In Search of Motivating Practices

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Do you know what academic motivation is and how to develop it in students? Although the subject has been discussed many times, including in the pages of this journal, it keeps being revisited as a fundamental aspect of the educational process. "How do I motivate my students?" This is a question that many teachers ask themselves when faced with a more or less interested class. Some develop knowhow and manage to motivate the troops, others do not. Is it a question of intuition or personality?

Not really! There are proven practices that support students' motivation to learn.

This article discusses the best-known theories of motivation and presents what teachers can do to support motivation to learn. For each of these theories, a case study of a hypothetical student's story is presented, and the role that the teacher can play is detailed.

Social-cognitive theories of motivation

While there are 101 theories of motivation, as Fenouillet (2016) writes, those belonging to the social-cognitive stream are more often evoked in research and practice. At the college level, authors such as Barbeau, Montini, and Roy (2001) have explored several of them and have identified avenues of intervention that can motivate students to learn. Here, focus is on four theories of motivation that are considered to be crucial: self-efficacy, causal attribution, self-determination, and task value.

Viau's (2009) definition of motivation in the school setting illustrates very well what characterizes the social-cognitive current: motivation is considered a phenomenon that has its source in a student's perceptions of themselves and their environment, and that results in the student choosing to engage in a proposed educational activity and persevere, for the purpose of learning (p. 12). Motivation is a changing and evolving phenomenon that is both internal to each individual and closely related to external factors (Schunk, Pintrich & Meece, 2008). Internal, because it is related to who I am and what I perceive as an individual. External, because it depends on what surrounds me: society and the place of education. According to the various theorists of this current, external factors influence students' motivational dynamics the most, especially those related to the course. Teachers must therefore be attentive to their practices if they want to intervene to encourage academic motivation. That being said, although motivation is a determining factor in a student's engagement, in other words, in the interest a student shows and the effort they put into an activity, they will also have to use appropriate learning strategies to be more successful.

The theories that will be described are interrelated (Schunk *et al.*, 2008). It is interesting for teachers to examine them by trying to answer the "questions" that students ask themselves and that determine their motivation to learn: *Can I do what is asked or expected of me? Do I want to do what is asked or expected of me?* The determinants thus identified will allow us to examine in parallel three categories of interventions that can contribute to developing students' motivation to learn: teaching practices, evaluation practices, and the teacher's relationships with each student and with the class group.

Can I do what is requested or expected?

The theories that provide the backdrop for answering the question "can I do...?" are well known. They concern self-efficacy (SE) and causal attributions. We describe them based on two typical cases.

Case 1

Attending her first physics class, Emily, who has been admitted to the Science program, hopes to complete her program in two years. The teacher begins the class by asking everyone to look at the other students sitting in the classroom. He tells them, "Last year, a third of the class failed this course. It was the same two years ago. I guess you don't want to be one of those students!" Wanting to help them succeed, he encourages them to review their lecture notes and complete the required exercises every week. This teacher has decided to shake up those who study at the last minute and then find themselves failing.

Emily, who did not do well in physics in high school, feels that she will probably fail this course, even if she does what is required. The exams are certainly very difficult for so many students to fail. She wonders if it would be better for her to drop the course.

Sense of self-efficacy

Bandura (1997) is the author of self-efficacy theory. He was interested in the beliefs that individuals like Emily have. According to him, a sense of self-efficacy is the foundation of human motivation, well-being, and achievement (Carré, 2004-2005, p. 19). It manifests itself through the belief that an individual has in their abilities and skills to perform a task and achieve their goals. Bandura (1986) states that an individual's SE is based more on their self-representation than on who they actually are.

Several research studies have been conducted on the major processes through which SE affects the individual's functioning (Bandura, 1997; Bouffard & Vezeau, 2010). Thus, it has been shown that the greater an individual's SE, the bigger the goals they pursue and the greater their effort and engagement in pursuing those goals. In an academic setting, this translates into a student's belief in their ability to understand and learn, which leads them to put in the effort and commitment to succeed. Students with a high SE correctly analyze situations and events, approach difficult tasks as challenges to be met rather than threats to be avoided, and are less affected by the stress that results from these difficulties. They visualize a scenario where they succeed, which guides them positively and sustains their engagement. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after a failure, as they attribute their

failure to insufficient effort, lack of knowledge or insufficient skills. A recent study by Wasylkiw, Hanson, MacRae Lynch, Vaillancourt, and Wilson (2020) confirms that self-efficacy determines a significant portion of the variance in academic performance and persistence of undergraduate university students. Furthermore, through the choices they make, students displaying self-efficacy develop different skills, interests, and a social environment that will determine the course of their life. Career choice is an example of the effect of SE on students' futures. Those with a high sense of self-efficacy make more ambitious career choices and prepare more effectively to achieve their goals.

