

## How can I ensure that students are motivated?

What should we do when students come to class but haven't done the readings or don't turn in assignments? How should we respond when students don't ask questions in class or contribute to discussions? And what if students don't even show up to class meetings?

When we see these behaviors, our response is often to create rules and policies that we hope will motivate students. For example, we might give pop quizzes to make sure they do the readings, penalize them for turning in work late, assign participation points to get them to speak up in class, or take attendance and deduct points for absences to make sure they come to class every day. But do these approaches really motivate students to come to class, prepare for class, and engage in the work of our assignments? The research suggests that they don't!

### *What the research says about motivation*

- **Threats and rewards don't result in greater motivation.** Decades of research on motivation for learning suggest that extrinsic reward and punishment systems (systems we put in place to control *them*) do not change behaviors in the long run. When we try to shape student behavior using methods like pop quizzes, grade incentives, or point deductions, we may see a temporary change in student behavior, but it won't last. These methods send a clear message to students: my class and my discipline are so boring or painful that I will need to bribe and punish you into the work. Ultimately, when students don't see the purpose and meaning in course work or requirements, they will simply go through the motions and perform for us but won't put real intellectual effort into these performances.
- **When students find meaning in learning, they have greater motivation.** Motivation increases when students perceive learning tasks as having inherent value to them. Learning can be intrinsically motivating when students have personal interest in the work we present to them or if we create a situation for them that is inherently intriguing. Either way we stimulate interest, the research suggests that students work longer and harder on a task they feel is rewarding in and of itself (or is closely related to something they find intrinsically rewarding).
- **When students have control over their learning, they have greater motivation.** Students are strategic: they put their greatest effort into tasks at which they believe they might succeed. If the work required of them in our courses seems impossible, they won't put in effort and will ultimately desist. But if they believe that the ability to succeed in our courses is something they can develop through practice and feedback, they have a sense of control that keeps them going even when they are challenged.

### *Using the research to tap into students' innate motivation*

**Show students how you will support their learning.** Students are willing to invest energy, time, and persistence when they see how you will support them with guidance and feedback that they can use to improve their performance. They are unlikely to see us as

supportive when we have positioned ourselves as rule enforcers or monitors who dole out punishments and rewards for their behavior. Showing students that we want to help them learn requires us to create a different role for ourselves as coaches who give them feedback on their learning. We can frame this new role through course design, the framing of the syllabus, and day-to-day interactions with students.

**Make learning meaningful.** Our students are on the periphery of our disciplines, wondering why they should invest time, energy, and persistence in our courses. It's not that our students want our courses to be entertaining and fun, it's more that they don't see yet how our courses can change their life, their perspectives, or their world. When our courses focus only on content, our students experience our disciplines as a series of discrete facts, definitions, or theories that don't have a real connection to the world beyond our classrooms. If we want the work of our courses to have meaning for students, they need to experience right away the power and utility of our disciplines—even in introductory courses. Course descriptions, assignments and assessments can all demonstrate the meaning of the learning in a course.

**Put students in control of their practice and their progress.** With the best of intentions, we tell students that with practice, they will improve their skills and do well in our courses. But simply telling students this and encouraging them isn't enough; students need structures in our courses to help them take control of and reflect on their own learning. Students should be required to make strategic choices that involve them in regulating their own learning and taking responsibility for their learning. Students should also be required to track their learning and note how they are progressing and what is helping or hindering that progress.

### ***Examples of course elements that motivate students***

#### A motivating course description

##### Social Welfare in the United States

The causes and outcomes of social problems and many of the problems encountered by individuals, families, and communities are interconnected. *You* have the choice to ignore the problems, perpetuate them, or to become an agent of change committed to preventing, alleviating or contributing towards the solution of recognized social problems. The goal of this course is for students to become active participants in recognizing and critiquing social problems and solutions, and to begin to formulate their own solutions to improve the well-being of individuals, groups, families, organizations, and communities from a social welfare perspective. Can a college course save a life? This one can.

