

Motivating Middle School Students: It Really Is All About Them!

The following material has been excerpted from *Classroom Motivation from A to Z: How to Engage your Students in Learning* by Barbara R. Blackburn. It appears here with the permission of the publisher. To order a copy of the book or for other inquiries, contact Eye On Education (888) 299-5350. www.eyeeducation.com

I'm not going to write something particularly profound. I'm not saying anything that will have a huge impact on anyone's life. All I know is that I have spent much time searching for my motivation to succeed—anything at all that will drive me to do my best. What I have discovered is that motivation, whatever it may be, is absolutely not external; it comes from within. No one can provide motivation for you, it must come from your core, from your inner self. If it doesn't, then it's not motivation.

Author Unknown,
submitted by Jennifer G., age 15, New York
(<http://www.motivateus.com/teens23a.htm>)

Do you teach students who are intrinsically motivated? Intrinsic motivation comes from within. It's the sense of working toward something simply because we want to or because we see value in the accomplishment, and it is relatively easy to know when a student is intrinsically motivated. However, in schools, we focus much of our time and attention on extrinsic rewards such as points and prizes because they are so much easier; and they do motivate

many students, particularly for the short term. Intrinsic motivation, however, seems to be harder for us. After all, how do you motivate someone to be self-motivated?

Indicators of a Students' Intrinsic Motivation

He or She:
Pursues the activity independently.
Enjoys the activity.
Doesn't want to stop working until finished.
Moves beyond the minimum expectations.
Doesn't care if there are rewards attached.

Foundational Elements

Intrinsic motivation has two foundational elements: People are more motivated when they value what they are doing and when they believe they have a chance for success. Although you can't provide either of these for your students, there are several key building blocks that support each.

Building Blocks for Value

First, students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to learn if they value what they are asked to do. There are five building blocks to add value in your classroom.

VALUE Building Blocks

V	Variety
A	Attractiveness
L	Locus of Control
U	Utility
E	Enjoyment

Students are more likely to be motivated when they are not asked to do the same thing over and over again. What is your least favorite routine task? I hate paperwork. It doesn't matter if it's completing a travel form for reimbursement or organizing my tax records; I would rather do almost anything else. One day I realized that if I had to do paperwork every single day, over

and over again, I would be miserable. That, however, is exactly how our students feel about some classes. There is an element of work involved in learning, but when students view learning as drudgery, they are less likely to be motivated to work.

Variety is enhanced when you make a lesson attractive. Attractiveness doesn't mean adding fluff to a lesson; it means integrating elements of curiosity and originality into your lessons.

Charlene Haviland, a teacher in Norfolk, Virginia, has developed lessons that incorporate this concept. She plans to use the Harry Potter books to teach science concepts. For a discussion on the flying broomsticks used in the game of Quidditch, Haviland said, "We can even go into Bernoulli's principle and explore how we can take that from flying on a broom to...how airplanes work...and why some fly better than others." (<http://www.cnn.com/2005/EDUCATION/07/08/harry.potter.science.ap/index.html>). I don't know about you, but I'd sign up for that class quicker than I would a standard class on aerodynamics.

The third building block, locus of control, refers to how students need to feel as though they have some control or choice in a given situation. This basically means that if Kinu feels trapped and like she is following orders, she is less likely to be motivated. Students are more apt to be intrinsically motivated if they have ownership in the learning—if they believe they are a part of the learning experience, rather than simply being told what to do.

Students also need to see the utility in learning. When I do workshops with teachers, I know they come into my session with one burning question: "How can I use this information immediately?" Adult learners are juggling so many demands, they prioritize activities and their attention based on how well something meets their immediate needs. Kids are similar, except they don't have the choice to leave. So often, we forget to show students why they need to know what we are teaching.

I was observing a student teacher when a student I'll call Darin asked, "Why do we need to learn this?" It clearly flustered her, particularly because I was there to observe her, and she snapped back, "Because I said so." You can imagine the look on Darin's face. Her answer ranks right up there with "Because we have to. It's on the test." Neither helps students understand why learning is important. Students are more engaged in learning when they see a useful connection to themselves.

The final block for building value is enjoyment. Students are more motivated when they find pleasure in what they are doing. During my first year of teaching, another teacher told me two things: "Don't smile before Christmas; and if your kids are enjoying the lesson, you're doing something wrong."

Now I realize how unhappy she must have been. Although you need to have a classroom with structure and order, that may look different in various classrooms. It is absolutely, positively okay to smile and have fun. Play games, make jokes, and do something different.

Building Blocks for Achieving Success

Students are also motivated when they believe they have a chance to be successful. And that belief is built on four additional building blocks: level of challenge, experiences, encouragement, and views about success.

First, the degree of alignment between the difficulty of an activity and a student's skill level is a major factor in self-motivation. Imagine that you enjoy riding a bicycle, and you have competed in a local race. You have the opportunity to race against Lance Armstrong. How do you feel? In that situation, there's plenty of opportunity for challenge, probably too much challenge! Or perhaps you love reading novels, but the only language you can read is Russian. How motivated will you be in a literature class? For optimal motivation, the activity should be challenging but in balance with your ability to perform. That's a struggle for many teachers; but that is the foundation of our jobs—starting where a student is, and moving him or her up to increasing levels of difficulty and providing appropriate scaffolding for learning at increasing levels.

Just as we've discussed in many other areas, a student's experiences are an important factor. I'm more likely to believe I can be successful in science if I've been successful in other science activities. On the other hand, if I've had multiple negative experiences reading poetry, I'm less likely to want to read poetry, because I don't think I can.

