Some Key Tips to Motivating Your Students

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You see a number of different expressions on the faces of Introductory Psychology students. You do not see some faces at all after the first day. Motivation varies significantly across students. How do you motivate students to study and learn? Not all students have a burning desire to master the material faculty teach. Some students do not want to go to college to learn, but go because they are either forced to by their families, or otherwise feel that they have to. What are the best ways to increase motivation? Knowing the research on motivation can help instructors better engage students. In this essay, I briefly describe motivation and summarize major theories of motivation. Finally, I shall describe strategies to increase student motivation in the form of explicit tips and suggestions.

Why Motivation Is Important

There are three commonly used measures of motivation: choice, effort, and persistence (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). Students who are motivated to learn choose activities that enhance their learning, they then work hard, and continue to do so even when there are obstacles to learning. There are many psychological variables linked to motivation. Some students are driven by a high need for achievement, some students are said to be extrinsically motivated (those who study primarily for grades or approval of others), other students are intrinsically motivated (those who study for the value of the learning in its own right). Students are generally focused on activities that they value and in which they expect to succeed (expectancy-value theory). Motivation is also said to be directed towards goals. Some students adopt mastery goals where the primary desire is to understand and master the material. Other students adopt performance goals where they focus on their learning outcomes in relation to the learning outcomes of others. Perhaps most well known is the work of Carol Dweck who showed that students who believe intelligence is fixed show different levels of motivation and effort than students who believe that intelligence is malleable (what is called a growth mindset). Each of these different variables relate to motivation and learning (McKeachie & Hofer, 2001; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011) and the five motivational theories that relate to educational success (with key points on each) are summarized below:

1. Autonomy and Self Determination
    - People have a need for control over their lives
    - Control helps people feel that they have choices
2. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

- People are motivated by both internal (enjoyable and interesting) and external rewards (social recognition, professional development, money)
- Teachers tap intrinsic motivation when they arouse student curiosity, provide appropriate challenges, and give students some control in the class
- Teachers tap extrinsic motivation when they provide useful and constructive feedback

3. Expectancy-Value Theory
   - Students direct their energies toward activities they value and in which they believe they can be successful
   - Thus, teachers best promote learning when
     - They show course content to have value to students
     - They foster student expectations of success in the course
4. Mastery /Performance Goal Theory
   - Mastery Orientation
     - Primary desire is to learn and master subject matter
   - Performance Goal Orientation
     - Primary desire is to achieve relative to others (compete)
   - Mastery believed to promote deeper learning
     - Teachers foster mastery by having strong rapport with their students and encourage intellectual risk-taking
5. Social Goals/Motivation Theory
   - Students have social as well as academic goals
   - Students wish to be socially responsible and connected to other people
   - Teachers facilitate social accomplishment when they:
   - Provide opportunities for peer discussion or group work
     - This is very helpful in also fostering student learning

Consolidating Motivation

As seen above, there are many different theories of motivation in the psychological literature. To help consolidate the different ideas, Svinicki, (2004) presented an *Amalgamated Model of Motivation*, which suggests motivation is influenced by two major factors:

1. **Value of the Goal**: There are many factors that influence how valuable a student will perceive a course or study topic to be. The main factors are:
   - The perceived need for the knowledge or information
   - Intrinsic quality of goal (does the student value the goal itself?)
   - Utility of goal (what use will achieving the goal have?)
   - Control and choice (how much control and choice does the student have?)
   - Influence of others (are the students' peers or family important factors?)
2. **Learner's Expectation that the goal can be achieved**:
   - Difficulty (is the topic, course, or subject very challenging?)
   - Prior experience (how much experience or knowledge does the student have on the topic?)
   - Match with learner skills (is the level of the challenge suitable?)

- Encouragement/examples of others (what support or modeling is provided?)
- Self-efficacy (does the student think they can achieve the goal?)
- Attributions of success/failure (what does the student believe success or failure is caused by?)
- Beliefs/attitudes about learning (what does the student see as the role of learning?)

One of the easiest things an instructor can do to motivate students is to help increase the value of a learning outcome for them. If instructors see students lacking motivation, assessing the extent students value what the instructor is teaching, is the first critical step to take.

It seems obvious that motivation is an important component of learning, but what exactly is the connection? There have been many different ideas on this topic (e.g., Svinicki, 2004).

- Directs the learners' attention to the task at hand and makes them less distractible. Anything that focuses learners' attention helps learning,
- Changes what the learner pays attention to,
- Helps the learner persist when they encounter obstacles,
- Helps the learner set goals which then serve as benchmarks that the learner can use to monitor their learning and recognize when they are making progress and when they have finished a task.