#### A motivating policy about late work

Final drafts are considered due by the time and date specified on the Course Schedule. While in an ideal world I would expect to receive all of your essays at the due date and time, I realize that my scheduling of these assignments sometimes coincides with other responsibilities—both academic and personal—that you are obligated to fulfill. For that reason, you have a “late pass” for late submission of ONE of the four essays that you will be writing for the course. You can use this pass to turn in an essay no more than two class

meetings (1 calendar week) late. Because you already have this built-in extension for one essay, there is no need to ask for additional extensions on the essays unless there are serious extenuating circumstances.

#### A motivating policy about managing course work

As many of the assignments in the course are done in class, it is impossible to schedule make-up opportunities for missed assignments. Because there will be occasions in your life when missing a class meeting or missing a deadline for an assignment is simply unavoidable (illness; personal crisis), this course has a few built-in safety valves. These are your tools to use in managing your life. Please manage these carefully.

- Safety Valve One: You will be able to drop your lowest (1) of the 3 individual essay grades
- Safety Valve Two: The average of the best 90% of your in-class work (both individual and team components) will count toward your grade.
- Safety Valve Three: The lowest RAP grade (individual and team component) will be dropped from the calculation of your average.
- Safety Valve Four: The average of the best 90% of your online writings will count toward your grade.
- Be careful not to waste your safety valves carelessly early in the semester, since you may need your droppable grades to offset any unforeseen low scores or difficulties later in the semester.
- Safety Valve Five: If you become seriously ill during the semester, or become derailed by unforeseeable life problems, and have to miss so many assignments that it will ruin your grade, you and the instructor will automatically schedule a special meeting in order to make arrangements for you to withdraw from the course with the documentation needed to try to save your grade point average. Don't wait until too late to arrange this meeting if you see that you're getting in trouble.

#### A motivating policy about attendance

Your in-class work is the key to your success in this course. Attendance itself is not graded, but graded in-class activities and assignments are the key to helping you practice and me give you the feedback you need to succeed. You can't learn or have a passing average on these activities and assignments if you don't have consistent attendance. Missing class means that you will earn "0" for the activities or assignments missed. There will be no make-up opportunities will be available for in-class activities except in documented cases of extreme extenuating circumstances. Naturally, if you miss an assignment or activities that happened at the beginning of class before you arrive or at the end of class if you leave early, that also results in a "0", and there will be no make-up opportunities. Most importantly, I want you to learn in this class, so missing our class meetings means less time learning for you and fewer opportunities for me to support you with feedback.

#### A motivating, meaningful assignment

This semester in Earth Science, we will be analyzing dust samples from our own bedrooms, cars, and yes (yuck) bathrooms. What lurks in the air and dust of the places where we spend the most time will amaze you and just might save you! And you will also be learning

some on-the-job skills as well as some really transferable skills like communicating what you find in a scientific and clear way. But don't worry, I won't throw you into this alone. We will build up to the bigger dust analysis project with lots of practice in the lab and lots of thinking practice in the lecture! That way you and I will know you're on the right track before you even collect your first samples for the project

### Motivating self-regulatory requirements

This semester, you will write four short sociology papers. After you submit the first paper, I will provide you with focused feedback on two aspects of the paper that work well and two that I would like you to develop. I'll use the case study rubric to give you this feedback, but I will focus your attention on two particular dimensions of your writing and thinking that I want to be your special areas for growth for the next paper. When you go to work on your second paper, I will help you develop a plan for improving on those two areas for growth. You will submit your second paper with that plan as well as with your first paper and my feedback. And the process will repeat, so that each time you submit a paper, you are focusing your energies on improving areas that we've targeted for growth and change. This way, you can monitor and ensure changes in your writing and thinking.

### **Resources**

Ambrose, S. A., Lovett, M., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., & Norman, M. K. (2010). What factors motivate students to learn? In *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching* (pp. 66-90). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Harrington, C., & Thomas, M. (2018). *Designing a motivating syllabus*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Lang, J. (August 28, 2006). The promising syllabus. *The Chronicle of Higher Education: Advice*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Promising-Syllabus/46748>

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). Motivation to learn. In *How people learn II: Learners, contexts, and cultures* (pp. 109-135). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

If you'd like to learn more about motivating your students, please feel free to **request a consultation**.