

Motivating Reluctant Learners

They are the students who avoid challenges, who don't complete tasks, and who are satisfied to "just get by" in class. They are "reluctant learners," who often have the potential to excel but don't seem to care about achieving in school. Identifying the reasons behind these students' reluctance to learn is integral to piquing their interest in schoolwork and helping them to acquire the knowledge they need to succeed.

Many reluctant students have been told or have received the message over time that they are poor students, and, as a result, they may feel frustrated, inadequate, confused, or even ashamed (Hebb 2000). This effect can lead to a further downward spiral—as reluctant students receive negative feedback from teachers and parents, there is often even less motivation to excel. From the perspective of the adults involved, this failure to apply oneself in reaction to comments such as "You'd do better if only you'd work harder" is both unproductive and irrational. Thus, all parties are likely to become increasingly frustrated, with the potential for even more student disengagement from academic tasks. In short—this situation is a recipe for failure.

Why Are Some Students Reluctant to Learn?

Personal Beliefs that Decrease Motivation

A student's belief about his or her capability to accomplish meaningful tasks—known as self-efficacy—directly affects his or her motivation to learn. Students with high self-efficacy willingly approach learning activities, expend effort to achieve goals, persist in the face of challenge, and use strategies effectively. On the other hand, learners with low self-efficacy more typically avoid challenge, expend little effort and give up, and believe they are not in control of their learning (DiCintio and Gee 1999; Lucking and Manning 1996).

Other beliefs that students hold that contribute to low motivation include:

- *Lack of relevance*—A student may believe that schoolwork is unimportant and does not relate to his or her life or interests.
- *Fear of failure*—This is the student who feels that it is safer not to try than to try and risk failure or embarrassment.

"Motivating students to learn is perhaps the greatest challenge in the classroom"
(Laubach 2003, 33).

- *Peer concern*—A student may opt for appearing “cool” rather than to try and risk embarrassment.
- *Learning problems*—The student who struggles to keep pace with peers in the classroom may simply give up in frustration.
- *Lack of challenge*—Apathy toward schoolwork may stem from assignments that are below a student’s ability.
- *Desire for attention*—A student may try to gain the teacher’s attention and support by appearing helpless.
- *Emotional distress*—Lack of interest in schoolwork or ability to focus may actually be an indication of anxiety, distress, or depression.
- *Expression of anger*—A student may perform poorly in school as an act of rebellion against parental pressure to excel academically (Shore 2001, 17).

In the Classroom

Finally, no discussion about motivating reluctant students is complete without attention to the classroom as context—a variable over which teachers have control. “Motivation is not a character trait but rather a

“A large and growing body of literature is available on the determinants of motivation. After an extensive review of the research, we have concluded that, in classroom situations, achievement motivation is a product of the interaction between student characteristics and instructional practices. Student characteristics that affect achievement motivation include (a) students’ ability to perform a task, which includes their skills, background knowledge, and prior experiences; (b) the degree to which students value an activity and perceive it as relevant, interesting, and important; and (c) students’ beliefs about learning and about themselves as learners” (Okolo, Bahr, and Gardner 1995, 279).

state that manifests itself differently in diverse settings,” assert Gehlbach and Roeser (2002, 41). Because a student’s lack of motivation can be specific to the classroom situation, teachers should strive to create environments that stimulate situational interest to motivate students and help them make cognitive gains in areas that initially hold little interest for them (Hidi and Harackiewicz 2000).

Assignments should be “multi-dimensional,” with teachers focusing during planning on how different features of a project (learning content, interacting with peers, or using engaging media) might be motivating for different students (Gehlbach and Roeser 2002).

Worthy (2000) cites as an example “James,” a 10-year-old who had a passion for comic books that interfered with his academic activities. While James appeared to be a problem student, his teacher perceived that he was actually a highly motivated learner whose interests simply did not fit into the traditional curriculum. She channeled James’ passion into productive educational activities such as checking out library books and Web sites about comics, writing and illustrating his own comic book, and interviewing a local historian to ensure the accuracy of his Arthurian-era story.

Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Rewards

Students are motivated through a combination of extrinsic factors (rewards and punishments) and intrinsic factors (the desire to complete a task for its own sake) (Educational Research Service 1998).