A third building block to feelings of success is the encouragement a student receives from others. Encouragement is "the process of facilitating the development of the person's inner resources and courage towards positive movement" (Dinkmeyer & Losoncy, 1980, p.16). The difference between encouragement and praise is simple; praise focuses on the performance of a student and is a form of extrinsic motivation; encouragement recognizes worth based on simple existence.

When you encourage, you accept students as they are, so they will accept themselves. You value and reinforce attempts and efforts, and help the student realize that mistakes are learning tools. Encouragement says, "Try, and try again. You can do it. Go in your own direction, at your own pace. I believe in you." Encouragement can be in the form of words, but you can also provide encouragement through a consistent, positive presence in your students' lives.

It's also important for students to read and learn about people who failed before they succeeded, because the final building block is a student's views about success and failure. Many students see failure as the end rather than as an opportunity to learn before trying again. How you define success and failure drives many of your beliefs about your own ability to succeed.

Do I Have to Choose Between Rewards and Intrinsic Motivation?

Although there are those who contend that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are opposites and that teachers must choose one or the other, most teachers I meet take a middle-ground approach. They are opposites but not mutually exclusive. In a society that celebrates the value of rewards, a classroom that solely focuses on students' self-motivation is likely the exception, not the rule. However, we should strive to create a classroom environment that minimizes temporary, external rewards and encourages students to become self-motivated. It is possible. As Jennifer said, "No one can provide motivation for you, it must come from your core, from your inner self. If it doesn't, then it's not motivation."

Summary

- Build in a variety of teaching strategies and opportunities for assessment to keep students interested.
- Integrate elements of curiosity and novelty into your lessons.
- Help students feel ownership in an assignment; they are more likely to be motivated to complete it successfully.
- Demonstrate immediate uses for information for students to see the importance of acquiring the knowledge.
- Make learning fun—interest and energy cause motivation to increase.
- Ensure that students feel that success is within reach (with some effort) for every assignment that you give.
- Help students see that failure is often the only road that leads to success.
- Encourage students to believe in themselves.
- Minimize external rewards—instead, teach students to become more self-motivated.

If you would like more information...

This site discusses extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and how rewards may do harm: <http://www.mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/chap4/chap4q.htm/>.

This site contains information on how to capture children's natural intrinsic motivation in the classroom: http://seamonkey.ed.asu.edu/~jimbo/RIBARY_Folder/motivati.htm/.

Help Students Develop Self-Motivation: A Sourcebook for Parents and Teachers by Donald R. Grossnickle, National Association of Secondary School Principals.

The Encouragement Book: Becoming a Positive Person by Don Dinkmeyer and Lewis E. Losoncy, Prentice-Hall.

Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's Praise and Other Bribes by Alfie Kohn, Houghton Mifflin.

Adding Value to Instruction: A Staff Development Activity

Scott Waybright, Curriculum Coordinator at Charlotte Country Day, created the following staff development activity.

8:45 – 9:00 Creating VALUE for Students.

Facilitator leads discussion of the VALUE acronym and how the implementation of the ideas can lead to a more intrinsically motivated classroom.

V = Variety	– or –	monotony of the same things day after day.
A = Attractiveness	– or –	nothing original or interesting to a student.
L = Locus of Control	– or –	teacher makes all the decisions with no student input.
U = Utility	– or –	content is taught because state says so, no connection to students life.
E = Enjoyment	– or –	lessons feel like work, no fun.

**9:00 AM – 9:45 AM Identifying VALUE on the Curriculum Maps
(Teaching Partners)**

1. Using a highlighter (5 different colors – one for each letter in VALUE) go through your courses' content for the year and mark where you currently are successful. For example, write an "L" on the Oppression Unit in Social Studies when you allow students to find their own example from history to share with the class. Write a "V" on the Circulatory System Unit when you assess understanding using a real cow heart.
2. Review the labels you have written. Discuss with your partner what you see. Are some units heavy in VALUE? Are some units missing VALUE? Are there some aspects of VALUE that are consistent all year? Are there some aspects of VALUE that are rare during the year?
3. Post your curriculum map on the wall around the room.

9:45 AM – 11:00 AM Peer Sharing of VALUE across the disciplines

1. As an entire group, walk around the walls of the room and review everyone's curriculum maps. Look for units that are well VALUEd and for units that are missing VALUE. Jot notes on paper about the great ideas you see. On sticky notes, make suggestions that could improve the units with missing VALUE. Stick them on the maps as you go around the room.
2. As a large group, share some of the particularly great ideas seen in the maps.
3. Collect your map off the wall and sit with your teaching partner. Discuss the suggestions left by others. Choose a unit that really needs your attention. This will become the Peer Follow-up to be implemented by the end of the year.
4. Take your maps and sit in grade-level teams. Lay out all the maps and look for the balance of VALUE across the grade level. Is there a part of the year that is drudgery for the kids? Is there a time of the year that is too heavy in a particular part of VALUE? As you read about the curriculum on your grade level, are there opportunities to exploit connections between the disciplines.

Meet the Author



Barbara R. Blackburn has taught early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school students and has served as an educational consultant for three publishing companies. She received her Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Now an Associate Professor, she received the 2006 award for Outstanding Junior Professor at Winthrop University, where she coordinates a graduate program for teachers, teaches graduate classes, supervises student teachers, and collaborates with area schools on special projects.

In addition to speaking at state and national conferences, she also regularly presents workshops for teachers and administrators in elementary, middle, and high schools. Her most popular topics include:

Instructional Strategies that Motivate Students

Content Literacy Strategies for the Young and the Restless

Motivation and Assessment

Rigor is NOT a Four Letter Word

Motivating Yourself and Others

Engaging Instruction Leads to Higher Achievement

High Expectations and Increased Support Lead to Success