

A Primer on Motivation: Principles Old and New

By Thomas R. McDaniel

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What does a teacher need to do to motivate today's students to learn? Fifty years ago the topic of motivation was virtually ignored in teacher education programs. Teachers of that day were told to "have a good lesson plan," "be enthusiastic," and "use grades and prizes" to stimulate interest.

Later, the behaviorists developed and promoted some techniques of "extrinsic motivation" that were derived from reinforcement theory. Many of these techniques found their way into schools in the form of behavior modification programs, most notably in special education classrooms. Later still, humanistic educators and psychologists—Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Rudolf Dreikurs, and others—told teachers to focus on "intrinsic motivation": developing self-concept, meeting individual needs, and encouraging student progress.

Today we are asked to improve classroom climate, mediate transactions, and invite school success. The contemporary teacher is likely to be confused and not a little daunted by the number of motivational techniques recommended for the classroom.

Thomas R. McDaniel is director of graduate education programs at Converse College, Spartanburg, South Carolina.

And it is not just that we have more theories now, either; we also ascribe more importance to them. The newfound interest in teacher and school effectiveness, the public concern for higher achievement test scores, and the social problems—discipline, drugs, drop-outs—of both the community and the school all contribute to new demands that teachers and their classrooms be more motivating. How can schools expect higher productivity and achievement unless students *somehow* become more interested in and committed to their own educational improvement? This is the essential challenge of instructional motivation, and the challenge is one that confronts the overburdened classroom teacher daily. So what's a teacher to do?

Maximizing Success

Motivation is complex and controversial, but it is also a crucial element in instructional success. Why a student will "move" toward instructional goals and how to maximize that movement are questions that arise in every classroom in every school and are resolved—for good or ill—by individual teachers. Nonetheless, there appears to be an emerging set of principles to guide teacher behaviors related to effective instructional motivation. Of course, principles are no better than the teachers who put them into practice, but I present the following five principles as an eclectic combination of techniques—traditional and modern, practical and theoretical, pedagogical and psychological—that teachers *can* use to produce better motivation. Although in reality these principles are closely connected, even inter-related, each focuses on a given aspect of the teacher's role as motivator.

1. *Inviting success.* This motiva-

tional principle, named by William Purkey, expresses a humanistic notion that students behave in accordance with a teacher's *perception* of their ability. An invitation, says Purkey in *Inviting School Success*, "is a summary description of messages—verbal and nonverbal, formal and informal—continuously transmitted to students with the intention of informing them that they are responsible, able, and valuable."¹ A major premise from which this view of motivation is derived is that positive self-concept is the key to student motivation to learn.

The principle of inviting success is a foundation for several of the other principles of motivation listed below, but it is of special value as the expression of an atti-

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tude that effective motivators demonstrate in their relationships with children—an attitude that says in word and deed, "I care about you, I trust you, I know you are somebody, I know you can learn." How much faith do you have in your students? Can you develop and demonstrate more?

More specifically, a teacher should examine words and actions that might be obstacles to motivation. Do you let previous records, horror stories from other teachers, or ability grouping influence your confidence in your students' capacity to learn? Do you slip into sarcasm or ridicule? Do you find yourself continually using such negative terms as "no," "stop," and "don't"? The principle of inviting success asks you to change

your perceptions and attitude so that you can bid students to become the trustworthy, capable human beings you *know* they can be.

Invitational techniques include being explicit in sending invitations, talking directly to students and using their names frequently, giving all students your attention and time, reserving time for one-on-one contact with students, listening with care and respect, providing more opportunities for students to talk and participate in class, developing class spirit, letting students know they are missed, using student experts whenever possible, and promoting cooperation.

Emphasizing Cooperation

2. *Cooperative learning.* Competition has long been honored and practiced as a means of motivating learning by way of games, contests, incentives, and rewards. But teachers can also motivate students by cooperative strategies. Cooperation can often reach those youngsters who lose in competitions. Indeed, our public schools may have inadvertently created a large number of "losers" by overemphasizing competition. Students who make no teams, win no prizes, and earn no rewards for superior performance may conclude that they have few reasons for continued effort in the classroom. At the very least, schools should consider ways of balancing the competitive ethos—which the "excellence movement" is likely to exacerbate—with cooperative activities designed to enhance the motivation of noncompetitive students.

At the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota, David Johnson, Roger Johnson, and their colleagues have developed a variety of cooperative learning strategies described in

such books as *Learning Together and Alone, Joining Together, and Circles of Learning*.² These researchers contend that “teachers must be prepared to teach needed collaborative skills in order for cooperative learning to be productive.”³ Cooperative learning requires that teachers group students heterogeneously and structure goals to promote positive interdependence of members; teachers must promote shared responsibility for leadership *and* learning; they must directly teach such social skills as leadership behavior, communication, and conflict management; and they must analyze and evaluate for the groups of students the process being used to solve problems and share work.

