

The Newest Communication Research on Classroom Motivation

Chris Kasker

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.

“I throw tennis balls at students,” is what a fellow instructor explained to me as a classroom activity to keep students alert and motivated. Throwing tennis balls at the students did keep them on their toes. Surely there is no need to conduct scientific research to determine students who know they might get a ball thrown at them will be “motivated” to stay awake compared to students who have no earthly idea that they should be on the lookout for flying fuzzy yellow-green spheres. However, do those flying spheres of fun help students become motivated to want to learn the subject material? This review does not cover tennis balls specifically, but it does examine the findings of the newest research on classroom motivation conducted by communication scholars.

In general, classroom motivation covers three categories of classroom motivation: state, trait, and intrinsic (Brophy, 1987). Trait motivation describes the student’s nature to learn. It is part of their inherit character to learn. Intrinsic motivation is a little different. This category of motivation describes the student who participates in a learning activity for the enjoyment of the experience, not for the purpose of learning. The category that this review examines is state motivation. Think of state motivation as the student’s state of mind of the student when he or she walks into the classroom. Does their state allow them to engage in the class’s activities for the purpose of “acquiring the knowledge or mastering the skill the activity was designed to teach?” (Brophy, 1987). There are numerous studies that suggest that state motivation can be influenced by teachers (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994; Goodboy & Myers, 2008; McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006; Myers, 2002; Myers & Rocca, 2001; Richmond, 1990). However, some research suggests that from a student perspective, “motivation is a student owned state, while lack of motivation is a perceived as a teacher-owned problem.” (Gorham & Millette, 1997)

In their recently published study on classroom motivators and de-motivators, Katt & Condly (2009) used F. Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory, a well tested organizational psychology theory, to determine if constructs supported in organizational research were similarly supported in the classroom. Motivation hygiene theory states that a person is motivate by either pain avoidance or a desire to grow psychologically. In other words, a person encounters motivating or de-motivating factors. Katt & Condly’s data suggests that motivators and de-motivators function independently in the classroom. Meaning, in order for students to be motivated to complete a learning task, motivators must be present and de-motivators must be absent.

The data also identifies some of the motivators and de-motivators. Interestingly, most of these factors fall within the control of the teacher. The first factor was labeled achievement. Students (29.5%) described the achievement of a difficult task, or at least a task the required more than normal effort, as a motivator. The second factor was labeled recognition for achievement.

Students (17%) who were recognized by peers or teachers, either in private or public noted it as a motivating factor. The third factor was labeled professional care. Students (16%) who had teachers that showed genuine concern for their learning noted it as a motivating factor. The fourth factor was labeled relevant work. Students (14.3%) who perceived their class work as practical, useful in the “real world” noted it as a motivating factor. Another factor was labeled relevant growth. Students who overcame a particular fear or finally understanding a concept noted it as a motivator.

The data identified four major de-motivators. These are things that teachers should avoid. The first de-motivator was labeled class management. Students (42%) identified class management as the biggest de-motivator. Teachers with poor class management fail to control class discussions or activities, intimidate or embarrass students, show favoritism, lose student work, have unclear expectations, and poor course organization fall into this category. However, it is interesting to note that the data does not suggest that a teacher that has good class management creates a motivating factor. It is when it's poor that the effect is experienced. The second de-motivating factor is labeled self. This one is harder for the teacher to control. Students (22.3%) reported self as a de-motivator when they had negative experiences due to their own lack of effort, preparation or attendance. The third de-motivating factor is labeled class policy/administration. Students (15.8%) reported class policy as a de-motivator when they felt policies were too rigid in areas like attendance, lateness to class and on assignments; and where exams were not appropriate based on course material or taught in class. The fourth largest factor was labeled interpersonal relationships. Students (5.7%) who labeled this as a de-motivator were de-motivated by their classmates who were non-inclusive or disruptive. This could possibly be managed by a teacher with better control. However, it addressed and fixed, it does not seem to become a motivating factor.

Houser & Frymier (2009) researched two more relevant factors regarding classroom motivation, student empowerment and learner orientation. Student empowerment is developed through the behavior of the teacher along with individual characteristics. Students are empowered when their teacher allows them to take ownership of their learning (Brunson & Vogt, 1996). In examining student empowerment, Houser & Frymier examined the effects empowerment had on students' learner orientation (Eison, 1981). Students are grade oriented (GO) or learning oriented (LO) (Milton, Pollio, & Eison, 1986). Students can be high in both, low in both, or higher in one than the other orientation. Students who look at course material and information as important and rewarding are learning oriented. Students who are grade focused and look at classes as events to endure are grade oriented.