Some research suggests that extrinsic motivators are not as valuable as intrinsic motivators. For example, studies of African American students in predominantly White school settings show that schools that emphasize engagement in academic tasks for the purpose of learning and improving are more supportive of these students’ academic success and well-being than are those that emphasize engagement for the purpose of “besting” others (Kaplan and Maehr 1999).

Other research concludes that extrinsic rewards such as public recognition of individual excellence are a valuable way to motivate students. However, it also

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suggests that schools should recognize outstanding performances in areas outside the core curriculum and that are consistent with the school's goals to ensure inclusion of students of all abilities (Tomlinson 1992).

Fulk and Montgomery-Grymes offer three steps to shifting students' dependence on external reinforcement to an internal motivation to learn:

- First, provide incentives for improved performance or mastery.
- Second, combine all reinforcers with social praise, and gradually fade the distribution of the incentives.
- Third, encourage students to reinforce their own progress with statements such as "I did a great job!" (1994, 29).

Classroom Practices that Undermine Motivation

Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, and Vincent (2003) have developed the following list of practices that actually undermine student motivation:

- ability attributions (teacher comments tie success to ability, not effort)
- competitive environment in which "winning" is stressed over working together and improving
- few displays of student work and accomplishments
- lack of scaffolding for students who are struggling
- ineffective/negative feedback
- lack of connection of new material to students' prior knowledge
- lack of monitoring of students' behavior, level of attentiveness, etc.
- lack of established routines and procedures
- low task difficulty
- negative classroom atmosphere
- negative approach to classroom management
- overly difficult tasks
- poor/incomplete planning
- public punishment
- slow pacing
- sparse classroom environment
- task completion emphasized over learning
- uninspiring instructional practices

Offer Students Choices

"The more that students perceive autonomy, the more engaged they become in learning," say Gehlbach and Roeser (2002, 42). Disinterested students often respond positively when given some choice in the learning process (Shore 2001).

Highly engaged learners believe that outcomes are related to their own actions (Ornstein 1994). In one study, students indicated that having control over their learning makes them feel more involved and competent and chases away boredom, confusion, and the desire to "be doing something else" (DiCintio and Gee 1999, 233). Teachers can augment students' feelings of self-determination by allowing them reasonable choices in their assigned activities—for example, by sometimes allowing students to choose whether they will work in a group or individually on a particular project (Gehlbach and Roeser 2002).

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Other specific techniques for motivating students through involvement include:

- *Allowing flexible sequencing and due dates*—This technique enables students to determine the order for independent practice activities. A complete social studies unit, for example, may require a product map, a written summary, and an oral report within a particular time period. However, teacher reminders may be required until students acquire necessary time management skills.
- *Incorporating self-scoring and self-correction*—For example, select seatwork assignments that fall within students' independence level (i.e., above an 80 percent accuracy level) so that the need for assistance will be minimized. Provide answer keys and instruct students to self-score their work and to make necessary corrections independently or with the assistance of a "study buddy," the teacher, an aide, or taped study guides.
- *Varying assignment length*—For example, construct assignments so that the most critical problems are contained within the initial section of the exercise or

Fulk and Montgomery-Grymes provide examples of options that could be offered to students as alternatives to a traditional book report:

- Complete the study guide as you read each chapter.
- Share your book with the class. This will be oral and should include a visual.
- Make up activities to be completed by your classmates.
- Make a poster about the book to “sell” it to readers.
- Write a newspaper report about part or all of the book.
- Make a book report mobile.
- Interview the author.
- Read the book with a friend. Help each other with understanding the book.
- Make a book jacket for the book. Include a section about the author and a summary of the book. Illustrate the cover to make others want to read the book.
- Pick one incident in the book and rewrite it with a different ending. Include all the same characters (1994, 29).

worksheet, and instruct students to self correct when they reach a certain point within the assignment. Set a target criterion level (e.g., 90 percent correct). Students who achieve the accuracy criterion are exempt from the remainder of the assignment and can move on to alternative activities (Fulk and Montgomery-Grymes 1994).

Help Students Set Goals

Goal setting also can help students develop an internal sense of control and responsibility for their learning. The goals should be:

- *Specific and measurable in quantity of achievement*—For example, students can count how many assignments were finished punctually or how many

points in a week they earned in a particular class to stay on pace for a “B” grade.

