Motivating Students When Grades Don’t (or Barely) Matter

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**Introduction:**

Webster’s defines the word “motivate” as “impel or to urge forward by the exertion of strong moral pressure.” In the context of academia and education, however, motivation takes on a slightly different meaning. According to Linda Nilson, the term means “stimulating the desire to learn something.”¹ There are, of course, two types of motivation when it comes to education or any other field for that matter: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is what is more commonly known as self-motivation and, according to Robert Eisenberger and Judy Cameron, “is said to be demonstrated when people engage in an activity primarily for its own sake, whereas extrinsically motivated behavior is controlled by incentives that are not part of the activity.”² One thing that is commonly agreed upon by most psychologists and teachers alike is that, whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic, motivation is a must in the classroom.

As instructors, it seems we have an obligation to ensure our students are motivated, if it is so essential to learning. How do we achieve this? This is a question that has been asked in many studies. A question which has not been asked with much frequency, however, is how does a teacher motivate students when few or no extrinsic rewards/motivational options are available? This literature review will examine the aforementioned question.

**Motivation:**

In evaluating the use of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, some researchers believe an equal balance of both is required to maximize learning.³ Other researchers, on the other hand, believe that only certain types of extrinsic motivation enhance learning while yet other types of extrinsic rewards are detrimental to learning.⁴ Even beyond these theories, other studies have shown that intrinsic motivation is a necessity when it comes to learning no matter what extrinsic factors are at play.⁵

One study suggested there are actually eight different factors that affect students’ motivation level. These factors are: instructor’s enthusiasm, relevance of the subject material, course organization, material difficulty level, student involvement, variety, instructor/student

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rapport, and use of understandable examples.\(^6\) While grading leniency is thought by some to be a motivator, one study revealed it actually is not much of a factor.\(^7\) It seems that a majority of studies indicate that intrinsic motivation is crucial, but there is disagreement when it comes to using extrinsic motivating techniques.

**The Absence of Extrinsic Motivation:**

Nilson, in her book “Teaching at its Best,” describes a number of extrinsic motivators. The motivators include expectation of significant others, earning potential, being able to stay in school or have someone else pay for it, putting-off adult responsibilities, promotion, and staying out of the military.\(^8\) At the United States Military Academy, students (“cadets”) certainly are not looking to avoid military service or put-off adult responsibilities. Cadets may be affected by the other factors in their first three years. In their senior (“firstie”) year and especially in the second semester of their firstie year, however, earning higher grades, as opposed to just a passing grade, doesn’t play any part in earning potential, promotion, and possibly even expectations of significant others – I would imagine that most teachers would not consider a student who earns a D to have mastered the subject material. The possible reason that cadets might be satisfied with a D is that cadets have a guaranteed job when they leave the Academy as an officer in the United Stated Army. While their job within the Army and where they will be stationed is determined by their class rank, that rank is calculated during and following the fall semester of their firstie year, respectively. This means that most, if not all extrinsic motivators to earn more than a passing grade are essentially eliminated halfway through their firstie year. “Senioritis” is ubiquitous. The consequences of a failure in the final semester, however, are greater here than in any other college.

The United States Military Academy’s curriculum has two primary structural features. The first is a solid core of twenty-six courses that the Academy considers essential to the broad base of knowledge necessary for all graduates; a course in Information Technology for all but engineering majors; and a three-course core engineering sequence for those who do not choose a major in engineering. This core curriculum, when combined with physical education training and military science, constitutes the Military Academy’s "professional major." The second structural feature is the opportunity to specialize and explore an area in depth through the selection of an academic major consisting of not less than ten elective courses.\(^9\) Of the twenty-six core courses, only one is left for the last semester of cadets’ firstie year: Constitutional and

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\(^8\) Nilson, at 51.

