.

A first step is for educators to recognize that even when students use strategies that are ultimately self-defeating (such as withholding effort, cheating, procrastination, and so forth), their goal is actually to protect their sense of self-worth (Raffini, 1993). A process called attribution retraining, which involves modeling, socialization, and practice exercises, is sometimes used with discouraged students. The goals of attribution retraining are to help students to (1) concentrate on the tasks rather than becoming distracted by fear of failure; (2) respond to frustration by retracing their steps to find mistakes or figuring out alternative ways of approaching a problem instead of giving up; and (3) attribute their failures to insufficient effort, lack of information, or reliance on ineffective strategies rather than to lack of ability (Davis, 2003). Other potentially useful strategies include the following: portray effort as investment rather than risk, portray skill development as incremental and domain-specific, focus on mastery (Davis, 2003). Because the potential payoff – having students who value learning for its own sake – is priceless, it is crucial for instructors and institutional leaders to devote themselves fully to engendering, maintaining, and rekindling students' motivation to learn.

Recommendations

To encourage students to become self-motivated independent learners, instructors can do the following:

- Give frequent, early, positive feedback that supports students' beliefs that they can do well.
- Ensure opportunities for students' success by assigning tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult.
- Help students find personal meaning and value in the material.
- Create an atmosphere that is open and positive.
- Help students feel that they are valued members of a learning community.

Research has also shown that good everyday teaching practices can do more to counter student apathy than special efforts to attack motivation directly. Most students respond positively to a well-organized course taught by an enthusiastic instructor who has a genuine interest in students and what they learn. Thus activities an instructor undertakes to promote learning will also enhance students' motivation.

Annotated Readings

Ames, C.A. (1990). Motivation: What Teachers Need to Know. *Teachers College Record* 91(3): 409-421.

Motivation, one of the foremost problems in education, is often inadequately addressed in typical foundational (educational psychology) courses. Motivation has been described as the intensity of behavior, the direction of behavior, and the duration of behavior. The question for instructors is how to get students to do what you want them to do and to do it consistently over time. In this article, Ames clarifies the complex construct of motivation as it relates to learning and offers a revamped curriculum that applies motivation theory and research to practice. She recommends instruction in how motivation constructs (self-worth, attributions and related metacognitive beliefs, and achievement goals) relate to each other, to developmental changes, to individual and culturally related differences, and to the classroom context. This framework offers a starting point for extracting motivational strategies and applications from research and theory, and for relating them to all areas of classroom organization and instructional planning.

Brophy, J. (1987). Synthesis of Research on Strategies for Motivating Students To Learn. *Educational Leadership* 45(2): 40-48.

This article synthesizes the conclusions drawn from a review of the literature on motivation conducted to identify principles suitable for use by instructors, especially principles for motivating students to learn during academic activities. Brophy asserts that student motivation to learn can be conceptualized either as a general trait or as a situation-specific state. The trait of motivation to learn is an enduring disposition to strive for content knowledge and skill mastery in learning situations. The state of motivation to learn exists when student engagement in a particular activity is guided by the intention of acquiring the knowledge or mastering the skill that the activity is designed to teach. He provides a “starter set” of strategies to select from in planning motivational elements to include in instruction. In particular, students are more likely to want to learn when they appreciate the value of classroom activities and when they believe they will succeed if they apply reasonable effort.

Davis, B.G. (1993). Motivating Students Ch. 23 (pp. 193-201). In *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Some students seem naturally enthusiastic about learning, but may need – or expect – their instructors to inspire, challenge, and stimulate them. Unfortunately, there is no single magical formula for motivating students. Davis identifies many factors that affect a given student’s motivation to work and to learn: interest in the subject matter, perception of its usefulness, general desire to achieve, self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as patience and persistence. And, not all students are motivated by the same values, needs, desires, or wants. Some students will be motivated by the approval of others, some by overcoming challenges. To encourage students to become self-motivated independent learners, Davis discusses eight characteristics that are major contributors to student motivation: instructor’s enthusiasm, relevance of the material, organization of the course, appropriate difficulty level of the material, active involvement of the students, variety, rapport between instructors and students, and the use of appropriate, concrete, and understandable examples.

Lepper, M.R. (1988). Motivational Considerations in the Study of Instruction. *Cognition and Instruction* 5(4): 289-309.

In this article, it is suggested that the time for a closer relationship between motivation and cognition is at hand. Several important issues are discussed, such as: what difference does it make if learning is intrinsically motivated or task-involved?; do students learn better, or worse, or simply differently, under different motivational orientations; and, by what processes might differences in motivational orientations influence students’ learning from different tasks? There are two basic reasons one might value an intrinsic motivational orientation or task orientation. In one case, helping students to enjoy the process of learning may be viewed as an end in itself; in the other case, intrinsic motivation may be valued as a means of enhancing students’ learning from educational activities. In neither case, however, should one assume that all educational activities can, or ought to be, intrinsically motivating for students. In those cases in which it is possible and appropriate to promote an intrinsic motivational orientation, however, it may be important to recognize the potential practical significance of such efforts.

Maehr, M.L., & Midgley, C. (1991). Enhancing Student Motivation: A Schoolwide Approach. *Educational Psychologist* 26 (3 & 4): 399-427.

One can fairly say that we have returned to an interest in what David McClelland (1961) termed the “achieving society”. Thus, not only achievement, but achievement motivation, is recognized as a critical need for a society that is clearly worried about its future. What little motivational research is directed toward the practical world of education is primarily addressed to instructors. Maehr and Midgley presume to speak to those in leadership roles. Building on current interest in restructuring institutions of learning as well as the recent attention to motivational issues, they suggest how institutions of learning can be redesigned so as to enhance student motivation and learning. Their proposal is based firmly on an established program of research and is framed by goal theory. In addition to presenting a rationale for learning environment change and a process to effect that change, they describe an ongoing project based on the theory and directed toward learning environment change.

Marshall, H.H. (1987). Motivational Strategies of Three Fifth-Grade Teachers. *The Elementary School Journal* 88(2): 135-50.

This study begins to build a conceptualization of teachers’ motivational orientations and seeks to identify teacher strategies that support motivation to learn. Three fifth-grade teachers’ behaviors were explored in classrooms that exemplify three motivational orientations. In the learning-oriented classroom, twice as many lessons were introduced with motivational statements as in the work-oriented and work-avoidance classrooms. More lessons in the learning-oriented classroom included motivational statements referring to endogenous (e.g., challenge) rather than exogenous (e.g., rewards) factors. This teacher’s management/maintenance statements frequently served to maintain student interest rather than to redirect students from off-task behavior as in the other classrooms, and she encouraged student responsibility for learning. Questions raised for future research include the relation between teacher motivational orientation and both student (outcome) and contextual variables. Strategies that support motivation to learn are highlighted.

Stipek, D. (2001). *Motivation to Learn: From Theory to Practice* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon

Motivating students to achieve is a challenging and often frustrating task for today's teachers. This book applies the underlying theories behind motivating students by integrating psychological theory, research, and practical issues related to achievement motivation and classroom practice. Its theory-based approach provides teachers with a good understanding of the rationale for particular practices, which helps them adapt recommendations to the particular needs of their students. The book also includes discussion of the learning environment context and its effect on classroom practice and motivation. The focus is on classroom learning, but attention is also given to how strategies used to motivate students in school affect their participation in intellectual activities outside of school. This teacher-centered book gives clear, practical guidelines for diagnosing and improving student's motivation. In addition, while addressing the practical needs of teachers, the book also offers a comprehensive summary of achievement motivation research – making the book particularly useful to researchers interested in practical applications.