Professor Dennis McInerney shares some tips on how to motivate both students and teachers.

For most teachers, the new school year usually begins with two main goals: get students interested in class and get them to show it by performing well. However, like most New Year resolutions, this is often easier said than done. How can we translate the concept of motivation into concrete actions in the classroom?

SingTeach speaks to Professor Dennis McInerney about how we can motivate our students and engage them in learning.

Q: It's common practice for some parents to dangle rewards, like cell phones or iPods, to motivate their children to work harder for their examinations. Is this something teachers should discourage?

A: There's no simple answer to that. Research-based evidence says that students who are achieving well in schools are not rewards dependent. What that implies is even if rewards aren't given to them, they would still do well.

On the other hand, research also shows that students who are low achievers and those for whom particular material is very difficult to learn, or students who are ambitious and try to do well in something hard, a reward might be appropriate to keep them at their tasks. It's not a black-and-white issue.

Q: What about extrinsic rewards in the classroom context?

A: Research has shown that if you have students who are already intrinsically motivated and working well, when their teachers introduce rewards, there's typically a fall-off in achievement and motivation.

So you don't apply extrinsic rewards in this situation because it may distract the motivated student from the task of learning. Students may develop the desire to compete and outperform other students for the rewards, rather than learn for the sake of learning. This is okay for the winners, those who get the rewards. But there will potentially be a lot of losers, so those who don't get the rewards may lose motivation.

In some cases, students get rewards that aren't effectively tied to real productivity or what they have done, and they say, "Why did I get that reward? I didn't deserve it. Oh well, I don't really have to work much now because I did lousy work and I got a reward." So within that sort of classroom context, extrinsic rewards could be dangerous.

Q: For students who are already intrinsically motivated, grades may seem to be the only thing that matters. What can we do to help them look beyond that?

A: One of the things teachers can do is get students to value the pleasure of understanding what they are learning rather than depending on extrinsic rewards.

Second, help students set long-term goals for what they are doing. This connection between immediate goals for learning and future orientation is very important because if students see the utility of what they are doing in school to achieving these future goals,
then doing the work is no longer extrinsically dependant on just the grades.

Third, a simple way is to provide stimulating and relevant lessons and set them within real-life contexts. For instance, if they are learning something about medicine, set up a mock medical setting or go visit a hospital.

Fourth, help students experience success that is not measured by grades. For example, teachers can attribute success to the students’ efforts and abilities, so they think they did well because they worked hard or because they are bright. Then the relevance of extrinsic rewards becomes minimal because the students feel good about themselves.

Fifth, provide students with motivational feedback that is not based on a grading system. The feedback could be about the quality, interest, or creativity shown in their work. So give motivational feedback and, if necessary, the grade. Or teachers could design their assessment and evaluation so there are opportunities for alternative assessments that don’t have grades attached to them.

There’s a whole battery of things a teacher can do but, of course, these have to be used appropriately according to the age of the child. What we typically find is that children from primary schools don't work so much for extrinsic rewards, they work for the fun of learning—they go to school to meet their teachers and friends and to become involved in interesting activities. But when the child gets to secondary school, when there's more grind and grunt, then intrinsic motivation becomes a very important way of keeping them highly task-oriented and focused.

Grades will, of course, always have a role to play in providing both a benchmark against which students can evaluate their performance as well as a motivator for them. And seeking good grades is associated with a whole host of positive reasons, such as pleasing one’s parents and family, maximising one’s potential to get into good university courses, as well as a tangible reflection of having understood some work. So we can’t say that working for grades is all bad.

At the same time, grades should be put into perspective, and some of the other reasons for students trying hard and achieving at school—such as solving interesting problems, working with friends on collaborative projects, helping other kids do well by sharing one’s knowledge, being respected as a hard worker—should be given more prominence if we want to have truly well-rounded, motivated students.

Q: Many factors can influence a child’s motivation level, and many of these are beyond a teacher’s control. So who should play the role of motivator in a child’s life?

A: Well, there’s no answer to that. What teachers can work with are the attitudes, values and approaches to learning that students bring to the classroom.

Research shows that there’s significant variance in student performance that can be explained by variants in schools and classrooms—such as quality of teaching, appropriate and relevant curriculum, variability in teaching methods, valid and reliable assessment, effective feedback and so on—which teachers have control over.

So there are things teachers can address to enhance student motivation and student engagement in learning but ultimately everyone is responsible.

Q: Any tips on how teachers can keep themselves motivated throughout the whole academic year?

A: Teachers should question themselves periodically about how motivated they are about teaching. If they want their students to be energetic and motivated, then they have to be inspiring, motivational and energetic themselves.

Effective teaching involves some acting. I remember going into my 15th Introductory Psychology lecture at the university after teaching there for 15 years. I looked at the students and said to myself, “I’ve got to do this lecture again. I change the content a little each year but I’ve done this for so long. If I am bored, the students will also be bored.”

But then I remember that when I walk in there, all those faces weren’t there for 15 years. They are new faces and they are excited, and they are there to learn something new. And so I had to reinvent myself and make the lecture sound as if it was the first time I had ever given it, and become just as excited about the lecture as the students.
I think if teachers structure their teaching well and have good teaching skills, they will see progress in their students. It may be small in some classes but once they see progress, it will enthuse and motivate them throughout the year. Also, teachers should use a variety of methods in their teaching and assessment so that they can enjoy teaching and their students can remain engaged.

Personal engagement with the students will help them to stay enthusiastic in their long teaching careers. Get to know students personally; for instance, get to know something about their background or interests. Once the teachers are personally engaged with them, they will stay motivated through the year because they have become friends.

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He has a strong interest in cross-cultural research and has published extensively in refereed international journals and written numerous book chapters and conference papers, particularly in the area of motivation and learning.

Selected References


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