
Title	Motivating Students
Author(s)	Jessie Wong Yuk Yong & Scott Corbett
Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 15(2),3-9
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

Motivating Students

JESSIE WONG YUK YONG
& SCOTT CORBETT

When one of us visited a school last month, the principal came and said, "I have a student who takes two hours to write three sentences. How can you motivate him?" To this question, we have no straightforward answer. Few topics in psychology have received as much attention in empirical research as motivation. However, motivation is thought of in the Singaporean culture in simple ways: motivation comes from reward or punishment; motivation comes from within the person; some people are born without it and these people cannot be motivated at all, they are therefore weak and unable to succeed. These different notions about motivation make us wonder how our teachers should tackle the problem of unmotivated students.

There is no doubt that all teachers should be concerned about their disinterested students in the class and help them to learn. And no teacher will deny that motivated students are easier to teach and that those who are interested in learning, do in fact learn more. What does this mean to the teachers? And what does motivation consist of? What are the possible ways to motivate our students? These are the concerns of this article.

Empirical research on motivation

Motivation comes from a combination of forces which operate both inside (intrinsic) and outside (extrinsic) the individual's mind. Intrinsic motivation is largely self-defined, coming from within usually in the form of intangible personal satisfactions such as feelings of self-determination and competence. Extrinsic motivation comes from external sources and is often tangible (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Individuals are moved by these two sets of forces in a complex way when doing a task.

Empirical research indicates that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are related to each other and to student learning. Intrinsic motivation is generally more effective in influencing behaviour but not

sufficient in itself. Very often students need extrinsic rewards to motivate them to learn or to complete a task. Some students may be highly compelled to learn for intrinsic reasons but still enjoy the challenge of meeting an external demand like taking an examination. Other students may learn because they care about the grade they receive but still find reading and writing pleasurable as they begin doing the task.

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation operate with different degrees of power under different situations. For example, if a teacher wants his students to begin a new behaviour, extrinsic motivation always works more quickly and powerfully than intrinsic motivation. Research shows that students can be motivated to learn quickly if promised a sufficiently attractive external reward. However, extrinsic attractions must usually be offered indefinitely for the behaviour to continue.

In contrast, it is more difficult to motivate students to learn a new behaviour intrinsically, but this learning is usually more lasting. Therefore it is better for teachers to use intrinsic motivation if extrinsic motivation is unnecessary. That is to say, in situations when students are doing something they like and will do without any concrete reward, then intrinsic motivation should be encouraged and relied upon by the teacher. This is because extrinsic rewards will decrease intrinsic motivation. It is like playing or rewarding people to do something they are already motivated to do. According to research, this reward is over-justified and would spoil the intrinsic motivation already operating within the students (Deci, E. L. 1971). This phenomenon is explained by cognitive dissonance theory and cognitive evaluation theory in psychology.

Research at the Center for the Study of Motivation and Human Abilities (Frymier, 1970) indicates that:

1. Motivation to learn in school is not fixed, but is not changed drastically in short periods of time either. It may be that a semester or a school term is entirely too short a time to change an individual's motivational pattern very much.

2. Motivation should be thought of in optimal, not maximal terms. Either too little or too much motivation may impede learning.
3. Positively motivated students (those who want to learn) have stronger and more positive self images.

Positively motivated students and unmotivated students seem to have a different outlook regarding themselves and their surroundings. The positively motivated students are aware of the past, present and future in making decisions and deciding on future actions, while those students who are not motivated to learn in school tend to either hold on to or try to avoid certain aspects of their experience. The net result is that those who are not motivated to learn resist new information, tend to make snap decisions, use categorical reasoning (good or bad) rather than an evaluative continuum, and freeze their judgement even when new information suggests the wisdom of revising it. These findings have implications to those of us who teach. Since motivation and commitment are personal matters with each student, we as teachers should do what we can to eliminate the barriers that block them.

Cooperative learning and internal motivation

As teachers we are always looking for ways to increase internal motivation. Deci (1971) explains that one can increase a person's internal motivation by enhancing their feelings of competence and self-determination. Other studies show that in order to remain interested in learning, students must feel challenged and must receive feedback on their progress. Using grades or other inducements to emphasize a teachers' control over students rather than to give feedback on performance has been shown to reduce intrinsic motivation. Therefore what teachers can do is to design evaluations that give instructive feedback, or assign ungraded written work or put more stress on the personal satisfactions of assignments to encourage learning and to increase the students' intrinsic motivation.

Internal motivation may also be increased by giving students opportunities to choose learning activities (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

The Cooperative Learning Strategy developed in the early 1980s in the United States and practised in many parts of the world now, explores all these areas of student learning. In our opinion, cooperative learning presents a teaching and learning strategy which promotes intrinsic motivation in the learners and therefore it is an area teachers should seek to explore.

The Cooperative Learning Strategy attempts to help children to understand the need for learning before the content is taught to them. By telling the students why they need to learn particular tasks or skills and letting them know how these tasks or skills would help them in their life is the first step to motivating them intrinsically. For example, when teaching young children social skills, the teacher applying the Cooperative Learning Strategy will tell the children the need to learn social skills and how such skills would help them in their future life. The next step is to give the pupils an opportunity to practise the particular social skills and encourage them to do so both inside and outside the classroom. Finally, later, the students should be asked to process and review what they have learned. Research in cooperative learning shows that in this way, children are motivated intrinsically and they tend to have positive attitudes towards learning what is being taught.

