CONTROL, CHOICE, AND STUDENT MOTIVATION

You may be among those who believe that student motivation is something you have no control over, and therefore is nothing of great concern to you—they either have it or they don’t. There’s lots of evidence, however, to the contrary. We know from research in cognitive science and psychology that how we structure student activities and the learning environment can have an enormous impact on student initiative, enthusiasm and persistence, whether the student begins with strong intrinsic motivation or not.

To show how this works, we’ve distilled some ideas from Marilla Svinicki’s Learning and Motivation in the Postsecondary Classroom (2004), which explores ways in which we can design learning experiences that actually fuel student motivation. Svinicki describes the research showing that students’ motivation will be influenced fundamentally by their goal orientation, which is primarily a function of the way students see the value of achieving a goal and their expectation that a goal can be achieved. The following are some key principles that can be applied to enhance students’ goal orientation and create a more productive classroom environment.

Principle #1: Students’ perception of self-determination and personal control is an important source of motivation.

This can be tricky— instructors do bear responsibility for course design. But when we take too much control we play into familiar and entrenched paradigms of parenting: it becomes too easy for students to abdicate responsibility for their behavior and its consequences. Conversely, if students perceive that they are making decisions that determine their own fate, they will take more ownership of their actions and of their academic work. When students are responsible for making clear choices and facing the consequences of those choices, instead of just conforming to a set of rules that the professor has made, they see themselves as being in charge of managing their own behavior, which fosters a positive development of their attitude. An added benefit of turning over some of this responsibility to students is that you—as teacher—will find yourself relieved of the tedium that comes along with micro-managing your courses. The key practice is to place emphasis not on controlling behavior but on holding students accountable (via explicit consequences) for their productivity and decision-making. Here are some examples:

- **Design some decision-making into the grading scheme.** For example, plan to allow students to drop a fixed number of grades—but don’t do the drops for them automatically. For example, offer students the option of using a specific number of drops as an alternative to making up missed assignments. This gives them the responsibility of managing their assets, so that it becomes the students’ choice (and responsibility) to determine whether to drop a missed assignment or to do make-up work. Keep in mind that in the case of a documented, excused absence, university policy prohibits instructors from denying students the opportunity to make up work; however, you’ll find that many students will appreciate the choice of using a dropped grade rather than having to schedule a make-up assignment.

- **Introduce some options or flexibility into assignment deadlines.** In cases where students are doing individual work, as in essays or projects, allow some flexibility of deadlines, and give students the responsibility to manage this for themselves. Instead of “no late papers,” which can only be interpreted as YOUR rule, allow students to make decisions about the timing of an assignment and require them to face the consequences for that decision (e.g., they have two possible deadlines to submit an assignment, with an explicit grade potential at each stage, rather than extensions or point attrition for late papers).

- **Replace attendance rules with classroom performance measures** in the form of simple problem assignments, micro-quizzes, minute papers, etc. Students widely perceive that required attendance—in and of itself—addresses more the instructor’s need for control rather than the learning behavior that it is intended to encourage. To change that perception it will be necessary to change the grade category of “attendance” (if you grade it) to “readiness” or “in-class performance” and assign a variety of in-class learning tasks that carry credit toward the course grade. Now it is the student’s responsibility to be ready and engaged or accept the consequences. By this approach, it is visibly to
students' benefit to attend class. If they are absent, they visibly miss the opportunity to earn points that day. Students now own the management of their attendance, which they can use in order to maintain their grade—or not.

Principle #2: Good task/assignment design can leverage students' inherent intellectual curiosity.

Most university students actually want to learn—even if they don't realize it or don't manifest it daily in their body language. Effective task/assignment design provokes curiosity even where it does not already exist. To see this in action, compare two ways of asking students to process information in a course.

Even students who have everything they need to succeed in a course will lose motivation if they don't know where they stand.

Traditional: Students may or may not read an assigned chapter before coming to class, knowing that the instructor is most likely to cover the important points in a lecture. After 3 or 4 cycles students take a test over the material covered.

Active Learning: Before coverage of a unit's content, students are asked to solve a problem or complete a task for which they don't have quite enough information to make a clear determination. They have to make their best judgment based on what they already know and using whatever thinking strategies they have. (This often works best if students are able to work in the safety of a small group, which gives them confidence to take risks.) After they have struggled through this problem/task and explained how they arrived at their tentative solutions, the professor presents some key concepts and requires additional reading that will have a direct bearing on students' being able to analyze related situations or solve related problems. Now that students have seen how these concepts are useful to accomplish the task, they can be given another, more challenging problem to which they can apply the same principles. Students who are placed in situations where they discover for themselves the need for information will have a higher level of curiosity for the information than will students who simply receive the targeted information as a first step.

Throwing students into the authentic, somewhat messy tasks of our disciplines will work when students are also allowed to practice the thinking skills and attitudes needed to be successful in this more challenging environment. They need to practice patience, exploratory thinking, listening, and hypothesis-testing, among others. Students who are frequently challenged in this way will ultimately feel more in control of their own learning (see Principle #1) and will be more motivated.

Principle #3: Students will demonstrate greater motivation if they believe they have the skills necessary to achieve a goal.

Often called self-efficacy, this may seem to be completely outside an instructor's purview. But even though a student's sense of self-efficacy is largely intrinsic, good instructional design will give students an accurate sense of their chances for success and a sense of the pathway that will get them there. Frequent feedback—both informal and formal—is fundamental. Too often the only feedback students receive comes in the form of grades, but this is often the least communicative tool we have. Instead, build in the practice of asking students to answer conceptual questions in class or for homework, to help them (and you) learn if they are on track, and what they need to do to get there. This is useful even if you don't have time to personalize your responses: just knowing whether they were able to accomplish the task is important information for them to have.

Keep in mind, also, that there are many informal mechanisms beyond quizzes and tests that you can use to help students assess whether they are mastering the concepts and skills they need to succeed in your course. Here are a few examples from Angelo & Cross, Classroom Assessment Techniques (available in the ITLAL reading room):

Minute Paper: During the last few minutes of class, ask students to answer the following on a half-sheet of paper: "What is the most important point you learned today?" and "What point remains the least clear to you?". The purpose is to elicit data about students' comprehension of a particular set of concepts.

Directed Paraphrasing: Ask students to write a layperson's translation of something they have just learned—geared to a specified individual or audience—to assess their ability to comprehend and transfer concepts.

Application Cards: After teaching about an important theory, principle, or procedure, ask students to write down at least one real-world application for what they have just learned to determine how well they can transfer their learning.

Instead of "dumbing down" the course to accommodate students' learned helplessness, give them more responsibility by asking them to make decisions that will determine their own fate.

The paragraphs above have provided an excerpted and simplified overview of a complex set of theories. If you feel motivated to learn more, Svinicki's book is available in the University Library and in the ITLAL reading room, where additional resources are available.

Resources: