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Avoiding Motivation Missteps

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## Setting the Stage for Intrinsic Motivation

*Barbara Blackburn and Abbigail Armstrong*

Too often, educators focus on extrinsic motivations such as prizes, tokens, and stickers to motivate students. Although these may work temporarily, their effects fade over time. To be motivated for the long term, students' drive has to come from within.

### Two Must-Haves for Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is that drive that comes from within a student. Intrinsically motivated students appreciate learning for its own sake and tend to earn higher grades, score higher on achievement tests, prefer challenging work, be more confident about their abilities, and retain information and concepts longer.

For intrinsic motivation to take root, students must value what they do and believe they can succeed. Let's break these two elements into teaching guideposts.

### Valuing the Work

Students typically cultivate value for their work through the relevance of the lesson. That's why we strive to show real-life applications when we are teaching. Sometimes, relevance is how they might use the material in another lesson; other times, the work holds value for the future (success in college, the military, or the workforce). For elementary school students, triggering a sense of value can be as simple as hearing their name in a story. We like to say that most students have a streaming music station playing in their heads, "WII FM" or "What's in It for Me?" That's why they regularly ask you, "Why do we need to learn this?"

When we do workshops with teachers, we know they come into our sessions with one burning question: "How can I use this information immediately?" Adult learners are juggling so many demands that they prioritize activities and their attention based on how well something meets their immediate needs. Students are similar, except they don't have the choice to leave. So often, we forget to show students why they need to know what we are teaching.

Learning activities can create value for students. In general, students are more motivated when they

are doing something with new knowledge and skills as opposed to passively receiving content ("sit and get"). Charlene Haviland, a teacher in Norfolk, Virginia, has developed lessons that incorporate this concept. She uses the *Harry Potter* books to teach science concepts, like the physics behind the flying broomsticks in a game of Quidditch. She challenges students to apply their learning and ask, "How could this actually happen in the real world?"

Finally, students find value in their relationships with their teachers and peers. We once heard a speaker say that the teacher-student relationship is foundational to everything that happens in the classroom. We believe that is true. Students need to feel liked, cared for, and respected by their teachers. Many students also need the same from their peers. If they feel isolated from other classmates, they are often disengaged and less likely to value what they are doing.

## **Believing in Their Potential for Success**

The other hinge point for generating intrinsic motivation in your classroom is whether students believe they have a chance to be successful. That belief is built on four factors: level of challenge, experiences, encouragement, and views about success.

First, the alignment between the difficulty of an activity and a student's skill level is a major factor in self-motivation. Imagine that you enjoy playing tennis, and you have the chance to compete in a local match. You will be playing against Serena Williams. How do you feel? In that situation, there's plenty of opportunity for challenge—probably too much. For optimal motivation, an activity should be challenging but in balance with your ability to perform. That's a struggle for many teachers, but that is the foundation of our jobs: starting where students are, moving them up to increasing levels of difficulty, and providing appropriate scaffolding for learning at higher levels.

Students' experiences are also an important factor. They're more likely to believe they can be successful in science if they've been successful in other science activities. On the other hand, if they've had negative experiences reading poetry, they're less likely to want to read poetry, because they don't think they can interpret it. Creating multiple opportunities (by aligning the difficulty of an activity with a student's skill level) for students to build success in an area where they previously struggled will help students develop confidence.

Encouragement from others is the third factor in determining whether students feel they can be successful. When you encourage, you accept students as they are so that they will accept themselves. You value and reinforce attempts and efforts and help students realize that mistakes are learning tools. Encouragement says, "Try, and try again. You can do it. Go in your own direction at your own pace. I believe in you." Encouragement can be verbal, but you can also provide encouragement through a consistent, positive presence in your students' lives.

Finally, it's important for students to read and learn about people who failed before they succeeded, because this will inform their views about success and failure. Many students see failure as the end rather than as an opportunity to learn before trying again. Countless people, including Abraham Lincoln, Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, JAY-Z, and Sonia Sotomayor, have experienced failure in their lives and ultimately become very successful. Shaping how students define success and failure, and showing that each includes room for growth, will influence their beliefs about their own ability to succeed.

## **Make Learning Its Own Reward**

Although prizes and awards may immediately motivate students, the momentum will not last. To develop lifelong learners, invest time tending to the factors that foster intrinsic motivation so that students value their work and believe they can be successful.

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