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Motivating Young Adolescents

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Carrots and sticks won't make middle schoolers learn. These approaches will.

Teachers and leaders from ancient cultures—for example, those of us born in the 20th century—agree: Adolescents aren't always interested in the topics adults consider important for them to learn. Ten- to 15-year-olds, we declare, rarely inject anything but minimal energy into their studies. Instead, they demand, "When are we ever going to use this?" "Don't you take us seriously?" and "How can I make Sara like me?"

It's easy for adults who've forgotten the wonder and uncertainty of the adolescent years to declare that students today are more uninterested in school and undisciplined in life than *they* were at that age. It's a false observation, however. Each new set of mature adults has declared the same thing about the set of young teenagers behind them—yet so far, humans are still thriving.

It's true that instructing a class of adolescents is no easy feat. It's a tenuous walk on a rope suspended high above a canyon of many competing priorities. We maintain a delicate balance, telling students, "Stay in the classroom and do as I say, and I'll tell you what's important so you can live your lives." At any moment, students can misinterpret what we say, tune us out, or leave the room. So what keeps middle schoolers in the room and engaged?

We can find part of the answer to that question by considering what common practices *don't* motivate young adolescents. If we think about what teens enjoy, we'll realize why being removed from physical education to double up on math and reading doesn't make kids eager. Neither does lack of choice about what to learn, or teachers who find their own stories more fascinating than their students do.

"[Top 12 Demotivators](#)" lists more practices that don't do the job. There's a general principle here: When it comes to fostering cognitive perseverance, carrots and sticks don't work. Rewarding students who make the honor roll with a special assembly doesn't motivate those students to pursue successful academic behaviors the next semester. And punishing a student for failure doesn't teach him or her to study more thoroughly.

Let's consider six approaches that *do* motivate.

1. Adopt two mind-sets.

Many middle school teachers actually know things they can do to motivate their students. But substitute the word *manipulate* for *motivate* in the previous sentence, and what at first sounded reasonable now seems disturbing. None

of us wants to manipulate students. Every day, however, we practice the art of persuasion, convincing students that our subjects are worth their time and energy. This persuasion is tricky because of the dance between middle schoolers' lingering childlike curiosity and their mounting distractions: peers, sex, risk taking, pop stars, and keeping track of body parts in time and space.

Manipulation is very different from motivation, however. Manipulation involves one person doing something to someone else in order to control his or her actions or attitude. Conversely, motivation comes from within. It's a welling desire to invest oneself in a topic, person, or activity. We can control a student's behavior through rewards or threats, but we can't use those methods to *motivate* that student to do anything he or she doesn't already want to do.

So the first mind-set teachers need is the recognition that motivation is something we create *with* students, not something we do *to* them. Our goal should be a classroom culture that cultivates curiosity and personal investment, one in which students feel safe to engage in the activity or topic without fear of embarrassment or rejection.

Here's the second mind-set: There's no such thing as laziness. Humans are hard-wired to do demanding and complex things. Young adolescents are developmentally primed for learning things that are intellectually and physically advanced and for getting excited about their growing expertise and the freedoms that come with competence. Time and again, when a student successfully solves a difficult puzzle or math problem, she says with a grin, "Give me another one."

If a student appears lazy, there's always something else going on that we can't see—or can't control. He or she may be working hard outside of school. Kids who are seat fillers in school may be high-energy magicians at children's festivals, powerhouse soccer goalies, persistent Minecraft designers, and managers who inspire 25 friends to do a walk for multiple sclerosis. Middle school students will work for hours on service projects and read 700-page books. Each new success invigorates their reach for the next one.

A student who seems unmotivated may lack the tools for the tasks, have too many responsibilities at home, or worry that she won't be valued if she attempts a task and fails. It's easier for an adolescent who reads below grade level to make excuses about why he didn't do the homework ("The baseball game ran late" or "I forgot") than to admit to the teacher and friends that he *couldn't* do it because the reading was too hard. Such students think, "Why should I give the world more evidence that I'm an idiot?" They'd rather come off as scatterbrained than incompetent.

2. Empathize—and build trust.

We must help kids get past such face-saving by empathizing with them and by conducting ourselves in such a way that students know we have their backs. Young adolescents need to trust that teachers won't humiliate them or let them humiliate themselves. Think back to the stomach-turning fear you felt at age 13—fear that others might find you were out of your league in school and life. Most middle schoolers feel that. Building relationships with students, proving daily that risk taking is safe in your class, can dissolve those fears and replace them with courage.

So if JoJo says something incorrect, instead of pointing out his error, ask him to tell the class more about his point of view. It's possible that as he does so, he'll recognize the error of his thinking. Or declare that JoJo's answer is the answer to the question you were going to ask later in the lesson. (Of course, you weren't going to, but now you will, because JoJo needs a win.) Or tell him the answer is wrong but affirm his risk taking, thanking him for giving the class something to chew on. You might even change a student's reality by saying, "If you *did* know, what words would come out of your mouth?" What the student says next is usually correct.

Young adolescents intensely value teachers' opinions of them. They'll move mountains for teachers who they sense respect them. And because middle schoolers aren't sure what to make of their growing awareness that heretofore-infallible adults can be wrong or hypocritical, they gravitate toward adults whose words match their actions.

Teacher-student relationships shouldn't be left to chance, especially when students are struggling. When a middle-level student feels that we think of him as just one more paper to grade, he finds little incentive to do well beyond avoiding his parent's wrath. Even one stable relationship with an adult can make the difference.

3. Remember where they are.

The single most motivating practice teachers can employ in the middle-level classroom is to teach in developmentally appropriate ways. The best middle-level teachers understand the unique nature of young adolescents. They can point to specific experiences in their lessons that are appropriate for 10- to 15-year-olds.

The first stop in getting up to speed on developmentally appropriate learning experiences is the Association for Middle Level Education's [list of 16 characteristics of successful schools](#). The association offers resources on specific motivational techniques, such as ways to forge meaningful connections among subjects, create teacher advisory programs, and incorporate authentic assessments.

I can't overemphasize the need to provide a path to learning that's sensitive to students' developmental stages. When asked which teachers motivate them, young adolescents immediately mention teachers who "get" them; who

accept them unconditionally (mistakes and all); and who empathize with them (as if remembering what it was like to experience certain concepts for the first time). Teachers tuned to young adolescents' learning preferences also

- Incorporate social interaction into any engagement with content; such interactions provide opportunities for content-related conversations, online class discussions, debates, or collaborative inquiry.
- Switch activities every 10 to 15 minutes to maintain momentum.
- Help students recover from bad decisions and failure.
- Teach each topic in more than one way.
- Show enthusiasm about their subject, even after teaching it for years.
- Offer regular opportunities for self-definition; encourage students to incorporate their own culture into assignments or to develop a unique voice for class presentations.

4. Give descriptive feedback.

Middle school students are thinking, "Am I normal? How am I doing? How do I know when I know this stuff?" Young adolescents seek comparative yardsticks in every domain of their lives: physical growth, intellectual prowess, hairstyle, family rules, and the capacity to burp the alphabet.

So it's important that students have a clear picture of any academic goal and of where they are at any moment in relation to that goal. Only timely, descriptive feedback helps kids get that picture. Motivational teachers provide many exemplars, formative feedback, and opportunities for students to self-assess.¹

Many teachers falsely assume that judgment and evaluation spur students on. There is nothing motivating about seeing "B+—Very Good!" written at the top of an eight-page paper, with no personalized feedback. For a student to wrestle with a paper for weeks in full blood, sweat, and tears mode and not get at least a comment about her clever analogy between a basketball referee and the body's limbic system, or how well he incorporated the teacher's advice on this final draft, is very deflating. If she's given zero feedback, a kid may not want to repeat in her next performance whatever it was that succeeded in this one—nor will she invest in the class. And of course, a "D+—Disappointing" doesn't motivate a student nearly as much as specific feedback on how to improve would.

Feedback-focused teachers recognize the power of allowing students to redo their assessments and assignments in light of specific teacher feedback. Absent the option to redo an assessment, descriptive feedback is a frustrating exercise in what could have been. Teachers who hesitate to offer redos because they think their students won't learn responsibility or be motivated to do well in initial attempts are misguided. If an *F* on a project really motivated students to work harder, we'd have a lot more motivated students.

The perform–feedback–revise–perform–feedback–revise cycle is not only motivating to young adolescents, but it also prepares them better for high school, college, and the working world.

5. Teach the way the mind learns.

As teachers, we have to cultivate expertise in how the mind learns. Our lessons should show evidence of this expertise. For example, young adolescent minds crave vividness, so let's make content—from bibliographic format to JavaScript to graphing inequalities—come to life. Teachers might interview a math symbol about its importance, have students write the autobiography of a phospholipid, or create simulations to show syncopation. Don't limit such compelling lessons to something you do "only when I have time."

Prime students' brains from the beginning of a lesson—by describing learning goals and what students are about to experience. This will elevate the content's importance and move it to long-term memory. Young adolescents crave structure and patterns. Let's reveal patterns in texts and fields of study—for example, by teaching students Latin word roots so they can decode new words independently.

