

Methods of Motivational Teaching

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Abstract

As teachers, we want to motivate our students to learn during a unit and to continue learning about the topic after the unit ends. This article describes about a hundred methods we use to help motivate students to learn. The methods form 12 categories: (1) making content relevant to student values and goals, (2) helping students achieve their goals through learning, (3) providing potent models of learning, (4) prompting and persuading students to learn, (5) establishing a positive relationship with students, (6) rewarding student achievement and learning efforts, (7) not de-motivating students, (8) enhancing student learning self-efficacy, (9) using engaging teaching methods, (10) using an appealing teaching style, (11) giving motivational feedback, and (12) monitoring student motivation levels and adjusting motivation methods as needed. Teachers at any level of the educational system may be able to increase their motivational impact by using the methods that suit their personality, their topic, their students, and their setting.

Introduction

Students come into classes with various levels of motivation to learn. As teachers, we want our students to try hard to learn during the unit and to continue learning about the subject area after the class ends. Hence, we try to motivate our students to learn.

There may be an infinite number of actions an instructor can take that will increase student motivation, but we apply approximately one hundred methods that we consider most valuable and feasible. The methods come from psychological theories such as social cognitive theory, from psychotherapy methods such as motivational interviewing, from the suggestions of teaching experts, and from our own experiences as students and teachers. Individuals teaching at any level of an educational system can use the methods, which form 12 categories: (1) making content relevant to student values and goals, (2) helping students achieve their goals through learning, (3) providing potent models of learning, (4) prompting and persuading students to learn, (5) establishing a positive relationship with students, (6) rewarding student achievement and learning efforts, (7) not de-motivating students, (8) enhancing student learning self-efficacy, (9) using engaging teaching methods, (10) using an appealing teaching style, (11) giving motivational feedback, and (12) monitoring student motivation levels and adjusting motivation methods as needed.

We have used these methods to good effect, to the extent one can judge from student evaluations and teaching awards. For our published sources and more ideas, see References.

To increase your motivational impact, try methods that suit your personality, your topic, your students, and your setting. Even one additional method, if chosen carefully, might produce a valuable effect on student motivation.

Methods

1. MAKE CONTENT RELEVANT TO STUDENT VALUES AND GOALS

- a. Teach topics in a way that has potential for immediate application and possible benefit to the students, e.g., if the topic is self-control problems like overeating, go beyond discussing the problem and encourage students to test self-control strategies such as goal setting and self-monitoring to regulate their own eating.
- b. Before each class session, remind yourself why the material is meaningful and interesting.
- c. Relate subject matter to the specific interests of students.
- d. Relate subject matter to the everyday experiences of students.
- e. Ask students to give personal examples of applications of principles being studied.
- f. Give students choice about what they learn, e.g., what topics are covered in class and in assignments.

2. HELP STUDENTS ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS THROUGH LEARNING

- a. Ask the students about their life (or career) goals and encourage them to set subgoals relevant to the unit.
- b. Encourage students to set realistic yet challenging goals, long-term and short-term, that relate to their learning.

- c. Talk with students about the importance of connecting their behavior with their goals.
- d. Encourage students to apply concepts in their own lives in ways likely to benefit them, e.g., when teaching about the effects of reinforcement or rewards, discuss how to use the principle to improve important relationships through giving well earned praise for nice or helpful behavior that one might overlook.

3. PROVIDE POTENT MODELS OF LEARNING

- a. Show up to class early and well prepared.
- b. Speak in an enthusiastic tone of voice.
- c. Talk about your efforts, recent or remote, to learn, especially the same content now being covered.
- d. Express personal interest in the topics you cover.
- e. Give an anecdote about the strong learning efforts of a prior student.
- f. Read passages of a well written student essay and praise the work.
- g. Give an anecdote about a student who started the unit with low self-confidence and still did well by working hard.
- h. Invite individuals who have studied the topic in the past and who are now applying what they learned in their careers to talk to the class about their experiences.
- i. Create extracurricular activities relating to the unit, e.g., a trip to visit a place where the principles of the unit are applied.

4. PROMPT AND PERSUADE STUDENTS TO LEARN

- a. Encourage students to try hard during the unit.
- b. Give the rationale for unit requirements.
- c. Stress that knowledge of topics extends beyond the unit content.
- d. Suggest enrichment readings or activities and encourage students to explore topics for themselves, during the unit and after.
- e. Explain the value of lifelong learning.
- f. Encourage students to self-monitor their learning efforts, e.g., by keeping a record of how many study questions they answer correctly each day.

5. ESTABLISH A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH STUDENTS

- a. Introduce yourself when you first meet a class and include information relevant to the unit and to you as a human; if the class is small, ask the students to introduce themselves to the class (or introduce to the class a student on one side of them).
- b. Greet the class each time you enter the classroom or you start class.
- c. Show empathy (awareness of the perspective and feelings of students), e.g., by putting into words what seems to be their point of view.
- d. Show warmth (caring, acceptance), e.g., by greeting the students with a smile
- e. Show genuineness (i.e., speak sincerely).
- f. Listen reflectively to the students (e.g., listen carefully and paraphrase what they say).
- g. Talk about your own mistakes as a learner or in applying unit content.
- h. Make a joke about something you have done or tell a joke.
- i. Laugh at yourself or with students.
- j. Smile at times when interacting with students.
- k. Show interest in students, e.g., by speaking to them individually before class and asking about their goals and extracurricular activities.
- l. Learn and use the names of the students.