Research has shown numerous differences between grade oriented and learner oriented students. Students with high learner orientation experience better control of their studies and better grades than students with low learner orientation (Gorham, 1999; Jacobs, 1992). Students with high grade orientation tend to experience more test anxiety and lower grades and standardized test scores than students with low grade orientation (Eison, 1981). This research is important because it indicates that students' experiences can differ based on their learning orientation which can be related to their feelings of empowerment.

Houser and Frymier found, “Students classroom motivation to learn is a reflection of their own behavior and that of the instructor, and their motivation in turn impacts their affective learning and performance of learning indicators. Students need to care about their learning and the clear teacher can enhance learning for the motivate student” (Houser & Frymier, 2009).

All this brand new research helps the teacher to motivate students by remembering a few key points. First, there is no cookie-cutter solution to motivating students. People are people. Each person is an individual with individual differences. Although only two types of students were described, learner oriented and grade oriented, even the laymen teacher knows that students can be placed into many more categories. Second, an empowered student is a motivated student. A teacher that possesses the ability to recognize student needs and adapt to them is on the path to empowering his or her student. Third, the more motivating factors you have in your classroom the better chance you have at motivating your students. Some of those motivating factors include: achievement, giving your students an opportunity to accomplish something difficult; recognition of achievement, fostering an environment where peers recognize each other's accomplishments as well as you the teacher; professor care, showing genuine care for your student's learning (also applies to empowerment); and creating relevant work, designing projects that show the practical side of class concepts. And finally, the fourth thing to remember is to avoid the de-motivating factors in the classroom. Some of the de-motivating factors include: poor class management; self, which is the student's poor performance and probably very difficult for a professor to affect; class administration and policy; and interpersonal relationships between students, something that may be beyond the teacher's sphere of influence.

Speaking of spheres, where do those yellow-green flying spheres (tennis balls) my fellow instructor uses to "motivate" her students fit into all of this motivation talk? I think as long as she's consistent she avoids the class management de-motivating factor. The tennis ball makes the class fun, for sure, but is that enough? If used in a manner to put a student on the spot to answer a difficult question that is followed up with recognition for doing well, I think my fellow instructor is indeed helping to motivate her students to learn.

Annotated References:

Chory, R. (2007). Enhancing student perceptions of fairness: The relationship between instructor credibility and classroom justice. *Communication Education* , 89-105.

In addition to instructors following the syllabus, providing many grading opportunities, avoiding the use of antisocial behavior alteration techniques and coercive-based power strategies, presenting information clearly, and giving students feedback in order to achieve enhance student perceptions of classroom distributive, procedural, and/or interactional justice, instructors should also be competent, caring and of high character.

Eison, J. (1981). A new instrument for assessing students' learning orientations towards grades and learning. *Psychological Reports* , 919-924.

This paper contains the learner oriented/grade oriented (LOGO) questionnaire designed to assess students' attitudes towards learning. With the results of the questionnaire, instructors will be able to see the number of LO versus GO students in the class. LO students approach the college experience as an opportunity to acquire knowledge and obtain educational and personal enlightenment. GO students attitudes and behaviors are focused around the belief that obtaining a course grade is, in and of itself, a sufficient reason for being in college. An instructor armed with the knowledge of his or her students' orientations can develop more effective teaching strategies.

Frymier, A., & Weser, B. (n.d.). The role of student predispositions on student expectations for instructor communication behavior.

An examination of expectations; instructor communication behaviors; student communication apprehension; learning and grade orientation; as well as humor orientation found that overall teaching is a highly dynamic activity where both students and instructors contribute to the classroom. When instructors use the same activity on two different classes and experience favorable results in one class and not the other, the teacher usually blames the students. This study confirms the idea that there may be some differences contributed by the teacher but more research needs to be conducted on the student's impact on teaching.

Goodboy, A., & Myers, S. (2008). The effect of teacher confirmation on student communication and learning outcomes. *Communication Education* , 153-179.

Teacher confirmation is the term used to describe when an instructor communicates to a student in a way the shows the student that he or she is recognized by the teacher and acknowledged as a valuable contributor to the class. This article explains the results of research that supports the idea that teacher confirmation results in more student motivation, to develop a relationship with the instructor, to gather more information about the course and content, to greater class participation, less excuse making, and less challenging behavior.

Kearney, P., Plax, T., Hays, E., & Ivey, M. (1991). College teacher misbehaviors: What students don't like about what teachers say and do. *Communication Quarterly*, 309-324.

