Motivating Your Students: What To Do -- What Not To Do -- and Why It’s Important

You want to motivate your students, make your class more interesting and fun – but how?

- Do you tell lots of jokes and funny stories?
- Do you tell them “This is fun!”
- Do you include lots of cool (but not-so-relevant) pictures in your Powerpoint presentations?
- Do you tell them exciting anecdotes full of gory details that relate, tangentially, to the topic?

These may seem like they’d be motivating, but are they really effective? Some of the things you might think are motivating, might actually get in the way of learning.

The Perils of Seductive Details

Let’s say you are teaching students how lightning forms. You are afraid that all that talk about positive and negative ions might be a bit boring, so to spice things up, you throw in an anecdote about some football players who were struck by lightning. The students sure seem interested, but later you realize that all they remember are the gory details of the lightning-strike accident, and very little about how lightning forms. This scenario is actually part of a study showing how seductive details (interesting, but irrelevant facts) can inadvertently interfere with learning (Harp & Mayer, 1998).

If you do include pictures or anecdotes, be sure they are directly relevant to the material. Ask yourself – “Will these help students understand the important concepts or might it distract them? Are they illustrating key points, or are they just decorations?”

Is Motivation Just “Fluff”?

Research shows that motivation is not just “fluff” – it’s an important component of meaningful learning. According to Dr. Richard Mayer (2003), a cognitive psychologist at UCSB, research has demonstrated that when students are motivated to learn

- they try harder to understand the material
- they process the information at a deeper level
- they are more likely to be able to apply what they’ve learned to new situations

So, how CAN you motivate students - without distracting them?
Help Students Process the Material
“The best way to help students enjoy (the material) is to help them understand it” (Harp & Mayer, 1998).

Students, especially those unfamiliar with the topic, often need help selecting which concepts are important. They need guidance with organizing the material and seeing how concepts are related. To guide these processes, you could:

1) Put outlines of the topic on the board or in a handout

2) Summarize and give previews (Mautone & Mayer, 2001)
   “In order to understand how lightening forms, you need to focus on these three main phases...”

3) Ask questions before or after they read or hear the material (Boker, 1974; Rickards & DiVesta, 1974)
   - Rote questions such as “In what year did the civil war begin?” help students remember specific facts
   - Higher level questions such as “What are some similarities between the civil war and gang warfare of today?” help students apply the knowledge to new situations

Help Students Relate to the Material, Connect it to Real Life
1) Begin with a familiar, concrete example or analogy
   - For example, before explaining how radar works, tell students that a useful analogy is to think of a radar waves like a rubber ball bouncing off of objects (Mayer, 1983).

2) Help students relate the information to personal experiences
   - “Have you ever seen...?” “Have you ever wondered why...?”

3) Explicitly state how and why material will be useful
   - “Later, we’ll actually be carrying out an experiment using this procedure.”

4) Use personalized speech
   - “During inhaling, YOUR diaphragm moves down creating more space for YOUR lungs...” as opposed to “During inhaling, THE diaphragm moves down creating more space for THE lungs...”
   (Mayer, Fennell, Farmer, & Campbell, in press).

Help Students Feel Confident That They Can Master the Material
• Your belief in your ability to master a task affects the amount of effort and persistence you will devote to a task. Students work harder when they believe they can do well. (Bandura, 1977).
Past experience contributes to students’ belief that they can do well in a particular subject – If students have come to believe, “I’m no good at this” they’ll likely have low motivation.

So, how can you address this in class?

1) **Begin with questions and problems that are within the students’ current range of ability, then build up from there** (Vygotsky, 1978).

   This provides them with opportunities to succeed, and allows you to give them positive feedback.

2) **Utilize Peer Modeling: Have students come to the board and work out problems.**

   Allowing students to observe their peers successfully perform tasks can lead them to believe that they are also capable of performing the task.

   Research studies with college students, as well as elementary school students, have shown that students who watched peers work through problems not only developed more positive attitudes about their own abilities but also did better on problem-solving tests compared to students who just watched their teacher work through problems. (Hsu, 2000; Schunk & Hanson, 1985)

3) **Let the students try to work out a problem or explain their ideas rather than immediately giving them the “correct” answer.**

   Research involving elementary school children shows that unsolicited help from the teacher may lead to students’ perceptions that the teacher believes they aren’t able to do it on their own (Graham & Barker, 1990).

4) **Make expectations clear**

   Students can’t feel confident that they can master the material unless they know what needs to be mastered
   - The syllabus should clearly state what students need to do in order to achieve a certain grade
   - Be sure to state at the beginning and at the end of each class period the main objectives of the lesson
   - For writing assignments, provide clear grading rubrics (See www.id.ucsb.edu/IC/TA/tips/rubric.html for some tips.)

**References**


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