Motivating the unmotivated student

What is it and why is it important?

"The term motivation refers to factors that activate, direct, and sustain goal-directed behavior... Motives are the "whys" of behavior - the needs or wants that drive behavior and explain what we do. In fact, we don't actually observe a motive; rather, we infer that one exists based on the behavior we observe (Nevid, 2013, p.268)." Accordingly, motivation only manifests itself through action, since motivation is basically the translation of an individual’s conviction into action.

There are two different forms of motivation that are frequently described in the literature. These are extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is typically driven by an external reward, incentive or consequence, while intrinsic motivation is driven by an internal interest. An example of this would be the student who is simply concerned with obtaining an A in the course or with gaining social recognition, versus the student who is genuinely interested in, and enjoys learning the material being presented, and who ultimately aims to master the material for personal gratification. In the latter case, learning is the motivator, and the learning would therefore be self-rewarding (Kirk, 2016).

When it comes to the education system, it is important to recognize that there is a large issue with this, in that it is often erroneously assumed that students choose to enrol in a course because of an internal desire. In reality, there are a variety of reasons why a student might register for a particular course, which tends to result in an educational environment where many classrooms are filled with unmotivated students. This is especially important, since an individual’s level of motivation has been shown to be intricately linked to their performance, persistence, and their enjoyment and creativity (Halvorson, 2010). Fortunately, research shows that instructors can have a substantial impact on a students’ level of motivation, and there are many things that an instructor can do to help motivate their students to learn.

How can we address it?

What can an instructor do to motivate their students to learn? This is a subject that has been widely studied, and one for which several theories have been proposed (Carl Wieman Science Education Initiative, 2013). For instance, consider Dr. Marilla Svinicki’s (2004) Theory of value and expectations. In this theory, two important concepts are seen to contribute to students’ motivation to achieve a goal: the value the goal has for them, and their expectancies (expectations) that they will be able to attain the goal. These concepts can be summarized by two key questions that students reflect on when given a task: “Do I want to do this task, and, if so, why?” (value) and “Am I capable of doing this task?” (expectancy). As instructors, we can therefore use a variety of strategies to help increase students’ perceptions of the value of a given task, as well as their expectations of being successful with that
task. If you want to know more about Svinicki’s theory and how you can apply it to motivate your students, check out Motivating our Students from the University of Waterloo - Centre of Teaching Excellence.

Along similar lines, self-determination Theory (SDT) provides a rather nice theoretical framework for motivation, and one that overlaps with Svinicki’s substantially. SDT conceives that humans are active individuals who aim to achieve their greatest potential, and that this is highly dependent on one’s social-contextual environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While individuals may vary, according to the theory, intrinsic motivation to achieve one’s greatest potential relies on satisfying three innate psychological needs, each of which is shaped by one’s environment.

As a result, helping ensure that one’s environment promotes satisfying the following three needs will help motivate participation. These three needs are Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness.

1. **Autonomy**: “being the perceived origin or source of one’s own behavior” (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 8). Meaning that autonomy is experienced when an individual perceives that they are in control of their own behaviors and goals, and therefore over the learning process.

2. **Competence**: “feeling effective in one’s ongoing interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to exercise and express one’s capacities” (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 7). Meaning that competence is experienced when an individual is provided with a sense that they can master the material, and the opportunity to strive and enhance their skills and their capacities.

3. **Relatedness**: “feeling connected to others, to caring for and being cared for by those others” (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 7). Meaning that relatedness is experiences when an individual perceives that they belong, that they are cared about, and when they are provided with the opportunity to demonstrate that they care for others. According to research, in an academic environment, students who feel that they ‘belong’ demonstrate higher levels of intrinsic motivation and academic confidence (Freeman, Anderson, and Jensen, 2007).

### Putting it into Practice

**What are some key practices that one could consider when trying to motivate students?**

In terms of nurturing the big 3, Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness, there are 10 aspects that a teacher can consider, and each of these falls under 1 of the 3 categories. We will discuss these briefly.

**A. First, Support Learner autonomy by:**

i. Assisting students in finding personal meaning and value in the material.

   - The material should be seen as personally relevant, interesting, and/or useful to the learner. This means recognizing the students’ background, experience and aspirations, and finding ways to connect the material to those.