In a shift from traditional research on student misbehaviors, this article examines teacher misbehaviors. 28 different types of incidents were put into three categories: incompetence which reflects the lack of very basic teaching skills; offensiveness which categorizes instructors as mean, cruel or ugly; and indolence which can describe the absent-minded professor who fails to show up for class, is late when they do, and offer poor excuses. The affects of instructor misbehaviors contribute to negative instructor evaluations, poor attendance, classroom disruptions, and lower achievements.

McCroskey, J., Richmond, V., & Bennett, V. (2006). The relationship of student end-of-class motivation with teacher communication behaviors and instructional outcomes. *Communication Education*, 403-414.

Student perceived instructor communication behavior (immediacy: positive approach behaviors toward students, clarity: helping students understand what the instructor is trying to teach, assertiveness: instructors approach students as a leader and maintains appropriate control in the classroom, responsiveness: instructor's positive reaction to students' needs and willingness to listen) are positively associated with course outcomes (teacher evaluation and affect of course content) and student end-of-term motivation.

Myers, S., & Rocca, K. (2001). Perceived instructor argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness in the college classroom: Effects on student perceptions of climate, apprehension, and state motivation. *Western Journal of Communication*, 113-137.

Perceived instructor verbal aggressiveness (a message behavior that attacks a person's self-concept in order to deliver psychological pain) was negatively related to perceived classroom climate (A supportive climate includes behaviors such as equality, empathy, and spontaneity, as well as descriptiveness and problem orientation. A defensive climate stifles idea sharing and perceives remarks as ego threatening). Perceived instructor argumentativeness (the predisposition to defend one's position on controversial issues while simultaneously attempting to refute another person's position) was positively related to perceived student state motivation (tendency to find academic activities meaningful and worthwhile, and try to get the intended academic benefits from them). Perceived instructor verbal aggressiveness was negatively related to perceived student state motivation.

Myers, S. (2002). Perceived aggressive instructor communication and student state motivation, learning, and satisfaction. *Communication Reports*, 113-121.

Students who perceive their instructors to be high in argumentativeness and low in verbal aggressiveness report higher state motivation, affective learning, cognitive learning, and satisfaction. In other words, argumentativeness with low verbal aggressiveness leads to constructive outcomes and better student evaluations.

Richmond, V. (1990). Communication and power in the classroom. *Communication Education* , 181-195.

Negative side effects and student dislike of the instructor are affected by instructor efforts to coerce students to engage in behaviors that the instructor or system prefers. Although the behavior change may occur, the negative affects derived from the nature of the change can cause the student to dislike the instructor and reduce cognitive and affective learning. Positive relationships between instructors and students have a higher likelihood of producing desired learning outcomes. Finally, there is a critical link between instructor communication behavior and student learning and student motivation.

Teven, J.J. (2007). Teacher caring and classroom behavior: Relationships with student affect and perceptions of teacher competence and trustworthiness. *Communication Quarterly* , 433-450.

Instructors generate greater student perceptions of trustworthiness and competence by displaying appropriate behavior and expressing caring towards other students than instructors who display inappropriate behavior and do not express caring towards students. Students who are exposed to caring instructors will evaluate both course content and the instructor more positively than students who are exposed to non-caring instructors.

References

- Brophy, J. (1987). Synthesis of research on strategies for motivating students to learn. *Educational Leadership* , 40-48.
- Brunson, D., & Vogt, J. (1996). Empowering our students and ourselves: A liberal democratic approach to the communication classroom. *Communication Education* , 73-83.
- Christophel, D. (1990). The relationship among teacher immediacy behaviors, student motivation, and learning. *Communication Education* , 323-340.
- Frymier, A. (1994). A model of immediacy in the classroom. *Communication Quarterly* , 133-144.
- Gorham, J. (1999). Diversity in classroom dynamics. In A. Vangelisti, J. Daly, & G. Friedrich, *Teaching communication theory: Theory, research and methods, 2d ed.* (pp. 257-268). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Gorham, J., & Millette, D. (1997). A comparative analysis of teacher and student perceptions of sources of motivation and demotivation in college classes. *Communication Education* , 245-261.
- Houser, M., & Frymier, A. (2009). The role of student characteristics and teacher behaviors in students' learner empowerment. *Communication Education* , 35-53.
- Jacobs, K. (1992). Psychometric properties of the learning-orientation grade orientation II scale. *Perceptual and Motor Skills* , 367-370.
- Katt, J., & Condly, S. (2009). Classroom Motivators and De-motivators. *Communication Education* , 213-234.
- Milton, O., Pollio, H., & Eison, J. (1986). *Making sense of college grades*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Myers, S. (2002). Perceived aggressive instructor communication and student state motivation, learning, and satisfaction. *Communication Reports* , 113-121.