

Motivating Students for Success

It is easy and fun to teach if students want to learn. The trick is in motivating students so that they want to learn what teachers want them to learn. This is the educator's primary task. The high quality teacher cultivates students' academic motivation and then provides a high quality ambiance for learning.

Educators differ on their beliefs for the best methods of motivating students. Many adults seem to believe that school-based learning is an unpleasant experience that students will avoid unless controlled by some outside force. Most common in schools are rewards for students displaying the desired behaviors and punishment (often lack of rewards) for displaying alternate behaviors. This may consist of trips to the treasure chest in the principal's office, coupons awarded that can be used to purchase items, organized trips to the local pizza establishment, extra recess time (less study time), homework freedom days, or stickers given to parents such as "My child is an honor student." Controlling students by fear is also very common. Students, for example, are threatened with low grades if their test scores or homework are inadequate. Coercion, similar to fear, is used to control student behavior with statements like, "You will be letting your friends down if you do not read this book by Friday."

Fear and coercion are bullying. Yes, we educators sometimes bully our students into complying. The use of external rewards, fear and coercion are forms of ***extrinsic motivation***; applying external pressures to manipulate students into complying with the expected behaviors. In this view, students are empty vessels that must be forced to learn what others want them to learn for their own good.

Many other educators view this differently. They see students as young inquiring minds that want to soak up meaningful learning¹ in an atmosphere of trust and caring. These educators believe that students will be self-motivated when they feel a sense of trust between themselves and teachers and within the student group. This is referred to as a sense of belonging. According to this view, it is important for students to have a say in their own learning; a sense of autonomy and influence. And, students need to feel trust that they will be supported in learning new and different things; no one will let them fail. This is called a sense of competence. A caring community is developed in schools and classrooms through collaborative processes such as morning welcome assemblies, class meetings, school-home activities, cross-grade and subject area group studies, and school-wide learning activities such as science day where community members and students work on science projects together. The result is student motivation from within or ***intrinsic motivation***.

¹ Consider, for example, the ability of children and teens to master the newest social technologies.

What Does the Research Say?

The research literature is replete with articles on the results of extrinsic and intrinsic modes of motivation. Following is a summary of research results from the literature adapted from a presentation by Scott Simpson (Technology and Innovation in Education, Rapid City, South Dakota).

A Culture of Compliance Does Not Promote Learning

Brain research suggests that the most primitive part of our brain is the brain stem. Activation of this part of the brain puts us in a fight or flight mode; reaction with very little or no logical thought. The upper lobes of the brain promote reasoning and creative thinking necessary for meaningful learning. Compliance directly activates the brain stem resulting in minimal learning opportunity. The thought pattern focuses on fight or flight response. Some students will comply, with rudimentary behavior, to be safe; others will choose not to comply resulting in low student engagement and increased behavior problems.

The Brain Grows In The Manner It Is Exercised

If we want children to grow up to be adults who do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, then we must provide opportunities, without reward or punishment, to practice appropriate decision-making. When a child does something right, do not reward her by giving her something special or saying “that was really great!” Rather, provide an opportunity for her to discuss what she did and why she did it; how she felt. When a child does something wrong, do not punish him or verbally lash out at him. Rather, provide an opportunity for him to talk about what he did and how he can fix it (note: apologies are never fix its). Both positive and negative behavioral situations can be made into learning opportunities. Help students internalize their thinking rather than focusing on what others will think or do.

We Learn Best As We Connect With Pictures and Stories

Remember that picture or painting that really caught your interest. Think back to that moment. Where were you? What were some of the other happenings that day? It is amazing how much we remember simply because those details are interlinked to that picture that caught our interest. Similar connections can be made through stories. History can come alive enabling us to connect specific information to our fascination with the story. All too frequently we teach facts and concepts in isolation. They are seen as abstractions with little inherent meaning. Algebra, for example, can be viewed as a set of formulas or it can be seen as a way of thinking. Is it any wonder that when the television show *Numbers* was popular, enrollment in math increased significantly? Similarly, the enrollment of students in forensic science has increased dramatically with the *Crime Scene Investigation* television shows.