It is also important to place learning and motivation in the context of teaching and learning. Motivation comes from and is influenced by many different sources. The instructor is also a key player in determining student motivation. Lowman (1995) suggested two key dimensions are important in understanding the interplay between teaching, learning and motivation:

Dimension 1: Intellectual Excitement
- This factor can be influenced by the clarity of presentations (in particular, what is presented) and the emotional impact on the students (or the way material is presented)

Dimension 2: Interpersonal Rapport
- This factor hinges on the awareness of the interpersonal nature of the classroom and suggests a focus on communication skills that enhance motivation and enjoyment of learning and that foster independent learning.

Similarly, and perhaps more comprehensively, St. Clair and Groccia (2009) presented a model that focuses on seven variables that must be investigated to develop a full perspective of college and university teaching and learning. The main variables to keep in mind with a brief description of them are:

Teacher: Understanding who individual teachers are and what they bring to the learning situation can affect the quality of that experience.

Learner: Learners differ in the same ways that teachers do. Students' backgrounds, preparation, and individual characteristics influence how, when, and why they learn.

Learning Process: Improved teaching should be grounded in an understanding of the research on the mechanics and transfer of learning.

Learning Context: Learning does not occur in a vacuum: Where and when teaching takes place influences teaching and learning.

Course Content: Analysis of the accuracy, difficulty level, organization and meaningfulness of what is taught can improve teaching.

Instructional Processes: The most obvious variable in this model describes what faculty as teachers and learners actually do in the instructional environment, which is what draws most of the attention (often to the exclusion of other factors), including teaching strategies (competitive, cooperative, individual teaching techniques, computer-aided instruction, etc.), teacher behaviors (such as oral and written communication skills, enthusiasm, organization, time management) and student learning responses (note-taking, class participation, student engagement and interaction, etc.).

Learning Outcomes: The desired results of teaching, in terms of short- and long-term learning outcomes should be identified during the course design process, before teaching, and assessed on a regular basis throughout the instructional process.

Tips for Increasing Motivation

Based on the five theories of motivation reviewed previously, McKeachie and Hofer (2001) offered the following suggestions for improving student motivation:

1. Provide Opportunities for Student Choice
   - When assigning writing tasks, give students the choice of topics and also the choice of due dates
   - On tests allow students to choose which essay questions to answer (e.g., answer 3 of the following 5 questions). Also allow students to justify and elaborate on missed questions
2. Share Your Own Motivation for Your Subject Matter and Teaching
   - Show students why you fell in love with your subject matter. Share why you enjoy teaching. Discuss the different types of personal and social satisfaction you receive in your work. Explicitly mention the value your subject matter makes to the world. Reflect with students on the sorts of autonomy you enjoy in your work.
3. Make Class Time Valuable
   - Prepare interesting and relevant lectures
   - From time to time vary class formats and activities
   - Allow opportunities for student discussion and interaction
   - Provide a moderate degree of intellectual challenge
   - For example, incorporate Problem-Based Learning
   - Pose thoughtful and stimulating questions
4. Encourage Mastery by Offering Extended Opportunities for Papers and Tests

- Allow students to revise papers before receiving a final grade on them
- Allow students to retake some quizzes/tests to improve their understanding and grades
- Offer students chances to learn from their mistakes

5. Use Criterion-Referenced Grading Rather than Normative Grading
   - Make point value of assignments crystal clear
   - Explain grading scale in detail so that students will know what they need to do to be successful
   - Avoid grading students relative to each other
   - These strategies help students perceive that they can control their destiny in our classes
6. Provide Immediate and Helpful Feedback
   - Feedback should be constructive and informative
   - Use controlling language only if necessary
     - "might consider" rather than "must" or "should"
   - Aim feedback at the problem and not the individual

In addition to these tips, Svinick (2004) offered the following suggestions for how faculty can motivate their students:

- Be a good role model
- Pick tasks with utility, challenge, & interest value
- Encourage self-efficacy
- Base evaluation on progress, mastery orientation
- Provide choice and/control over goals/strategies
- Communicate high expectations in line with capabilities

Summary: A Classroom Example on Motivating Students

To get a good sense of what motivates students, Buskist (2010) asked 167 students what teachers could do to increase their motivation for learning. The top three responses (and some suggestions to do it) are:

1. Make Lectures Interesting
   - Provide Relevant Real-Life Examples and Stories
   - Exhibit Enthusiasm for Subject Matter
   - Don't Always Lecture—Mix Up Class Activities
   - Allow for Student-Teacher Interaction
   - Allow Student Input in Class—Questions, etc.
2. Show Concerns for Students (Social Context)
   - Be Respectful Toward Students
   - Show Students You Care if they Pass or Fail
   - Let Students Know that You Want Them to do Well in Your Class

- Look for Opportunities to Connect Your Subject Matter with Your Students' Lives

3. Establish Class Contingencies/Policies
    - Require/Take Attendance
    - Offer "Pop" Quizzes and/or Frequent Testing
    - Occasionally Offer Extra Credit
    - Make Sure Test Items Correlate Highly with Material Covered in Class.

