

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Motivating students is not magic

Graham has invited a number of well respected international thinkers and writers about university teaching, and how to improve it, to each contribute one idea to the '53 Powerful ideas' collection. The first is from Marilla D. Svinicki, Professor Emeritus, University of Texas at Austin.

During my forty years at the University of Texas, I served as both a faculty development specialist and as a faculty member. Without a doubt, the most common question I was asked was “How do I motivate my students?” I felt that teachers had developed some pretty strong urban legends around the power of student motivation, as if it were a magic wand we could wave and everyone would learn immediately.

With a few exceptions, these questioners are intelligent, well read, and cognitively sophisticated, but what to do about motivation seems to baffle them. I hate to disabuse them of those magical beliefs, but sooner or later all teachers have to realize that there is nothing magic about motivation. And like many psychological concepts, the things that will motivate students are fairly straightforward.

First, two truths about motivation: Number One, teachers are NOT the main source of motivation for students; we just don't have THAT much control over their lives. So don't

feel guilty if your students are not all jumping up and down excited about class. There will always be some students who have other issues that affect their lives more strongly than you do. Number Two, motivation is in the eye of the one being motivated. How a person interprets what is going on in the surrounding situation is the biggest source of his or her motivation. Thus, the very same events can be viewed as polar opposites from a motivational standpoint simply because people interpret them differently. There is no one guaranteed motivation for all students.

So I'm taking this opportunity to make clear just how basic the strategies for influencing motivation can be. I've chosen 4 strategies that can be considered when looking for ways to influence student motivation. All are based on psychological theory on learning with relatively robust evidence of their validity.

1. Set some benchmarks or goals for success – These benchmarks can serve as an anchor for motivation. The learners can use the benchmarks as targets for their efforts. As they progress, they can measure their success periodically by comparing where they are with the benchmarks they've set. And seeing their progress or success is the ultimate motivator. It would be better if the learner or the learner in collaboration with the instructor set the benchmarks. This increases their motivational

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value because self-set goals usually appeal to pre-existing intrinsic motivators for each student involved in creating them. However, research has shown that even if the learners didn't choose the goal at first, an interesting and challenging activity will often spur them to become motivated where they weren't before, a phenomenon called situational interest.

It is not universally accepted that having well-specified goals will enhance motivation. For some systems the students have a fairly free hand in discovering what they want to learn without too much interference, whereas in other systems, such as those in the US, goals play a very important part in both the structure of the curriculum as well as the evaluation of students' ability to move on to a higher rank in their undergraduate careers. One could argue the motivational value of each perspective and the variables that would influence student progress and choices, but for me, providing these 18 year old not quite adults with an evolving ability for rational choices some guidance and support in how to become self-regulated lifelong learners gives them the ability to become what they want to be if they are willing to work toward it.

2. Make the endpoint goal and its interim work more valuable to the learner, because task value increases motivation for task engagement. - This leads us to a second very straightforward source of motivation - How valuable the goal and the associated tasks are to the learner. Just because we think something is obviously important to learn, it is not necessarily obvious to the learners. This is

one of the pillars of student-centered teaching – look at the learning from the perspective of the learner.

There are many ways to make a goal or task more valuable by increasing interest. For example, active learning strategies usually carry with them a level of motivation because doing is interesting and feedback is almost immediate. Using activities that mirror how the learned materials or skills will actually be used speaks to the motivation associated with learning something useful. Group work generally provides peer support and peer pressure, two important sources of motivation. None of these are brilliant new ideas, which is the point of this piece.

3. Make it possible for the learner to see that he or she can be successful - This insight in a learner taps into his or her self-efficacy, and, because of self-efficacy, failure will be seen only as a bump in the road rather than an insurmountable barrier. The learner will persist until either successful or he or she decides that achieving success is unlikely, at which point most learners stop trying. This sounds like magical or fuzzy thinking, but in research studies on all sorts of skills, learner estimates of self-efficacy for a task are highly correlated with subsequent success.

How do we encourage self-efficacy? Several sources of self-efficacy are described in the literature: 1) Seeing others being successful; 2) Prior success at a similar situation; 3) Support and feedback from a respected other

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like the teacher or other students; 4)
Experiencing successes along the way.

It sometimes seems simplistic to say that if the learner believes he can do it, he usually can. But some of the best ideas in teaching and learning are that straightforward. The idea of self-efficacy is one of those.

4. Allow the learner to exert some control over his or her own learning – This is the principle of “autonomy”, a part of the self-determination theory of motivation. Learners who believe that they are the ones making choices and exercising control over what is happening to them demonstrate a higher level of engagement, persistence, and responsibility for learning as well as beliefs in their own accountability for whether they learn or not. This can be done by allowing learners to choose among alternative assignments or

timing of their work. It can also be doing by encouraging learners to articulate their reasoning behind their choices. And most important, it is enhanced when the instructor allows the learners to make and then solve their own mistakes before jumping in to solve the problems for them.

These four ideas are not particularly brilliant; you probably had thought of one or more of them in your own practice. Starting with benchmarks for self-regulated learning and activities that are valued by students, supporting student feelings of self-efficacy and competence, tailoring instruction to the students’ starting understanding and building from there, and letting the students in on the design process by giving them choices and support and listening to what they say. These really do add up to our image of a motivating teacher. It’s not magic.

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