



Methods for Improving Student Motivation

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A common concern of faculty involves methods by which students can be motivated to learn. Motivation, like many affective characteristics, is difficult to measure and equally difficult to control. Traditional pedagogical approaches have tended to focus more heavily upon punitive techniques (e.g., quizzes and examinations, threat of failure or negative consequences) than reward techniques, so that motivation can have a negative

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connotation. Punitive measures are very much in keeping with the concepts of the Classical School of Personnel Management, which suggests that people inherently dislike work and must be coerced. Yet, there is ample evidence to suggest that motivation can (and should?) be achieved by methods which enhance reward opportunities.

Particularly at a time when students seem to be obsessed by grades and seem unwilling to learn for the inherent value of knowledge, and educational institutions are concerned about declines in alumni support, it would seem prudent to rethink motivational approaches.

METHODS FOR IMPROVING MOTIVATION

Change the Academic Task

The relationship of student ability versus the tasks assigned by faculty can have significant bearing upon motivational outcomes (Outline 1). It is tempting for faculty to believe that this concept does not apply to professional programs such as pharmacy. Yet, this is simply not true. It is virtually always possible for doctoral faculty to create learning demands which are beyond the capacity of almost any student, but particularly entry-level students. The manner in which faculty organize and order learning experiences can have a significant impact upon how effectively students are able to learn.

The issue is a question of balance. Students should have tasks which challenge, but which are not so difficult that they are needlessly frustrating or demeaning. Tasks should include those that they are able to master, which has the impact of building self-confidence. Tasks should be avoided which are "hard" merely for the sake of being "hard." "Hard" is not commensurate with "good" in education. And finally, every task assignment should satisfy a valid learning objective.

Change the Student's Perception of the Task

Students sometimes perceive tasks to be more difficult than they really are. This may occur because students lack experience or understanding relative to the task. It is often possible to break learning tasks into their component parts, allowing students to discover a more effective problem-solving approach. There are also times when learning anxieties can interfere with student efforts (e.g., test anxiety). By helping students learn to effectively deal with learning problems, these emotions are less likely to persist as barriers.

Change the Student/Faculty Relationship

The nature of the student/faculty relationship can sometimes be a motivational barrier or a stimulus. It is important for faculty to be aware of attitudes which may be displayed to students. Our perceptions can become self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., we hear that an individual is not a good student, and so we *expect* a substandard performance); we may categorize students according to some event or performance, then be unwilling to let them out of this "box" that we have created; groups of students may be stereotyped (e.g., we hear that next year's class is particularly obnoxious); or we may send other types of messages that become barriers to motivation. Thus, it is important to continually examine the qualitative nature of our student/faculty relationships. Are our actions and beliefs supportive? Do they nurture students? Do they encourage learning motivation?

Change the Reward Structure

The tyranny of grades has become an albatross around the neck of all educators. Grades, which were intended to be a means of accountability for all concerned, have taken on a life of their own. Students in contemporary society have become so preoccupied with grades that the information we seek to teach is often a minor concern. Because of the flawed grading system of American higher education, it is important to periodically reassess our grading policies. Every effort should be made to ensure that grading is done appropriately and that grades are an accurate reflection of student performances. Outline 2 summarizes some basic concepts that should be maintained as a component of all appropriate grading systems.

Periodically Review Your Teaching Methods and Course Content





It is important to keep courses current and alive. There are many teaching methods available. We should continually be educational researchers, identifying and evaluating our techniques and methodologies in an effort to achieve the most effective approaches available. Where possible, we should relate the practical value of course content to "real life" applications.

We teach at too great a distance (i.e., objective distancing). Too much education is presented in such a way that it does not involve the students in *their* world.

—Parker Palmer

OUTLINE 1

***Motivational Outcomes That Occur As a Result of the Relationship
of Student Ability versus the Tasks Assigned by Faculty***

Scenario	Outcome
If ability is slightly larger than the task demands 	Security
If ability is much larger than the task demands 	Boredom
If ability is slightly less than the task demands 	Challenge
If ability is much less than the task demands 	Frustration

Where:

- = Task Demands
□ = Students' Abilities

Ideally, there should be an element of showmanship to teaching. Popular professors are almost invariably “performers” when in front of their classes. They usually enjoy teaching and invite their students to come along on learning adventures. We should be open to the students, and genuine, so that they get to know the person behind the faculty facade. When we “let our hair down” a bit in the classroom, the results can be amazing for all concerned.

Motivation, like most other elements of the “art” of education, usually occurs as a result of an exploration of the available knowledge of teaching (i.e., the “science” of education), combined with applications and discoveries in the classroom. As teachers explore motivational approaches, they are apt to identify those that blend best with their own teaching styles, with the learning environments which they are attempting to create, and with student characteristics. It is not a matter of “spoonfeeding” the student, but rather it is a matter of removing barriers to learning by tapping into the dynamic nature of the learning environments in which we exist. Ultimately, it is a part of what makes education truly unique among the professions.

OUTLINE 2

Basic Concepts That Should Be Maintained As a Component of All Appropriate Grading Systems in Order to Enhance Learning Motivation

- *Be fair and humane to all students.*

Grading practices should be fair and accurate. Grades should be accurate reflections of student performances. Avoid assessment approaches which have no real validity or reliability (e.g., dropping papers down the stairs in order to rank them; giving grades based on the students' overall GPA rather than their actual class performance; tests that ask the student to recall trivia. Note: Yes, these approaches have actually been used by American faculty!)

Educators should be tolerant in a humanistic way of incidents in the lives of students which impact testing and other evaluation efforts (e.g., pregnancy, illness, death of significant others). Apply the “golden rule” concept: What would you consider to be fair and appropriate treatment if you were the student?

- *Use an appropriate variety of evaluation techniques.*

Educators sometimes utilize evaluation techniques which are convenient, but not necessarily the best for accurate and fair student assessments. Using a variety of techniques allows for a more accurate student assessment, since students may perform better with some methods than with others.

- *Evaluations should reflect appropriate learning objectives which have been given to the students.*

The true purpose of learning objectives is to let the student know what we expect them to know as a consequence of having taken our course. Examinations should not be a matter of mind reading. Too many faculty withhold important information from their students in order to ensure lower test averages. This is inappropriate in education. Evaluations that do not reflect these learning objectives will be invalid and unreliable.

- *Student praise and criticism should be valid.*

If either praise or criticism is not sincere, our credibility is lost. Likewise, when evaluations are inaccurate reflections of the student's actual knowledge base, we also lose credibility as educators.