It is important to note that many of the above suggestions for motivation depend on class design. In conclusion, the following points summarize the effective elements of course design that influence motivation:

- Be an Interesting and Enthusiastic Teacher
- Establish Rules of Etiquette
- Establish Rapport with Your Students/Show Your Concern
- Use Active Learning Techniques to Provide Meaningful (Significant) Learning Experiences
- Establish Learning Contingencies and Tie Learning Objectives to Student Assessment
- Frequently Assess Student Learning with Feedback
- Assess Your Teaching Using a Variety of Different Methods

Like most human attitudes and behaviors, motivation is a complex phenomenon that is predicted by many different personality characteristics. Motivation, though based in the student, can also be determined by the actions of the instructor, the design of the course, and the interaction between the student and instructor. In this essay I reviewed a number of different theories on motivation and tips to increase motivation that corresponded to each. The annotated references provide additional information on many of the topics discussed above.

Annotated References

Anderson, L. W. & Krathwohl, D. R. (Eds.). (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives.* Allyn & Bacon. Boston, MA.

This book expands on the basic ideas developed by Bloom and revises the taxonomy of learning to provide students and instructors with benchmarks they can strive towards. Instead of just memorizing material, students should be able to apply their knowledge and synthesize information as well.

Bereiter, C., & Scardamalia, M. (1985). Cognitive coping strategies and the problem of 'inert knowledge.' In S. Chapman, J. Segal, & R. Glaser (Eds.), *Thinking and learning skills* (Vol. 2, pp. 65-80). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

There are a large number of automatic assumptions that students make about the process of learning that may not be accurate. This chapter highlights many of the reasons why students do not learn material as well as they can and includes mistakes faculty make in teaching that hurt student learning.

Druckman, D., & Bjork, R. (1994). *Learning, remembering, believing: Enhancing human performance.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

There are a number of ways that students mistakenly assume they know more than they actually do. This book summarizes many of the findings of cognitive psychology relating to how we learn and remember and provides many tips for increasing learning.

Lowman, J. (1990). Promoting motivation and learning. *College Teaching*, 38(4), 136-140.

This short article nicely highlights some key strategies to build students' motivation and help them learn more. Lowman is a master teacher who has also written books on techniques of teaching.

McKeachie, W., & Hofer, B. W. (2001). *Teaching tips: Strategies, theories, and research for college and university teachers* (11th ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

This book is perhaps one of the most influential books on teaching ever written. The authors cover nearly every topic relating to teaching and provide some key ideas for dealing with problems with motivation in the classroom.

Olson, M.H., & Hergenhahan, B. R. (2009). *An introduction to theories of learning* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, N.J. Pearson Prentice Hall.

A basic textbook that covers the main theories of learning. A good resource to review basic knowledge about learning processes.

Pashler, H., McDaniel, M., Rohrer, D., & Bjork, R. (2008). Learning Styles: Concepts and Evidence. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 9, 105-119. doi:10.1111/j.1539-6053.2009.01038.x

This article presents a comprehensive review of the literature assessing the utility of paying attention to learning styles in the classroom. The authors conclude that there is no adequate evidence base to justify incorporating learning-styles assessments into general educational practice.

Perry, W. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme.* Troy, MI: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
William Perry devised a set of stages through which college students move in the context of knowledge development. The book outlines how students' cognitive styles vary as they mature and suggests how their motivation to learn will vary with the their style of thinking.

Posner, J. G., Strike, K., Hewson, P., & Gertzog, W. (1982). Accommodation of a scientific conception: Toward a theory of conceptual change. *Science Education, 66,* 211-227.
Motivation to learn is often influenced by one's prior learning. If a student things they know the material, they are less likely to put effort into working on the material even when the prior learning is wrong. This article describes key ways to combat this problem.

Svinicki, M. D. (2004). *Learning and motivation in the post secondary classroom.* Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.
This book presents a comprehensive review of theories of learning and motivation and also provides explicit tips on how to increase motivation (many of which are summarized in this booklet). Svinicki is the current author of McKeachie's Teaching Tips, one of the classic books on pedagogy.

Svinicki, M. D., & McKeachie, W. J. (2011). *McKeachie's Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (13th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
This most recent edition of the classic teaching tips book has been significantly revised and presents new research on many aspects of teaching and in particular has an explicit chapter on motivation and learning.