

All of which is why we spend our end-of-summer days thinking of ways to engage our new crop of students — to persuade them to want to achieve the important learning goals we've set.

Motivation has long been a favorite subject of mine, and I've written about it often. But this summer, I reread a 2010 book, *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*, and came across an approach that's really helped me to think clearly about student motivation. The book details seven crucial principles, taken from research in the learning sciences (studies in psychology, cognitive science, and education) and applied to the contemporary college classroom. I read the book years ago, but somehow a chapter on the third principle — "students' motivation generates, directs, and sustains what they do to learn" — didn't strike me as strongly then as it does now.

The chapter offers a framework for understanding student motivation that is both intuitive and solidly backed by peer-reviewed research. It also breaks down motivation in a way that is useful when you are trying to come up with practical ways to encourage student buy-in. According to the framework, three main variables influence student motivation:

- **Value.** I like to think of this one as the "Do they care?" variable. Value refers to how much the student values the learning goal we are trying to motivate them to pursue. The more that students value a goal, the more motivated they will be to pursue it.
- **Expectancies.** By expectancies, the authors mean: Can the student expect to succeed in attaining the goal? That breaks down to two parts: (1) Will the steps we assign actually lead the student to the goal? and (2) Is the student capable of completing the steps and attaining the goal? The more that students think they will be able to attain a goal, the more likely they will be motivated to put in the work to pursue it.
- **Environment.** How supportive is the classroom environment? If students perceive the course environment to be supportive, they are more likely to be motivated to pursue the goal in question.

The chapter stresses that all three variables work together to influence student motivation. For instance, I value highly the goal of becoming the starting shortstop for the Boston Red Sox. Few things would make me happier. The reason why I am at my desk, typing this column — rather than in the batting cages or at the gym — is that I have no expectation that I am at all able to achieve this goal. My motivation is low, despite the fact that I value the goal highly. Likewise, even if your classroom environment is super supportive, and you've convinced your students that they can do anything, they still might not be motivated to do the work if you can't persuade them that your goals for them are valuable.

So how do we persuade students to value our course goals?

The best way to start, I'd argue, is by working to align our goals with students' goals for themselves. At the beginning of a semester, in particular, it's worthwhile to devote time to figuring out — and asking your students to figure out — what their goals are for the semester and beyond.

The first assignment I give every semester is a low-stakes writing exercise. I ask them to answer some pretty broad questions about their goals for the course: What do they want to achieve? Why are they taking this course? What, specifically, do they want to improve? What do they hope that success in this course will help them achieve in the future? I tell them that I won't grade their responses (they get credit for completing the exercise); I just want to learn more about them and what they're looking to get out of the class. How is that information useful?

- First, it helps me start to get to know my students. From their answers, I can quickly figure out whether I need to adjust my approach for the semester ahead. Have I been too ambitious? Have I made assumptions about them that aren't accurate? Do I need to focus more on particular skills or subjects? Reading their answers gives me the opportunity to better tailor my class to the students I have.
- Even more important is the effect this exercise has on the students. I love this assignment because it puts their focus squarely on themselves and what they want to improve or learn, rather than filling the opening day of class entirely with my expectations. I want students to work hard in my courses because they value what they're doing. I want them to work hard for themselves, not for me. I'm trying to convey, from Day 1, that their course goals are important to me, and should be important to them.

Research suggests, as well, that such goal-setting can have powerful effects. I've written before about a 2015 study by a group of researchers in the Netherlands and Canada who created an elaborate goal-setting assignment. They found that students who were asked to think about and articulate their goals for the future at the beginning of their college careers did significantly better academically than did control groups. A more recent Dutch study found that students in an economics course who were encouraged to set specific goals for themselves at the beginning of the semester did significantly better in the class than students who did not complete that task.

Beginning the semester with such an assignment can lay the foundation for a course that students feel is responsive to who they are and what they're looking to achieve. I find it useful to prod students to revisit their goals throughout the semester, reminding them of what they are looking to get out of the class. I look for opportunities to get students to connect what we're doing in class with their lives outside of class.

And I have become much more flexible over the years, when it comes to modifying my goals so they're more meaningful to students, and letting students have more control over their work wherever possible. When I teach rhetoric, I now know that I have to wait until I get to know my students at least a little bit before I can determine whether we'll need to focus on, for example, idea generation, revision, or refuting dodgy arguments. I tell students on the first day of class that the syllabus is a provisional document; the course will change depending on what they need. I try to signal that what's most important to me is that the work we do together is meaningful and valuable to them.

No matter your subject or your institution, whether your course is introductory or advanced, you won't be able to achieve your teaching goals if your students aren't motivated to learn. In future weeks, I'll return to the subject of motivation, taking up the variables of expectancies and environment. But it's worth thinking about — as you prepare to meet students for the new semester — whether they will value the goals you set for them. How can you ensure that what you find valuable about your subject will translate to the people you'll share your classroom with for the next 10 or 15 weeks? As you put the finishing touches on your syllabus, setting out your course goals for the students, don't forget to leave space for their goals, too.

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