- *Something the student wants to improve upon*—The goals can be negotiated with a teacher, but are established primarily by the student.
- *Attainable and practical for a specific time period or for a term of school*—Goals should have starting and finishing dates.
- *In writing*—For discipline and clarity, they should be written. They then become concrete and allow students to plan, organize, and develop internal responsibility and pride in effort.
- *Stated in terms of expected results*—Focusing on clear expectations helps create a “road map” by which students can form a mental image of each goal. Once the students can “see” a particular goal, they will find ways to accomplish their objectives.
- *Displayed on a “scoresheet”*—Students can employ personal scorecards to count their “wins” (progress), both small and large (Martino 1993).

Teachers can help students set reasonable, short-term goals through prompts to the whole class such as, “How many problems do you think you will be able to work correctly today?” (Fulk and Montgomery-Grymes 1994).

Make Learning Relevant

Students need to know the importance of the subject they are learning (Harris 1991). For example, teachers might explain that “math facts need to be memorized to [help with] the process of long division” (Fulk and Montgomery-Grymes 1994, 31). Other suggestions include:

- *Emphasizing the value of each activity.* Future success within real world settings may be dependent

“Motivation resides in everyone. [It] is complex. When we teach we see that the same student who responded apathetically to a lecture may nonetheless energetically interact with peers on any number of topics in the hallway after class. Similarly, it is not uncommon for a student who is bored or frustrated in one class to actively participate in another” (Ginsberg 2004, 8).

on the acquisition of specific skills; make these relationships explicit. When possible, present the activity within a naturalistic context.

- *Capturing interest* by activating students' prior knowledge of specific topics; point out inconsistencies between new information and prior knowledge.
- *When possible, harnessing fantasy relevance* by allowing students to use their imaginations. For example, you might suggest, "Pretend you are heading west in a covered wagon . . ." (32).

An instructional tool known as the Lesson Infusion Process is based on the concept that students have strengths that must be identified, valued, understood, and used in order for them to be successful socially, culturally, and cognitively. As part of the process, teachers:

- *Review subject matter* to determine what they plan to teach, then ask, "What about the lesson objective really matters to the children?"
- *Make a connection* between students' experiences and the curriculum content.
- *Begin the lesson* with an activity that connects to the strengths students bring. Then build on it with activities that draw on their experiences and further their learning.
- *Reflect on the instructional experience* to note new insights and considerations for change (Williams and Woods 1997, 31).

Appealing to what students like or consider fun can motivate reluctant learners (Herzog 2002). Even simply being aware of which students react positively to specific instructional strategies and which students have difficulty with certain approaches—for example, knowing that a particular student is more comfortable sharing information in a small group than with the whole class—can increase reluctant learners' educational participation (Educational Research Service 1998).

Educator Mike Muir suggests asking a group of under-achieving students the following questions about how they think they learn best—and then using the information when planning instruction:

- Think of a good learning experience. What made it good?
- Describe a good class or teacher that you have now or have had in the past. What made them good?
- Imagine that the State Department of Education

came to you and asked you how to design courses and units so that you could really learn well. What would you tell them?

- What one thing would you change about how your classes are taught or how your teachers teach that would help you to learn better? (2001, 38)

Asking students about the things they do outside of school, their "passions, and preoccupations," is another way for educators to make much-needed personal connections with these reluctant learners (The Tutor 2000, 1).

Harris (1991) suggests that teachers and other school staff share stories about themselves as children and adolescents—especially how they "survived" challenges or problems. Showing that the adults in the school are human and caring can go a long way in increasing students' interest and motivation.

Teach Students About the Learning Process

Many of these reluctant learners also do not know how to study effectively, but little classroom time is spent helping them develop such skills. Teachers should stress proficiency in areas such as notetaking, writing summaries, creating study plans, and time management (Tomlinson 1992).

In addition, many students do poorly on assignments or in participation because they do not understand exactly what to do. Take time to precisely explain what is expected on assignments or activities (Harris 1991).

"A common theme among effective practices is that they address underlying psychological variables related to motivation, such as competence and control, beliefs about the value of education, and a sense of belonging. In brief, engaging schools and teachers promote students' confidence in their ability to learn and succeed in school by providing challenging instruction and support for meeting high standards, and they clearly convey their own high expectations for student success" (National Research Council 2003, 2-3).

