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Encouraging Student Academic Motivation

Motivation ^[1]

One of the greatest frustrations mentioned by many teachers is that their students are often not motivated to learn. Teachers quickly come to recognize the warning signs of poor motivation in their classroom: students put little effort into homework and classwork assignments, slump in their seats and fail to participate in class discussion, or even become confrontational toward the teacher when asked about an overdue assignment. One common method for building motivation is to tie student academic performance and classroom participation to specific rewards or privileges. Critics of reward systems note, however, that they can be expensive and cumbersome to administer and may lead the student to engage in academics only when there is an outside 'payoff.' While there is no magic formula for motivating students, the creative teacher can sometimes encourage student investment in learning in ways that do not require use of formal reward systems.

Here are some alternative ideas for promoting student motivation

1. Build in rewarding opportunities for social interaction. A student may find an otherwise tedious or frustrating task to be more motivating if it provides an opportunity for social interaction. An adult tutor, for instance, can provide support and encouragement that can kindle motivation for a student. Cross-age peer tutoring, cooperative learning groups and informal 'study groups' are other examples of social situations that students may find to be both motivating and good settings for reviewing academic skills. One caution, though: social interactions can be so entertaining in their own right that they interfere with learning! Instructors can minimize social distractions in academic situations by making their expectations for student work very clear from the outset and by monitoring social groupings to ensure that academics always remain the main focus.

2. Provide audiences for student work. One social context that can be extremely motivating is to have an audience that will eventually evaluate one's creative work. Instructors can encourage students to submit their work to publications, for example, to post it on web sites, or to present it to live audiences (e.g., a poetry reading).

3. Reduce the 'effort' needed to complete an academic assignment. Research indicates that the amount of effort needed to undertake an activity (effort threshold) will play an important role in how motivated a person is to attempt the activity in the first place. If a task is made more difficult, it is likely that people will be more likely to put off trying the task. If a task is made easier, people will more willingly attempt it.

Teachers and parents can use this well-documented (and common-sense) fact to increase a

student's willingness to engage in academics. Here are some examples that show how reducing the effort connected with a learning activity can lead to greater student participation:

- A difficult and complex task (e.g., researching and writing a term paper) can be broken down into easier-to-accomplish sub-steps for the student to complete as separate assignments.
- A peer helper may assist a student who is chronically disorganized to set up and clean up their work area each day, making the task less time-consuming.
- If a child typically does not read for entertainment and will not go to the library for a book, a parent can leave interesting books around in the home for the child to read.

4. Connect academic requirements to real-world situations. The media are full of true stories that demonstrate the application of knowledge from various academic areas to real-world problems. When students see that content covered in their coursework can help to explain how actual, high-profile problems were created or solved, they can sense the real power of academic knowledge and its potential to affect human lives.

Here is one recent real-world example that a teacher might use to illustrate potential dangers in attempting to coordinate translation of measurements across competing systems: The radio signal of a NASA interplanetary probe sent to orbit Mars vanished suddenly on September 23, 1999, just as it was nearing the red planet. An investigation revealed the source of the problem. It appears that engineers planning the mission had failed to translate calculations of rocket thrust from the English measurement system (pounds of thrust) to a metric measurement system (1 newton = 4.45 English pounds of thrust). During the final leg of the probe's journey through space, mission managers assumed wrongly that rocket thrust calculations were in metric, rather than English, units and maneuvered the rocket accordingly. As a result, the probe went off course, probably entering the Martian atmosphere and being destroyed.

5. Offer students meaningful choice wherever possible. One intriguing element that teachers can explore to increase student motivation is that of choice. It appears to be a general principal that, when students are offered some degree of autonomy and choice in selecting or carrying out an activity, they are more motivated to take part in that activity. Of course, the teacher must decide to what degree they can build choice into academic activities. As examples of how choice can be applied in the classroom, teachers may permit students to:

- select the order in which they will complete several in-class or homework assignments;
- bring a book of their own choosing to a session with a reading tutor;
- be given several short, timed breaks during a work period and allowed to choose when to take them.

6. Make learning fun! Teachers have always used game-like formats to liven up academic material and engage student interest. A teacher may decide, for example, to have a class review for an upcoming test by playing a game that follows the format of the TV gameshow, Jeopardy! -- the teacher presents test review items and requires competing teams to try to phrase questions for which review items are logical answers. Humor and fast-paced instruction are also methods for making learning more lively and interesting.

Jim's Hints

The ideas presented here to boost student motivation all stem from a single assumption: that people are most likely to learn when they are fully engaged and interested in the learning task.

When planning any academic activity, teachers can follow the useful exercise of (1) imagining that they themselves are going to be the students and (2) brainstorming about ways that an instructor might motivate them to learn. The lesson here is simple: Students are not so different from us: If we become inattentive when listening to an instructor speak from a lectern for 90 minutes straight, our students probably will too!

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