Young adolescents respond well to thematic instruction and integrated curriculum. Making connections among fine and performing arts, with math, social studies, foreign languages, and so on makes these subjects come to life. Motivation flourishes as students apply skills taught in one class to tasks done in another class. They will discover that scholars do quantitative and qualitative analysis in both science and poetry units and that people interpret data visually in every subject. The key to solid learning, though, is for students to make these connections themselves, not just be told about them.

Teaching young adolescents skills that build executive function is invaluable. So is teaching them about proper diet, exercise, and adequate sleep.

6. Tell stories and spark curiosity.

Young adolescents are like first-time visitors to an esoteric sculpture museum who don't understand why everyone's

so impressed with a particular piece of art. "With a little bit of time," they reason, "I could mold all that wire into that gangly mess and call it art." Then a museum curator explains the story behind the artist or his technique, and the skeptic is jarred into wide-eyed appreciation and curiosity.

Without the backstory, learners are trapped behind walls of indifference. Thomas Huxley put it well:

*To a person uninstructed in natural history, his country or seaside stroll is a walk through a gallery filled with wonderful works of art, nine-tenths of which have their faces turned to the wall.*²

Young adolescents are storytellers and story receivers. Narratives not only appeal to their theater of the mind, but they also provide connections among disparate parts. Reel students in with the story of the very uncertain particle that could never tell its location and speed at the exact same moment. How about the one about Avogadro and his amazing number?

In middle school and the early years of high school, students are particularly responsive to stories of individuals persevering through difficulty. They can read of Milo's adventure with Tock in *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Hazel's journey as she battles cancer in *The Fault in Our Stars*, and the true stories of Malala Yousafzai, Thomas Edison, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, and Homer Hickam (NASA engineer and author of *Rocket Boys*). Young adolescents internalize each moment of these stories, wondering, "Would I do the same thing?" As similar situations arise in their own lives, they try on these characters' "clothing," using some of the same rationales or even words, as they take action themselves.

It's motivating to foreshadow what's to come and challenge students' current thinking. Place a mysterious package in the classroom with a note indicating the exact date it should be opened and what supplies to have on hand when what's inside emerges. Fasten props to your clothing and incorporate each prop into the lesson meaningfully at some point. Arrange the classroom experience so that students say, "I'm never sure what's going to happen next."

A Systematic Effort

Although any one of these motivational elements may not work every time, several in tandem likely will. But middle schools will have to be systematic in how they foster students' thirst to learn. Schools of teacher preparation should provide coursework in motivation studies for new teachers, because inspiring everyone they teach will be crucial to their success. Without serious training in student motivation, new teachers are left with a limited repertoire of responses and unexamined—sometimes harmful—notions of what inspires middle-grade students to engage in something new or stick with something challenging.

Sure, there are structures in place that obstruct motivational pedagogy. (I'm looking at you, 50-minute class periods and curriculum-by-age conveyor belts.) But with the approaches described here, any teacher can make Renaissance art compelling or make understanding the terms *slope* and *y-intercept* liberating. The era of blaming young adolescents for their lack of motivation is over.

Top 12 Demotivators

1. Being told how important today's lesson will be in high school and beyond. (Instead, help kids live this one week of their lives powerfully.)
2. Teachers who talk the whole class period or who speak in long paragraphs when disciplining.
3. Complex assignments that you don't have the skills to complete and that have no clear evaluative criteria.
4. Being told what you're probably feeling and thinking, even if it's accurate.
5. Teachers who see teaching middle school as just something to do until a high school position opens up. (Students can tell when they're not a teacher's preferred age group.)
6. *F*s, zeroes, and other indicators of failure.
7. Spending the day working on weaknesses, without identifying and using strengths.
8. Being treated like elementary school students. (No more requiring students to march to the cafeteria with their fingers pressed to their lips or clapping hands at the front of the room in a cute rhythm that students must repeat.)
9. Anyone belittling your strong emotional response to something minor in your life.
10. Classes that claim to be relevant to your life but that deny you access to personal technology during lessons.
11. Unwavering adherence to pacing guides or program fidelity, regardless of individual needs and talents.
12. Sarcasm.

Endnotes

¹ For tips on giving feedback to students, see the September 2012 *Educational Leadership*.

² Huxley, T. (1907). *Aphorisms and reflections from the works of T. H. Huxley: Selected by Henrietta A. Huxley*. London: Macmillan and Co. Retrieved from <http://aleph0.clarku.edu/huxley/Book/Aphor.html>

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