   - The attitude you convey about the subject is also important, so make sure to tell the students why you find the subject interesting. However, keep in mind that what a person finds interesting is shaped by their knowledge and past experiences, so don’t assume that because you see the material as interesting, the students should as well.

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1 Portions of the text are adapted from Motivating our Students with permission from the University of Waterloo, Centre for Teaching Excellence.

2 Portions of this text are adapted from Motivating Students (2016) by Karen Kirk of the Science Education Resource Center at Carleton College. Northfield, MN. This work is licensed under an Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Creative Commons License.

3 How to motivate student’s strategy list is a collaborative piece adapted from Tools for Teaching by Barbara Gross Davis & Motivating Learning by the Carl Wieman Science Education Initiative of the University of British Columbia and University of Colorado under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License Creative Commons License.

4 Portions of the text are adapted from Motivating Learning by the Carl Wieman Science Education Initiative of the University of British Columbia and University of Colorado under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License Creative Commons License.
ii. Encouraging active participation and self-initiation

- Create an open and positive environment where students can be active learners. To learn more about active learning, please check out our video resource on the topic.

iii. Providing Options/Choices

- Research shows that students prefer options when it comes to assignments, and activities, as well as what and how material is covered. Therefore, allowing some choice over assignment topics or formats, or even just providing students with the chance to select their lab or project partner(s) could be a big motivator. You could also consider “contract teaching”, which basically provides students with the opportunity to create their own due dates, assignments, and grading scale. To learn more on this, check out *What Teachers Say and Do Supports Students’ Autonomy during a Learning Activity* by Reeve and Jang (2006).

iv. Adopting a supportive teaching style, and avoiding controlling behaviors. Supportive teacher behaviors include things like listening, providing encouragement, being responsive to student questions and showing empathy for students (Reeve and Jang, 2006). Some specific examples of supportive behaviors include: Fostering students’ willingness to take on challenges, explore new ideas, and persist at difficult activities; Giving meaningful rationale for requested behavior; and Encouraging students to accept more responsibility for their learning. Conversely, controlling behaviors include things like providing solutions or answers before allowing the student the opportunity to deliver it, or uttering commands. For more on supportive teaching behaviors, check out *What Teachers Say and Do Supports Students’ Autonomy during a Learning Activity* by Reeve and Jang (2006).

B. Second Building Learner’s Competence by:

i. Giving frequent, early, supportive, constructive and positive feedback.

- Make sure that the feedback is not evaluative of the person, and supports the students’ belief that they can do well.
- You want to make sure that the feedback provides clear guidance on how well the student is meeting the challenges, so that they know where they stand and how they can improve. Above all, avoid comparing the student to their peers!

ii. Offering optimal challenges to help the individual develop a belief in their competency.

- Make sure that the challenge isn’t too easy, nor too hard. If a challenge is too easy, this could communicate that the professor doesn’t have faith in the student’s ability. Alternatively, if the challenge is too hard, this could create anxiety, so make sure that the level of difficulty is just slightly above their current level of ability. This will ensure that there is an opportunity for success (Margolis and McCabe, 2006).

iii. Ensuring that students feel that they are valued and contributors to their learning.

- Consider asking students what they want to learn about, and how they want to learn it. In doing this, you will be giving your students a voice, which will motivate them to learn.

C. Third, Foster Relatedness by:

i. Making sure to provide a social atmosphere in and outside of the classroom.

ii. Acknowledging Feelings and Providing Emotional Support when necessary and appropriate.
• Human beings have a fundamental need to feel connected to other people, and so an instructor who is helpful, and who shows warmth and openness will help motivate a student (Freeman, Anderson, and Jensen, 2007)².

iii. Finally, don’t forget to show that you love what you do! 😊

**Exercise: Reflecting on your Teaching Strategies**

How are you currently teaching and what strategies do you use to help motivate students. Complete the following to see! Your Motivation Profile.

**Some Limitations – Things to Consider**

Remember that you must be able to support anything that you do/offer. For instance, any activities that you offer as choices, or the type of feedback that you promise. So don’t offer anything that you aren’t ready or capable of handling. Know your limits!

You also have to remember that there is a lot of psychology involved here, and that there is only so much you can do to ensure that students are motivated. Sometimes, no matter what you try, the student just won’t be interested and it isn’t necessarily your fault. Keep this in mind.

