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Motivating Unmotivated Students

Douglas B. Reeves

"I can't force them to study!" said the exasperated teacher. "I've heard the last group chant of 'All Children Can Learn' that I can stand. We don't need any more slogans—we need practical ways to get these kids engaged in learning, or we're going to have another year go down the drain."

Her colleagues in the workshop nodded knowingly as this teacher said aloud what many of them had been thinking. It was not a lack of will or desire by these teachers. They had tried to make lessons more engaging, had cut down on lectures, and had invested hours in preparing interactive and interesting lessons. Then they watched as students laughed during assemblies while inspirational speakers encouraged them to pursue their studies more seriously. Worst of all, teachers noted, it was the same parade of student leaders—not student council officers, but the unselected leaders who exert subtle but unmistakable influence on other students and even teachers—drawing followers among younger students, who emulated their dress, patterns of speech, and contemptuous disregard for academic work. Their leadership message was clear: Don't mess with us and we won't mess with you.

This scenario is not confined to the stereotypical urban school. Teachers from a growing number of schools—urban, suburban, and rural—describe the scene as if they had observed one another's classrooms. If the resulting level of despair among educators provoked by such scenarios is left unchecked, the teacher quoted above and the entire school will enter a demotivating spiral in which teachers expect less, students deliver less, and administrators withdraw, accepting with stony silence the environment of hopelessness.

To ensure that students get the proper academic challenge to stimulate their desire to work in school, here are five practical techniques to motivate the unmotivated student: give them challenge, choice, significance, feedback, and competence.

Realize that challenge and high expectations are more motivating than low expectations.

According to the 2006 National Study of High School Student Engagement (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007), two of three high school students are bored every day in class—typically, they say, because the work isn't interesting, challenging, or relevant for them. Although teens routinely complain about work that is tedious and boring, and many refuse to comply with requirements for homework, they do rise to a legitimate



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challenge. Writing an essay is a chore; getting published is a challenge. Solving 20 problems is boring; solving one problem in five different ways is a challenge. Memorizing the steps of how an idea becomes law might seem irrelevant; presenting testimony before a legislative committee or local governing body is a challenge.

Provide choice.

If a test normally has 25 items, create a test with 30 and allow students to ignore five. If the purpose of a homework assignment is to practice a set of skills, create a menu of three choices so that students can choose how to demonstrate mastery. We best engage students when we seek diversity of responses rather than copying and mindless repetition.

Give students an opportunity for significance.

Many students think that they already know how to "play school"—keep your head down, don't bother the teachers, and do the minimum necessary. This path of least resistance is typified by the indolent student, who in turn is part of a society that is, in Robert Bork's (1996) memorable phrase, "slouching toward Gomorrah." Students crave responsibility and meaning, and large-scale service learning projects in small and large school systems demonstrate the power of purpose and meaning for their lives (Berman, 2008; Reeves, 2009).

Provide feedback that is accurate, specific, and designed to improve performance.

Hattie (2009) and Marzano (in press) provide powerful evidence that feedback is perhaps the single most important act of teaching. The masters of feedback in most schools can be found in the music departments. Watch a great chorus or instrumental leader provide feedback that leads immediately to improved performance. Students leave every rehearsal knowing that they are better as individuals and as an ensemble than when they entered the class. These teachers know that they need not make everything count for a grade to motivate students, but rather that they provide feedback that is clear, relevant, immediate, and constructive. Think about it—have you ever seen anyone conduct a musical group with a red pen? Feedback, not threats of low grades, leads to better performance.

Help students feel competent.

Why is it that disengaged and unmotivated students will spend hours playing video games? If violence and sex were all that was required to improve student motivation, then students in history classes would be enthralled with the lurid details of ancient and modern leaders. Video games offer more than graphic imagery—they give students an opportunity to use immediate feedback to "get to the next level." Each failure results not in disappointment and disengagement, but in the immediate pursuit of improvement.

These ideas are neither universal nor guaranteed, but taken together, they represent an opportunity to motivate both students and teachers. My students, whether they are 7 years old or eligible for Social Security, follow remarkably similar motivational patterns. They are more engaged and learn better when they are challenged, exercise choice, feel significant, receive accurate and timely feedback, and know that they are competent.

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Douglas B. Reeves is the founder of the Leadership and Learning Center in Salem, Mass.



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