\(^9\) United States Military Academy Academic Program which can be found at [http://www.dean.usma.edu/sebpublic/curriccat/static/index.htm](http://www.dean.usma.edu/sebpublic/curriccat/static/index.htm).
Military Law. For cadets in this course, there is little to no extrinsic motivation to earn more than a D, which is what is required to graduate.

Best Use of Intrinsic Motivation:

What must an instructor do when there is no extrinsic motivation? The answer, I believe, is to focus almost all attention on intrinsic motivation as opposed to creating new extrinsic motivators. Herzberg believes one of the best methods to increase intrinsic motivation is to increase responsibility. Although the example given for this literature review involves a law course, one of the most important learning points for a graduate of the Academy is to have personal responsibility. Creating new extrinsic motivators like daily quizzes might actually take away from learning both the law and personal responsibility. Army officers, as cadets will be when they graduate, are supposed to do the right thing because it is the right thing and they are supposed to do it even when no one is looking. The first thing that should intrinsically motivate cadets is that this is a chance to prove to themselves that they have personal responsibility. This can be expressed by the instructor on the first day of class and it can even be expressed to cadets by instructors during their first semester at the Academy so that they ultimately see intrinsic motivation as a goal in and of itself. For example at the Academy, the intrinsic motivator of personal responsibility could be demonstrated simply by having completed the reading assignment and being prepared for class.

Sass suggests that one of the most important factors relating to student motivation is instructor enthusiasm. This is an easy one. There are many times in the Army that officers are asked to do things they may not want to do. In this case, most cadets would just like to graduate and be officers. Officers who lead soldiers have two choices: they can sulk and complain about the mission or try to motivate soldiers by being self-motivated. A good attitude spreads almost as fast as a bad attitude, thus increasing or decreasing intrinsic motivation, respectively. A teacher, no matter what the subject, should be enthusiastic in the classroom because the instructor is the role model or officer for the students.

Most researchers seem to agree that relevance of the subject material is essential to increasing motivation. In this instance, the Academy got it right by saving Constitutional Law for the end of the cadets’ undergraduate academic careers. When cadets become officers, they swear to uphold and defend the Constitution. It stands to reason that they should know what’s in it. Additionally, as officers in the United States Army, the cadets will have an incredible amount of power over their subordinates, although they may not use it. That power, however, has limits.

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10 Herzberg, at 109-120.
11 Sass, at 86-88
If officers over-step their bounds, they are likely to hurt their units and themselves. Both of these reasons make this class highly relevant to cadets even though they just need to pass in order to graduate.

**Conclusion:**

One thing that is commonly agreed upon by most psychologists and teachers alike is that, whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic, motivation is essential in the classroom to foster learning. When extrinsic motivators are weak or do not exist, instructors should focus on increasing intrinsic motivators. Three of the most powerful ways to increase intrinsic motivation are to: increase personal responsibility, increase instructor enthusiasm, and ensure the subject matter is relevant to the student’s future. Students will naturally motivate themselves when instructors focus on these factors throughout the semester.

**References:**


20. United States Military Academy Academic Program which can be found at http://www.dean.usma.edu/sebpublic/curriccat/static/index.htm.

**Annotated Bibliography**


The authors of this article examined how intrinsic motivation can be affected by creating extrinsic motivation/reward. Intrinsic motivation, measured by “free-choice behavior” and self-reported interest, was either undercut or enhanced by the extrinsic reward based on the type of extrinsic reward offered. The authors concluded that tangible and/or expected rewards greatly diminished intrinsic motivation, especially when offered and then removed. Conversely, positive feedback enhanced intrinsic motivation. Another interesting aspect of the conclusions is that the negative effects of tangible rewards were greater in children as compared to college students,
whereas the positive effects of positive feedback were greater in college students as compared to children.


This article discusses how the over-emphasis on intellect and talent leaves future generations vulnerable to failure because children who grow up thinking they are successful because they are smart will not be willing to put effort in once they reach the limit of their base intellect. The author examined how encouraging effort or a “growth mind set” rather than innate abilities sets children up for success and to become high achievers in school and in life. The author further examined different views of intelligence, how to confront deficiencies, and properly praise children to help them learn to be successful.