This motivational principle works because it promotes higher levels of self-esteem while also promoting “belongingness.” The teacher needs to set clear goals, explain the criteria for success, structure the group for individual (as well as group) accountability, monitor the process and intervene when necessary, and provide directions for the task. In addition to the product of the group’s work, the teacher must pay attention to the process, especially by allowing groups to evaluate their own effectiveness. When students learn the joy of working productively together toward common goals, motivation inevitably improves.

Communicate High Expectations

3. *High expectations.* Much of the research on school effectiveness points to the importance of high expectations for students. The principle of inviting success depends on high expectations, and the cooperative learning principle suggests that teachers should expect students to accomplish important affective learning while

meeting academic goals. But the principle of high expectations is more far-reaching. It addresses the importance of self-fulfilling prophecies and of teacher behaviors that communicate high expectations.

Sad to say, negative expectations abound in classrooms, especially in classrooms filled with low-achieving students. Current research shows that teachers generally seat low-ability students farther away from themselves, call on low-ability students less often, pay less attention to low-ability students, give low-ability students less time and fewer clues for answering questions, criticize wrong answers from low-ability students more

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often and praise their correct responses less often, and interrupt the performance of low-ability students more often. Such behaviors communicate lower expectations, less tolerance, and even less affection for low-ability students than for their high-ability classmates. Consequently, the students create negative self-fulfilling prophecies that lead them to become less confident, more passive or more disruptive, and less motivated to work up to their capacity.

The first step in helping *all* students to meet high expectations is to analyze seating assignments, interaction patterns, and teaching practices to identify and correct any negative behaviors. Next, a teacher might examine classroom rules. Do they include long lists (more than five) of negative be-

haviors that are not allowed? Or do they focus on positive behaviors that are expected? Negative rules convey implicitly the teacher’s assumption that, say, fighting, cheating, talking, destroying property, and cursing *will* occur if not prohibited. Positive rules—“walk quietly in the halls,” “keep your work space clean,” and so on—convey *positive* expectations.

In the academic area teachers can direct students toward future success. Instead of criticizing mistakes, look for what is good in a student’s work. To help students see the potential for growth, use positive suggestions, such as, “I expect that, with practice, your multiplication will improve each day.”

Teachers must also set clear and explicit goals for student learning each day. These goals should be challenging but not *too* difficult. Teachers should communicate these goals as expectations and let students know that—though the work ahead may be difficult—they *can* achieve.

Encourage Readiness

4. *Set induction.* This principle relates to teacher behaviors designed to induce “readiness to learn” in students. Instructional motivation depends on a teacher’s skill in getting students to attend to the objectives, skills, knowledge, and values that constitute any given lesson. The old saying goes, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” Motivation by set induction says, “Yes, but you can put salt in the oats!” Set induction can be accomplished by a variety of “focusing events” or “advance organizers” (to borrow David Ausubel’s term). The idea is to prepare students for learning by grabbing their attention with an activity that is arresting and relevant (to the lesson *and*

to the students' experience).

Consider a few specific techniques. A teacher can begin a lesson with a perplexing question that leaves students intrigued. For example, "If rain falls out of clouds, why don't clouds fall too?" Or (to set up a lesson in grammar), "What would happen if we eliminated all verbs from the English language?" Such questions can establish a state of disequilibrium, a state of tension that motivates students to resolve a problem or dilemma. Whenever we

confront students with questions or problems that depart from their experience, we motivate them to relieve the disequilibrium.

Another application of this principle can be found in special objects and activities that focus students on the concepts to be studied. For example, a teacher might hold up a knotted rope before beginning a lesson on the umbilical cord or a faded rose before discussing the theme of "lost beauty." Such objects can be stimuli for questions or brain-

storming. Or a teacher could ask students to speculate on why a mechanical bird balanced on the edge of a glass of water magically dips to "drink" from the glass from time to time; all hypotheses could be recorded on the board.

More elaborate applications of set induction could include longer activities that start where the students are but connect to the lesson content. To motivate students for a lesson on slavery before the Civil War, a teacher
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How Good a Motivator Are You?

Check your motivational practices by rating yourself on the questions below. Add your totals in each column. Score yourself as follows: 90-100, excellent; 80-90, good; 70-80, fair; below 70, poor.