Rewards Render Us Passive

Rewards foster short-term thinking. The focus is on the reward rather than on the behavior that is supposed to be enhanced by the reward. Some students totally engage in obtaining the extra points, coupon for pizza, or dipping into the principal’s treasure chest. The focus is on the reward, not learning.

Other students simply disengage from the learning process. Most of us can recall studying hard for a test and then purging from our minds what we had “learned” for the test. This happened because we did not consider the learning meaningful; rather, we focused on the reward, a good grade on the test (or, not failing the test). Rewards activate the primitive fight or flight pattern of the brain, shutting down the more creative brain functions.

Learning Requires Trust

Trust requires a caring relationship; caring about every student’s success. All students can learn. They may not all learn the same things. In fact they will all take away different things from the same learning experiences. For high levels of learning, students must trust that it is okay to not be just like everyone else; it is okay to be vulnerable and to take risks. Learning in an atmosphere of fear and coercion is like writing a paper in the middle of a hurricane. It can be done, but it is ineffectual.

My greatest gift as a teacher. It was an 8th grade arithmetic class of about 25 students. I had administered my first essay test of the year on basic arithmetic constructs. I started to grade Billy’s paper; it seemed unreadable so I wrote F at the top of the first page. Bothered by Billy’s paper, I got up about 2 in the morning, pulled his paper from the stack and started translating it. About 5 a.m. I completed the task. Three hours on a single paper! To my surprise, Billy’s understanding of the arithmetic constructs tested was far ahead of anyone else in the class. He could not write, but he sure did understand. I put an extra leg on the F at the top of the paper making it an A. During the rest of the year, Billy was always involved in discussions, volunteering to help, and at one point made two very good 45 minute presentations to the class. In addition, his writing improved.

In April of that year I received a note from the principal asking for my assessment on sending Billy to a special school because of his handicap. Meeting with the principal, I asked “What handicap?” Stuttering, I was told. I responded, “Billy has never stuttered in my class. In fact he did two great 45 minute presentations to the other students.” I was told that I was the only teacher to assign a grade above a D to Billy.

Then, it dawned on me. Billy’s first paper with the terrible writing, he stuttered when he wrote! Before then, I had not heard Billy talk. Billy stuttered under fear and pressure but not when he felt trust. My recognition of his understanding of the content removed the fear and established trust in the classroom.

At the end of the school year, we held an open house for the parents and community. I was talking with the principal when a couple approached us. The man shook my hand and said “thank you.” The woman said “thank you.” They turned and left never introducing themselves. I asked the principal what that was about. He responded “Remember Billy. They are his parents. This is the first time that they have been in the school.”

Relationship counts!

Extrinsic Motivation Produces Short-Term Results

Extrinsic rewards can positively impact student behavior, but only for short periods of time. Over time, larger and larger rewards are needed to produce the same results; when the reward is removed, the desired behavior is often extinguished. Blame is then placed on the person providing the reward.

Coercion is Violence

Coercion is the manipulation of students to our own ends. It is bullying students to do what we want regardless of their feelings or situation. Ends justify the means! Coercion stimulates the primitive brain stem provoking the fight or flight response; it retards higher levels of thinking.

Misguided Measuring Can Distract Us From What Is Important

In today's preoccupation with accountability, standards, and test scores, this is probably a politically incorrect premise. But, it is true! I often wonder about people who insist that students be held accountable for learning. Why? Students are forced to go to school. They are forced to set in classrooms that someone else put them in and forced to learn things that someone else wants them to learn. Then, they are blamed when they fail. This is the design of America's educational system. The system is based on fear and coercion. "Do this or you will fail." "Pass this test to receive a good grade or to graduate." What are we really measuring? We are measuring whether or not students think like their teachers and the test developers. Measure only those things that are a truly important for the purpose of improving instruction.

Learning is Natural

Watch a new born baby during its first few months of development. It is constantly taking in new stimuli. It smiles, frowns and cries as it is assessing and learning from its immediate environment. Our brain never stops searching new things as it builds a nearly infinite number of internal connections. The joy of learning is the normal state. When we add fear, coercion and reward to the natural state, we confound it with extraneous ruses that detract from the innate drive for learning. Perhaps it is time to trust in students' natural instincts for learning and employ teaching strategies that enhance what is already within each student.