**How do I integrate multimedia?**

So now it’s time to explore what technology is available to help motivate your students. Given the sheer abundance of tech tools that can be discussed, here we will mention a select few that are either already widely used, or which are supported and therefore offered free of charge by the University of Ottawa. If you wish to know more about any of these tools, please visit each of the respective services or contact the Teaching and Learning Support Services at the University of Ottawa.

**BlackBoard Collaboration Tools**

Blackboard is equipped with a number of tools that can be used to promote collaboration and communication among students, as well as engagement in the material. Many of these tools are primarily useful in an online environment, however there are beneficial instances where they can be used within a classroom setting.

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A. Discussion Boards

- Discussion Boards contain one or more forums where users discuss related topics. Within each forum, there can be multiple threads, which include the initial post and all replies to it.
- Students can collaborate, explore and discuss topics as well as collectively create something new and so it is great for sharing information, resources, links or files.
- Discussion forums promote student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction.
- Discussion forums can be graded and students can do peer assessment.
- Please click on the following video link to learn how to create a Discussion Forum "Creating Forums in the Discussion Board" and consult the following document "Discussion Boards".

B. Journal

- Journals are an excellent self-assessment tool.
- While there is a setting for grading, consider formative feedback instead.
- Journals can be kept private between the student and instructor or shared with others.
- If you are interested in offering a BBL Journal tool in your course, review the following documentation "Creating a Journal".

Microsoft Word

- You may have already used this function, or received feedback via this function in word. If not, please make sure that you get acquainted with this tool, as it is not only easy to use, but extremely efficient in terms of providing feedback. Not only will you avoid having to print up a document in order to provide feedback, or make a photocopy of the document to ensure that you have a record of the feedback you provided, but you also won't have to worry about students not being able to read your handwriting!
- This tool allows you to track feedback and suggested changes throughout a revision process, as well as provide comments, and suggest/make changes to a document. Accordingly, it is a truly indispensable tool when it comes to perfecting a written document.

How can I use it to provide Feedback?

- Use this Tip sheet provided by the University of Oregon or if you are more of a visual person, click on watch the video to get the most out of Word Perfect.
Adobe Connect

- Want to connect with your students outside of class?
- Want your students to be able to collaborate and/or discuss with others in or out of class?
- Want to split your class into breakout groups in or out of class, and be able to moderate & monitor what is going on?
- Want to have an out of town guest speaker present information from the comfort of their own city?
- Then consider using Adobe Connect!

What is Adobe Connect and How can I use it?

- Adobe Connect is a Web Conferencing platform that allows people to connect online to chat with video and sound. It is similar to Skype, except that many individuals can meet at once in a structured and University of Ottawa supported site. Adobe Connect is accessible from anywhere an internet connection is available.
- A video camera and microphone is recommended for use, but a built in typing tool allows individuals to connect through writing as well.
- The University of South Carolina has put together a list of 7 ways you can use Adobe Connect effectively in your teaching. Check it out!

Want to learn more about Adobe Connect? Check out the Adobe Connect web-site, or visit the Centre for Innovative Technologies in Education web-site, and request the creation of an Echo360 account, and/or a demonstration.

Want to know more?

A. Check out Carleton’s online module on Motivation.

B. Please check out The Vanderbilt Center Teaching resource for more information on how to motivate students, including a look at intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the effect of learning style on motivation, and a number of strategies for motivating your students.

C. Also consider checking out an article published by the masters in this area, Ryan and Deci. Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being.

D. Barbara Gross Davis’ book, Tools for Teaching (Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco, 1993) is also a great place to learn about ways that you can increase student motivation in your classes. In the book, the author presents general strategies, research on motivation, examples and anecdotes to bring the material to life. It’s definitely worth the read, and a staple in any instructor’s collection.

E. Finally, for other strategies on how to motivate your students, check out the wiki on How to motivate your students from wikiHow.
References/Ressources


How to motivate students (n.d.). Accessed April 10, 2016 from the wikihow website.


Motivating our students (n.d.). Accessed on April 20, 2016 from the Centre for Teaching Excellence de University of Waterloo website.


For additional information, or to meet with an Educational Developer, please contact the Teaching and Learning Support Service (TLSS)’s Centre for University Teaching at the University of Ottawa by e-mail at cpu-cut@uOttawa.ca or by phone (613-562-5800, poste 5333). You can also visit the TLSS website at tlss.uOttawa.ca!