More Tips for Motivating Reluctant Learners

- Employ cooperative learning to connect learning with students' social needs, reduce competition, and give all students a chance to experience success (Educational Research Service 1998; Rehmke-Ribary n.d.).
- Encourage young children to write by supplying each student and yourself with a simple mailbox and expressing your desire to receive mail (Glazer 1999).
- Encourage students to read by asking them to predict an outcome or reflect on what they need to find out after reading only one-third of their assignment (Frenier 1996, 82).
- Offer students something new and different from what they already know. Studies show that a moderate level of discrepancy and incongruity arouses curiosity (Berlyne 1965). For example, a teacher might say, "The world can produce enough food to feed everybody, yet starvation and hunger run rampant even in countries that have the highest standard of living. Why is this so?" (Hootstein 1994).
- Encourage active student participation during instruction by saying, "Jot down . . .," "Tell your neighbor . . .," "Respond in unison," or "Signal agreement with thumbs up" (Fulk and Montgomery-Grymes 1994, 31).
- Create anticipation through drama and familiarity. For example, announce tests with an introduction such as, "It's time again, boys and girls, for more 'Words of the World,' words that surround us every day, words that you will always know how to spell because you learned how to spell them perfectly here in this very room. And the first word is . . ." (Rinne 1998, 624).
- Ask open-ended questions. At the beginning of any learning or assessment activity, offer questions all students should be able to answer successfully, such as, "Judging from the picture on this book, what could the story be about?" (Evans 1999, 55).
- Ask students to explain how they arrived at their answers, whether they are wrong or right. This helps students catch their own mistakes, but even when they do not, you can provide feedback about which parts of the problems were performed correctly and learn more about the logic that students are using. This way, you transform wrong answers into learning experiences for the whole class without threatening students' self-esteem (Gehlbach and Roeser 2002).
- Enhance students' responses with technology. The private nature of the feedback that students receive from computerized instruction can help reduce reluctant learners' embarrassment at wrong answers (Lucking and Manning 1996).
- Don't forget to have fun. Learning can be serious business and at times requires hard work, but opportunities for fun, play, and humor will lessen stress and anxiety and increase students' sense of bonding. Try to incorporate fun into the classroom routine and the school day (Educational Research Service 1998).

To ensure that students understand the task at hand, teachers should:

- Ensure that they have students' attention before they present directions.
- Allow sufficient wait time between each step if lengthy directions are necessary.
- Monitor clarity by asking students to restate the directions in their own words.
- Provide demonstrations or modeling prior to students' independent work.
- Employ a system of "study buddies" from whom students can quietly request clarification prior to independent work (Fulk and Montgomery-Grymes 1994, 32).

Finally, no matter how uncomfortable it might be, educators should speak honestly to students about their performance while also providing concrete suggestions for improvement. Doing so can help motivate students to try harder—especially before it is too late.

Teachers should explain to students at the beginning of the school year and periodically through the year the required grade-level standards that must be met. "If students don't know what standard they must meet and what progress they are making toward meeting the standard, how can they remain hopeful? Are we asking students to keep learning without telling them the target?" asks Tufly (2001, 39).

Recognizing the Importance of the Affective Environment

Finally, Mendler (2002) reminds us that teachers can do "small" things that can have a great impact on making the classroom a safe and encouraging place—a place in which it is easier for students to take risks. For example, he suggests that teachers:

- congratulate five students during each class on something they have achieved;
- respond nonevaluatively at least three times per class by offering comments such as "That's an interesting way of looking at it;" or

- have an “on-a-roll” program that acknowledges students for demonstrating improved effort or performance.

Making approaches such as these a part of daily classroom routine can go a long way toward encouraging students to do their best.

In Summary

Reasons why a student is a reluctant learner are often complex. Educators need to look not only at the student in isolation but also at the interaction between the student and the classroom/school environment. Students need both challenge and support. They need to be actively engaged, with instructional approaches designed to maximize the possibilities for engagement. Finally, they need to feel safe so that they can take risks instead of retreating from participation. By focusing efforts on both the student and the learning environment, educators are more likely to achieve their goal of motivating reluctant students.

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Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- Talk about the various motivational needs of your students. How might you incorporate some specific student interests into your instructional planning?
- Think about some of the activities and assignments you have planned for this month. Have you considered how to describe these assignments to students so that they understand their “relevance”? How might you amend/alter activities to allow for more student choice?
- Review the tips for motivating reluctant learners. Share additional ideas/tips with your colleagues.

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