

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Finding the Spark: More Tips for Building Student Motivation

Teachers can feel overwhelmed when faced with students who are unmotivated to learn. The task becomes less daunting, though, when teachers realize that they can boost student motivation in five important ways: by (1) making positive changes to the learning environment, (2) fostering a sense of community in the classroom, (3) enhancing the interest of classroom activities, (4) responding to individual learning challenges, and (5) building in additional outcomes/pay-offs for learning. Here are some ideas.

Learning Environment

The setting in which we work can encourage us to give our best effort or discourage us from even trying to perform. Ideas to motivate by influencing factors in the student's environment:

- Reduce distractions in the classroom.
- Create a consistent room arrangement, with predictable materials and routines.
- Let students choose their seat location and study partners.
- Enlist students to come up with rules and guidelines for effective classroom learning.
- Create a memory-friendly classroom. Post assignments and due dates, written steps for multi-step tasks, etc.
- Use a mix of verbal and environmental cues to keep students focused and on-task.
- Hold class in different locations occasionally ("within-building field trip"). For example, think about 'swapping' classrooms with another teacher on a given day.
- Ask for student advice on how to make the classroom a more inviting and useful learning environment.

Classroom Community

We define ourselves in relation to others through social relationships. These connections are a central motivator for most people.

Ideas to motivate by fostering a sense of a learning community:

- Be as inviting a person as possible by actively listening to students and acknowledging their contributions.
- Greet students at the classroom door. 'Check in' briefly with students at the start and end of a work period.
- Ask students to complete a learning-preferences questionnaire.
- Assign 'study buddies' who help each other to get organized, start work projects, encourage one another, and provide peer feedback.
- Train students to be peer editors or evaluators of others' assignments.
- Hold weekly 5-minute 'micro-meetings' with the group or class. Check in with the group about topics or issues important to them. Record important points brought up and get back to students if necessary.
- Keep 'dialog journals'. Have students write daily or weekly comments in a journal to be kept in class. Respond to student comments with short comments of your own.
- Circulate through the classroom. Be interactive and visible to kids. Use words of praise and encouragement.

Academic Activities

Motivated students are engaged in interesting activities that guarantee a high success rate and relate to real-world issues.

Ideas to motivate through selection and development of learning activities:

- Use humor.
- Keep miscellaneous work supplies on hand (e.g., paper, pencils, etc.) for students to borrow.
- Set a timer (e.g., for 60 seconds) and challenge students to finish routine tasks or transition between activities before timer runs out.
- Set up academic 'culminating event' fieldtrips. On these fieldtrips, have students use skills learned in class (e.g., drafting questions in social studies to be used in an interview with a member of city government).
- Invite interesting guest speakers into the classroom to speak on academic topics. Prepare index cards with review questions and answers based on material covered in class. Have guest speaker 'quiz' teams; award points to teams based on their mastery of material.
- Offer students meaningful choice in setting up their assignments (e.g., selection of work materials, type of activity).
- Select fun, imaginative activities for reviewing academic material. In order to get students to assemble material for a research paper, for example, you might send them to the library on a fact-finding 'scavenger hunt.'
- Encourage active student participation.
- Use motivating 'real-world' examples for review, quiz, or test items.
- Keep instructions and assignments short. Have students repeat instructions back.
- Celebrate student achievement.
- Celebrate mistakes as opportunities for learning.
- Prior to assignments, have students set their own short-term work or learning goals. Periodically, have students rate their own progress toward their self-selected goals.
- Structure work period so that more difficult activities are in the middle, with easier tasks at the start and end.
- Liven potentially dull student review activities by conducting them as class-wide or small-group drills. Use a game format to maintain interest.
- Use novel, interesting materials for instruction.
- Allow students to set their own pace for completing work.
- Select activities that make a community contribution. Students may, for instance, work on writing skills by publishing a monthly newsletter for the 7th grade.

Learning Challenges

Every learner presents a unique profile of strengths and weaknesses. We unlock motivation when we acknowledge and address unique learning profiles.

Ideas to motivate by accommodating challenges to learning:

- Avoid 'stigmatizing' as low performers those students who require remedial academic support.
- Lead students through the first part of an assignment as a group before having them complete it independently.
- If an assignment requires use of new or difficult terms or concepts, first pre-teach or preview this material.
- Make the classroom a 'safe' setting in which students can identify and work on their own skill deficits.
- Give students credit and recognition for effort on assignments as well as for mastery of content.
- Be honest in telling students how challenging a topic or activity is likely to be to master. Never downplay the difficulty of an assignment!
- Use a 'think-aloud' approach when introducing a skill or strategy.
- Select academic activities that guarantee a high degree of student success.
- Allow students to take a brief break when tired or frustrated.
- Help students to get organized and started on an activity.
- Have students keep a schedule of work assignments and due dates.
- Encourage students to use memory aids such as notes and lists.
- Assist students in breaking large, multi-step tasks into smaller subtasks.
- Have students write those subtasks down as a personal 'to-do' list.
- Teach students to use a notebook organizer.
- Give reminders of upcoming transitions between activities.
- Help students to highlight key information to be remembered.
- Provide frequent review of key concepts.
- Periodically remind students of timeline of upcoming assignments.

Outcomes/Pay-Offs for Learning

Learning is a motivating activity when the learner can count on short- or long-term payoffs for mastering the material being taught.

Ideas to motivate by arranging or emphasizing payoffs to the student for successful learning:

- Reward student effort along with quality of completed work. (One way to do this is to use frequent encouragement for good effort along with praise for finished work.)
- Build in short-term rewards (e.g., increased free time, pencils, positive note home) for student effort, work completion.
- Create high-visibility location for displaying student work (e.g., bulletin board, web site). Encourage students to select their own best work to be posted.
- Have students monitor their own progress in accuracy/work completion. For example, have students create graphs charting homework assignments turned in. Tie student-monitored performance to reward programs.

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