

## Honoring Intrinsic Motivation

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Try to find a harder job than a teacher's! The teacher's daily task is to coordinate and supervise the instruction of 20 or more children for six and one-half hours a day. Harder yet is convincing them to engage in learning. A letter on a report card just doesn't cut it for some students. Perhaps too many days of information that appears to have little no relevance to their immediate needs have made them cynical. Perhaps not enough control over their own learning has discouraged them, or too many gimmicks to motivate by reward or punishment have disillusioned them. But ask your students about what they do out of school and you will find that every one has a passion, interest and expertise. Wouldn't the teacher's job be the best in the world if students came with the same enthusiasm for learning in school that they have for their out-of-school interests? So how do we accomplish this ideal?



Intrinsic motivation, as Mark Lepper defines it, is “ to undertake an activity for its own sake, the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feeling of accomplishment it evokes” (as quoted in *Motivating Students to be Lifelong Learners*). Every true teacher desires to have a classroom where enthusiasm for the task is honest and the students are eager to attack the work. Yet many kids say that school is boring and that they would prefer to do something “interesting” with their time.

Teachers often default to their own motivators if they do not consciously put forth an effort to honour their students' motivators. Individuals require individualized motivation. The teacher in the average classroom, therefore, has a formidable challenge. According to one website ([www.Calumet.purdue.edu](http://www.Calumet.purdue.edu)) quite a few strategies can be used to enhance motivation. I will focus on four: challenge, control, competition, and cooperation.

Some individuals find *challenges* stimulating and are willing to put in the effort. What does this look like in the classroom? Challenges are real, reachable, yet mind-stretching activities that are relevant to the student's real life and related to the content. I believe it happens when we challenge them to make a difference in their community by taking their knowledge and participating in social action projects.

It is easier for students to engage in a learning task if it appeals to them or, at the very least, they have some type of choice. Perhaps students can come up with their own projects that meet the learning objective but also allows them some *control* over their learning experience. Experts believe that *control* is important to students since “rewards and punishment can be de-motivating in the longer term, especially when others have control over the system” ([teachers.net /gazette/ aug00/tracy.html](http://teachers.net/gazette/aug00/tracy.html))

Though some may see *competition* in a negative light, *competition* with oneself can be healthy and a real motivator. This type of *competition* provides feelings of accomplishment that are necessary for motivation. Ask anyone who enjoys the game of golf what motivates them. They play because they take pleasure in the improvements (or hope of improvement); it's not just about winning. So it can be with learning. *Competition* with oneself motivates many.

The social student finds pleasure in his/her time with others. *Cooperation* can actually help these students focus longer on a learning task. Also, seeing everyone else involved is often enough of an incentive for a more reluctant student to also get involved, maybe even just for the fun of it.

Is there a place for extrinsic motivators? Sometimes we need to use them. But when we understand intrinsic motivators, the process of learning will be more enjoyable for all in the classroom. Once the students trust that the teacher is there to guide them, not force them, they are more willing to be led. From my experience, when choices are given, students are more likely to accept the responsibility that belongs to them. Fear of failure does not loom so large over them.

So why do you teach? What motivates you? Does the answer include a love of learning and the intrinsic rewards you find in your job? There is definitely a *challenge* but that challenge provides satisfaction. You have *control* over planning your lessons. As you teach your content and students, you are constantly looking for a better way (*competition* with yourself) to deliver your lesson next time. You welcome opportunities to *cooperate* with other teachers who teach your subject or grade level and spend time together going over effective strategies.

If it works for us, shouldn't it also work for our students, especially if we can model it effectively to those we teach and lead?

### **Resources:**

- Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, *Motivating Students to be Lifelong Learners*, 2000.  
(Accessed from: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/16/d2/59.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/d2/59.pdf) )
- Vockell, Edward. "Intrinsic Motivation." *Educational Psychology: A Practical Approach*.  
(Accessed from: [www.education.calumet.purdue.ed/vockell/edpsychbook/edpsys5/edpsy5\\_intrinsic.html](http://www.education.calumet.purdue.ed/vockell/edpsychbook/edpsys5/edpsy5_intrinsic.html) )
- Tracy, Kim. "Intrinsic Motivation." *Teachers.net Gazette*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (August 2000).  
(Accessed from: [www.teachers.net/gazette/aug00/tracy.html](http://www.teachers.net/gazette/aug00/tracy.html))