

# Five Keys to Motivating Students

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June 6, 2018



Recently I had reason to revisit Paul Pintrich’s meta-analysis on motivation. It’s still the piece I most often see referenced when it comes to what’s known about student motivation. Subsequent research continues to confirm the generalizations reported in it. Like most articles that synthesize the results of many studies, it’s long, detailed, and liberally peppered with educational jargon. It does have a clear, easy to follow organizational structure and most notably, it spells out implications—what teachers might consider doing in response to what the research says motivates students. Here’s a quick run-down of those generalizations and their implications.



1. **Adaptive self-efficacy and competence perceptions motivate students.** Pintrich translates: “Students who believe that they are able and that they can and will do well are much more likely to be motivated in terms of effort, persistence, and behavior than students who believe they are less able and do not expect to succeed.” (p. 671) Even more simply: If students believe they can do it, they are motivated to try. The first **implication for teachers** involves the feedback they provide students. It needs to be accurate. If students don’t have the knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish the task, how can they acquire those? If students are trying, any progress, even very small amounts of it should be noted. A second **implication for teachers** involves the difficulty of the task. It needs to be challenging but something that can be accomplished. Tasks that are too hard or too easy are equally de-motivating to students.

2. **Adaptive attributions and control beliefs motivate students.** “The basic construct refers to beliefs about the causes of success and failure and how much perceived control one has to bring about outcomes or to control one’s behavior.” (p. 673) Related to the previous finding but with a different focus, the issue here is the context in which the learning occurs. If the student comes to class, does the homework and studies for the exam, will that produce a high score? If the student doesn’t think effort makes a difference, they won’t expend any. One important **implication for teachers**: there’s a need to talk about how learning works, the importance of effort and the control students do have over what and how they study. Another **implication**: students’ motivation increases when they are given the chance to make choices and exercise some control over learning, say, for example, deciding the relative weight of quizzes and exams within a designated range.
3. **Higher levels of interest and intrinsic motivation motivate students.** Research makes a distinction between personal and situational interest. Personal interest represents the attraction a student feels for a content area—what’s motivating the decision to major in a particular field. Situational interest refers to positive feelings generated by the learning tasks or activities themselves. The **implication** according to Pintrich: “Provide stimulating and interesting tasks, activities, and materials, including some novelty and variety in tasks and activities.” (p. 672) And then there’s the **implication** we all know but sometimes forget: Students can catch motivation from a teacher who is obviously, unabashedly in love with the content and teaching.
4. **Higher levels of value motivate students.** The motivational issue here is straightforward. Do students see the relevance, the importance of what they’re being asked to learn and do? Unfortunately, there’s still a whole lot of students who don’t think what they’re learning is relevant. But it is relevant and that’s so obvious to teachers, they don’t see the need to point it out. **Implication**: teachers should, at multiple times and in multiple ways, make clear the importance, usefulness, and relevance of the content and associated activities.
5. **Goals motivate and direct students.** And students aren’t motivated solely by academic goals, like those related to mastery (comprehension of content) and performance (grades). Pintrich notes that research on social goals “highlights the importance of peer groups and interactions with other students as important contexts for the shaping and development of motivation, a context that has tended to be ignored . . .” (p. 675) For teachers, one **implication** involves greater use of cooperative and collaborative group work designed so that it includes opportunities to attain both social and academic goals.

Motivation is sourced internally, but teachers can provide the fuel needed to power it. This classic piece of scholarship identifies the fuel and suggests how we can supply it.

Reference: Pintrich, P. R. (2003). A motivational science perspective on the role of student motivation in learning and teaching contexts. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95 (4), 667-686.