The authors of this article analyze maladaptive and adaptive behaviors, specifically helplessness versus mastery-oriented patterns in late grade-school age children. The key difference, according to this article, is the children’s goals. The authors then examine how the children’s goals create or reinforce the behaviors and suggest that the behaviors extend beyond the classroom and into later life and affect how individuals obtain a view of self and even a view beyond self and onto others.


This article examines whether or not the use of reward to alter human behavior has a negative effect in the long-term. The authors first explain what they believe to be the conventional view on reward, that by increasing extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation and creativity will inevitably be reduced or eliminated altogether. After a brief look at this conventional view, the authors go on to disprove the conventional theory and explain that while reward can have a negative effect, it only will be negative if used inappropriately. The authors examine different approaches taken by previous researchers and conclude that (1) the detrimental effects of reward only occur under highly restrictive and easily avoidable conditions, (2) that one has to understand the basic concepts of classical conditioning in order to analyze the effects of reward on motivation, and (3) positive effects of reward are easily attainable using proper procedures derived from behavior theory.
This article is the lead article in the first volume of a motivation journal. The author, rather than discussing the technical reports on a number of research experiments he conducted in the past, uses this introductory article to describe what he feels is apparent after years of research. He emphatically claims that gender differences are evident when it comes to motivating children and different things motivate girls as compared to boys. The author further claims that motivation is related to social class and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are generally less motivated than youngsters from advantaged backgrounds. The author also believes motivation is “durable” and, while a learned behavior, cannot be changed in the short-term. This concept works both ways in the sense that while it is hard to motivate someone in a short period of time, it is also hard to de-motivate someone. The author finally asks the question of what teachers should to ensure they positively affect motivation as opposed to negatively affecting it based on his aforementioned theories.

This article examines what makes college students interested in taking different courses. The authors conclude that three main factors contribute to college students’ interest, although other factors have to be taken into consideration. The first factor is instructor communication which, if done properly, can motivate students when it comes to the subject at hand. The other two factors, course stimulation and course applicability are just as important. Additionally, although not a main contributor in most cases, the authors contend that student attendance and class participation are also factors.

The author in this article discusses the “Kick in the Pants” (KITA) method of motivation. The author describes KITA as a method that uses positive or negative reinforcement to motivate employees, but believes it to be ineffective in the long-term because it only creates extrinsic factors which, once removed, no longer motivate employees. Instead of using KITA, the author recommends using various techniques which increase responsibility, personal achievement, external and internal recognition, growth, and learning. The various methods suggested all increase intrinsic motivation, thus creating long-term productivity. Although geared towards
employer/employee scenarios, this article is certainly relevant for student motivation in and out of the classroom.


Grading and its relationship to student satisfaction is the focus of this article. The authors contend that, while on the surface it may appear that students are more satisfied with more lenient graders than with hard graders, in actuality, the instructors grading difficulty level has little to do with student satisfaction in a course. This article claims that grading leniency really is just a factor that distracts from other factors, including motivation, which are the real variables that determine how satisfied students are with different courses.


This article examined how intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation work together to affect learning. Interestingly enough, the authors concluded that students who had a high level of intrinsic motivation would be adversely affected by too much or not enough extrinsic motivation. In other words, students with a “reasonable” amount of extrinsic motivation performed better in a given course as compared to students with no extrinsic motivation and students with a great deal of extrinsic motivation provided they were already highly intrinsically motivated at the onset.


This article investigated which aspects and characteristics of college classes contribute to how students’ perceive their own level of motivation (high or low). The author concluded that eight different factors contributed to students’ motivation level. Among these eight, however, three – instructor’s enthusiasm, relevance of the subject material, and course organization – were distinguished as being the most significant. The other factors – material difficulty level, student involvement, variety, instructor/student rapport, and use of understandable examples – while important, did not have the same effect.