- m. Self-disclose (e.g., tell personal stories related to the current topic).
- n. Move near and among the students when teaching.
- o. Give the students something, such as a class party.
- p. Encourage students to communicate with you outside class.
- q. Stay in the classroom until the students leave.
- r. Try to assist students outside of class matters, e.g., when they discuss a personal problem with you.
- s. Express interest in facilitating the learning of the students.
- t. Contact students who do not attend class and ask if you can help.

6. REWARD STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND LEARNING EFFORTS

- a. Reward learning and learning efforts (including attending and actively participating) with praise and high marks.
- b. Praise publicly (e.g., in class) good effort by students.
- c. Encourage students to take pride in their learning efforts and accomplishments.

7. AVOID DE-MOTIVATING TREATMENT OF STUDENTS

- a. Avoid providing harsh or insulting criticism, e.g., “This is dreadful writing.”
- b. Avoid criticizing students in front of the class, e.g., “You all saw from Jenny’s presentation the problem of not making eye contact.”
- c. Avoid teasing students, e.g., “Your tattoo makes quite a statement.”

8. ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING SELF-EFFICACY

- a. Tell students that they can do well if they work hard.
- b. Suggest that students recall times in the past when they mastered new material.
- c. Refer to the students using a positive label relating to the topic, such as calling them scientists.

9. USE ENGAGING TEACHING METHODS

- a. Give students as much choice as possible about how you help them learn, e.g., whether you assign group or individual projects.
- b. Create novel, surprising, or emotion-arousing learning events, such as the following.
 - (1) Use role playing, e.g., to practice interpersonal skills or to illustrate something, such as a specific psychological disorder or a point of view.
 - (2) Provide interesting demonstrations.
 - (3) Arrange relevant, interesting field trips.
 - (4) Stimulate student curiosity (as a book thriller might), by posing mysteries for the students to solve, e.g. to identify something surprising in an assigned reading.
 - (5) Stimulate students’ imaginations, e.g., with computer or acted simulations.
 - (6) Do the unexpected occasionally, such as dressing up as someone related to the unit or asking an interesting trivia question related to the unit.
- c. Use active learning methods such as the following:
 - (1) Stimulate discussions.
 - (2) Use Socratic teaching (ask the students questions about the topics being covered)
 - (3) Assign hands-on or lab tasks.
 - (4) Assign in-class writing, e.g., stating the most important thing the student learned in class today.
 - (5) Give content quizzes, graded or not.
 - (6) Give interesting home assignments.

- (7) Assign interesting projects, group or individual.
- (8) Ask students to teach each other in pairs.
- (9) Give students topic-related problems to solve or tasks to accomplish and ask them to form small groups in which to do the work.
- (10) Ask students to carry out a game-like activity relating to the topic, e.g., playing emotions charades in small groups to learn about nonverbal signs of emotions.
- (11) Ask students to apply learned principles in class and out.
- (12) Ask students to imagine themselves playing some part in a topic-relevant process, e.g., imagining themselves on the first day at a new school.
- d. Use anecdotes or cases to teach (humans are inclined to listen carefully to stories, especially if there is an element of suspense).
- e. Stimulate self-exploration related to the topic, e.g., through personal attitude quizzes.
- f. Point out news stories or current events that illustrate something being taught.
- g. For variety, consider video, good guest speakers, and varying your teaching methods.
- h. Make student tasks moderately challenging (as do popular video games).
- i. Encourage students to help each other learn, e.g., by sharing notes or studying together.
- j. Assign interesting reading materials, e.g., those with clear writing, relevant anecdotes or examples, photos, and self-quizzes.
- k. Use or assign popular media, such as bestselling books and award-winning movies.
- l. Set up the classroom in a manner that encourages interaction, e.g., chairs in a circle instead of in rows.
- m. Encourage questions and comments.

10. USE AN APPEALING TEACHING STYLE

- a. Express enthusiasm for teaching.
- b. Make eye contact with students.
- c. Speak loud usually, but vary your volume.
- d. Vary your voice pitch and tone.
- e. Speak at least moderately fast.
- f. Speak in a dramatic or expressive way.
- g. Vary your facial expressions.
- h. Use hand and arm gestures when speaking.
- i. Stand while teaching.
- j. Move about while teaching.
- k. Avoid frowns and signs of anxiety, such as fidgeting with hands, legs, or objects.

11. GIVE MOTIVATIONAL FEEDBACK

- a. Give frequent feedback on performance.
- b. Give constructive feedback, i.e. feedback that contains positive elements, indicates how to improve, focuses critical and positive comments on effort rather than ability, and acknowledges improvement.
- c. Give detailed, personalized feedback.
- d. Evaluate student work as promptly as possible.
- e. Make grading as credible as possible, e.g., by using objective methods and/or grading rubrics.
- g. Provide summative (unmarked) assessment when possible.

12. MONITOR STUDENT MOTIVATION LEVELS AND ADJUST MOTIVATION METHODS AS NEEDED

- a. Monitor the motivation level of students, e.g., through observing their attendance, facial expressions, and participation level, or by asking the students about their interest levels.
- b. Adjust your methods as needed to maintain high motivation levels.

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