Benware and Deci (1984) discover that cooperative learning promotes intrinsic influences in other ways too. Their study with college students shows that those who are asked to teach what they have learned later have achieved more "higher-level learning objectives" and shown more intrinsic interest than those who are not asked to teach what they have learned. This suggests that the challenge of having to teach is itself an internal motivation to learn. This strategy is applied in cooperative learning. We call it the Jigsaw method. In this strategy, students are divided into groups. Each group sends a member to what becomes an "expert" group which is given a portion of what the teacher intends to teach. The "expert" group is expected to discuss the material among themselves until they have "mastered" the material. Then they return to their original groups and teach their "lesson" to their group members who have all been given a different portion of the material to master. All members take turns teaching their "expert areas" to their group members. As a result, the whole class would have been taught or covered the

"whole knowledge" that the teachers intended to impart in that lesson. The advantage of this teaching strategy is that "the expectation of the students to teach" is used as an instrument to increase students' interests and intrinsic motivation and focus on learning.

Cooperative Learning Strategy also encourages instructors to give students more choices as to what they learn. This has also been shown to increase the intrinsic desire of students to complete the task. In short, cooperative learning stresses the creation of a learning environment which in itself provides intrinsic motivation.

However, in Singapore's schools, a grading orientation has always been used to motivate students to learn. Teachers emphasize grades (external motivation). Students with a strong interest in grades are therefore extrinsically influenced to learn. Yet, this does not contradict the fact that students with a strong interest in learning are also intrinsically motivated even though they might prefer a different learning environment. Teachers can promote a more holistic learning environment within a grading environment by designing evaluations that give instructive feedback and by stressing the personal satisfactions of assignments instead of over-emphasising grade attainment.

Implications for the teachers

Though many teachers may like to advocate an intrinsically centred learning orientation to motivate students, the fact remains that they unwittingly encourage an emphasis on grades. Giving points for good behaviour, grades for good work done, bonus points for completing a task quickly and minus points for naughty behaviour in class are just some common examples which demonstrate teachers' emphasis on grades.

Because extrinsic attractions are powerful and widespread in Singaporean society, and almost all our students are influenced by the rewards of meeting the society's expectation, Singaporean students have weak capacities for self-reinforcement. Therefore it is advisable for teachers to attempt to motivate them extrinsically in time

of need and accept that extrinsic motivation plays an important role in students learning behaviour too. However, skilful teachers who see valuation and grade systems as important are also able to realise that when intrinsic satisfactions are sufficient, there would be no need for extrinsic rewards. They would encourage students to develop their intrinsic motives which are much more lasting than extrinsic motivation.

Teachers who wish to increase their students' motivation should also be concerned about their evaluation methods. Though we cannot avoid the implications of studying for exams and grades, we should use these as offering some possibilities of intrinsic satisfactions as well. We can also use evaluation methods that encourage conceptual learning instead of rote learning. On top of that we should avoid using words that underscore the teachers' power when talking to the students i.e. "Don't fail", "You must", "You should struggle for an 'A'". Conversely, we should use more encouraging and less powerful language, such as "I hope", "I think you can do it", "I am interested in your answer", "I have confidence that you will do well" which will strengthen their incentives for learning. On choosing teaching strategies, cooperative learning strategies are encouraged as they provide room for students and teachers to encourage and compliment each other to see the needs and benefits of learning. In other words they helps to motivate each other intrinsically. Whatever classroom strategies are used, if teachers could help students to identify and understand the needs to learn, and to help them and encourage them to learn, they will probably be motivated to learn.

To sum up, the following are some possible ways to motivate the students to learn.

1. Establish the relevance of the subject.
2. Involve students in the choice of optional units.
3. Teach according to the level of ability of the students yet seek to challenge them.
4. Use a variety of teaching strategies i.e. make the lesson interesting.

5. Reward the students only when necessary.
6. Encourage and give compliments to the students.
7. Involve students in the teaching process.
8. Give constructive feedback promptly
9. Use encouraging and non-threatening words when giving them feedback.
10. Give students time to process what they have learned.

External motivators and extrinsic motivation are unlikely to produce or sustain a student's receptiveness in activating their own programme of life-long learning that is becoming so necessary in today's changing world. Thus teachers have the responsibility an opportunity to encourage the growth of intrinsic satisfactions and the rewards for learning in students. Students who construct powerful intrinsic motivating systems towards learning will prepare themselves well for becoming adaptable workers, constructive citizens and vibrant members of their communities in the inevitable future that constantly flows towards and around Singapore.

References

- Benware, C and Deci, E. L. (1984). Quality of learning with an active versus passive motivational set. *American Educational Research Journal* (21): 755-65.
- Deci, E. L. (1971). Effects of externally mediated rewards on intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (18): 105-15.
- Deci, E. L. and Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behaviour*. New York: Plenum.
- Emery, G. (1982). *Own your own life*. New York: New American Library.
- Frymier, J. R. (1970). Motivation is what it's all about. *Motivation Quarterly*, 1, 1-3.
- Tec, L. (1980). *Targets: How to set goals for yourself and teach them*. New York: Signet Books.