	Usually (4 points)	Sometimes (2 points)	Never (0 points)
1. I believe my students are competent and trustworthy.			
2. I avoid labeling students.			
3. I avoid sarcasm, put-downs, and ridicule of students.			
4. I send explicit invitations to succeed.			
5. I listen to what my students really say.			
6. I let students know they are missed.			
7. I make good use of student experts in the class.			
8. I use heterogeneous groups to build interdependence.			
9. I teach leadership and communication skills.			
10. I avoid overemphasis on competition, rewards, and winning.			
11. I help groups evaluate their effectiveness in group <i>process</i> .			
12. I give equal time, attention, and support to low-ability students.			
13. I communicate high expectations to my students.			
14. I focus on future success rather than past failures.			
15. I look for what is positive in student work and behavior.			
16. I set and communicate clear goals for instruction.			
17. I use well-designed, thought-provoking questions to stimulate readiness.			
18. I use objects as "focusing events" to stimulate interest.			
19. I use brainstorming to stimulate interest before beginning a lesson.			
20. I use set induction activities that connect a present experience to a lesson concept.			
21. I ask low-risk, open-minded questions.			
22. I wait three to five seconds after asking a divergent question.			
23. I suspend judgment and redirect a question to get multiple responses.			
24. I paraphrase and clarify responses instead of judging and praising.			
25. I personalize learning.			

Motivation

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might begin to discriminate against the blue-eyed (or short or left-handed) children in the class, requiring them to do extra homework, sit in the back of the room, be dismissed last, and so on. Or, in preparation for a lesson on the Plains Indians, a teacher might show a slide depicting an Indian and give students one minute to observe everything they can. Afterward, the teacher could ask whether the Indian has a weapon or what markings were on the Indian's left arm. Inference questions could follow, such as "Was the Indian angry? How do you know? What caused him to be angry?" This in turn could lead to reading a chapter in a history book for the purpose of generating additional answers to these questions. Set induction provides structure, direction, and relevance that together pique curiosity and promote motivation to learn.

Increasing Participation

5. *Interaction.* How can a teacher ask questions and handle responses in ways that increase involvement, participation, interest, and thinking? Teachers who are good motivators know that their interactions and transactions with students are central to a successful lesson. Such teachers enjoy classroom discussion, use humor, draw on personal experiences (theirs and the students'), keep open minds, invite students to teach the teacher, keep a lively pace, and demonstrate genuine enthusiasm. But beyond these general behaviors, they also give special attention to the kinds of questions they ask students and the kinds of strategies they employ when students answer (or don't answer) a question.

Consider questioning tech-

niques. For an invitational teacher, the basic purpose of questioning is to give students every opportunity possible to show what they know, think, and value. Students quickly lose interest when they discover that questions are designed to find out what they do *not* know and call for convergent responses that will be immediately judged. Motivating questions usually involve little risk for the responders and allow many acceptable answers. Some questions—such as "Let's see who forgot to read the homework assignment. Joe, can you define a prime number?"—tend to be high risk, convergent, and threatening. On the other hand, a question such as "I know you found the assignment on prime numbers interesting and difficult. I wonder if anyone can give us one example of a prime number—Joe?" has a much better chance of motivating a response.

One key to handling student responses successfully is "wait time." A teacher who thoughtfully waits three to five seconds (the average wait time is about *one* second) can expect more answers, longer answers, and better-reasoned answers. Another valuable technique is to ask some questions that even the teacher cannot answer. (It is ironic that teachers who *know* answers ask questions of students who do not.) When possible, suspend judgment on responses by securing several responses before commenting or by saying, "Tell me more about that." Always judging responses and giving too much praise—especially in higher-ability classes—have negative effects on interaction and the response rate. Using questions as a means of increasing motivation requires teachers to develop the skills of divergent and higher-order questioning and the skills of redirecting and suspending judgment.

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There is more to good motivation than most teachers believe. Indeed, these few principles and tricks of the trade are but one part of the art of instructional motivation. Teachers can learn how to personalize instruction (using names more frequently, greeting students as they enter the room, using personal examples as a basis for learning); they can learn how to use small-group instruction more effectively, how to capitalize on what students already know, how to end every lesson on a positive note, how to individualize better and provide greater choice, how to use unfinished activity, and how to build interest in the curriculum itself. All of these principles, strategies, and techniques have a place in the repertoire of a teacher who has learned to motivate students for success. Effective teachers use their motivational skills to develop a positive climate that nurtures the educational growth of children. Are *you* skilled in the basics of instructional motivation? □

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FOOTNOTES

¹ William Purkey, *Inviting School Success: A Self-Concept Approach to Teaching and Learning* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1978), p. 3.

² David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, *Learning Together and Alone: Cooperation, Competition, and Individualization* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975); idem, *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982); and David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, Edith Johnson Holubec, and Patricia Roy, *Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1984).

³ Johnson et al., p. v.