On the contrary, students who doubt their abilities avoid difficult tasks that they perceive as threatening. They show less interest, have unambitious goals, reduce their efforts, and become less committed to their goals. When faced with difficult activities, like Emily, they talk about their inabilities and the obstacles they face rather than focusing on how to succeed. They believe they cannot control a difficult situation, experience anxiety, magnify risks, worry about things that rarely happen, and tend to engage in avoidance behaviours. They drop out of classes more often than those with a strong sense of self-efficacy and have difficulty finding their way in the workplace. They are slow to recover their sense of efficacy because they associate their performance with ineptitude.

Bandura (1997) states that four sources can contribute to the development of an individual's SE: successful or mastery experiences, vicarious or indirect experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional and physiological states. Successful or mastered lived experiences are the most determining sources of influence. Thus, success can contribute to building a strong sense of self-efficacy, especially if it requires overcoming certain obstacles. It teaches the student that they can succeed if they put in the effort required. On the other hand, failures most often produce a decrease in this feeling.

Emily, whom we introduced earlier, is concerned: she has not done well in physics in high school and doubts that she will be able to pass her physics class; she already envisions failing the course and wonders if she should drop it. Her lived experience is not positive, and she has clearly not learned to see herself as "capable of."

How do we make students feel "capable of"?

- Respond positively and sympathetically to their questions.

- Supervise the completion of their work by providing clear instructions, detailed evaluation grids and feedback suggesting ways to improve their productions.

- Use formative assessment to help them identify what they have understood and what they need to work on, so they can ask for the relevant support.

- Encourage them to observe and analyze how they behave in successful situations. To illustrate what self-observation is, the teacher can use themselves as an example.

The second source is vicarious or indirect experience. Seeing individuals, similar to ourselves, achieve success through effort leads us to believe that we, too, can achieve success through effort. Through their conduct and expression of thought, competent students pass on their knowledge and teach those who observe them skills and strategies for managing their environment. On the contrary, if someone similar to us fails in spite of their effort, it reduces the feeling of effectiveness and therefore the effort invested.

How can we promote a positive vicarious experience?

- Avoid competition and comparison between peers.

- Encourage collaboration by having them work in teams and by inviting them to evaluate the productions of their peers to improve them.

A third source is persuasion by others, which can take the form of encouragement, evaluative feedback, advice, and opinions of significant individuals.

We realize that Emily is faced with a teacher who believes that some members of the class are not capable of learning. However, several studies have shown that a teacher who believes that all of their students can learn is much more successful than a teacher who believes that only some of their students can learn (Bouffard & Vezeau, 2010).

How can the teacher have a positive influence?

- First, establish a trusting relationship with students, a supportive climate.

- Show that you believe them to be capable of learning and succeeding in an activity.

- Discuss with them the learning strategies they use and those they could develop.

The fourth and final source is the individual's perceived emotional and physiological state. For example, individuals who interpret manifestations of stress, fatigue, and pain as signs of incapacity see their sense of self-efficacy impaired. Thus, it is important to get students to analyze the sources of the state experienced and identify ways to reduce it. Emily, who experiences a lot of stress, could be reassured about her feelings (she is not the only one who has them) and encouraged to explore what can help her reduce this agitation, such as doing an activity she enjoys, breathing consciously, doing exercise, etc.

Causal attribution

For Weiner (1986), causal attribution is a cognitive process by which students explain their own behaviours as well as those of others. It is a process of constructing reality from observed events or behaviours. Causal attributions play a role in students' perceptions of controllability, for if they do not attribute their successes and failures to themselves, they do not perceive themselves to be in control of their environment. The causes invoked by students may be internal or external, stable or unstable, controllable or uncontrollable.

Case 2

As the teacher reviews the last history exam with the whole group, he reminds them that the questions were aimed at analyzing different events that marked the period studied.

Adam, who is used to doing well in history, intervenes, a little angry, because he did not do well on this exam. He felt that the questions were not related to the subject matter. He had revised each chapter well and memorized all the important dates and events. He had spent a lot of time preparing for this exam and it didn't work out.

Source: onfire.craftwork.design.com

Adam is a typical example—so often heard—of a student who explains his failure on the basis of an external cause (the exam) perceived as uncontrollable and unstable, because the content of the exam elaborated by the teacher did not correspond, according to him, to what was expected. He does not take responsibility for this failure, especially since he had made a significant effort. Therefore, he will not question how he prepared for it, nor will he pay attention to his teacher's feedback on the content of the exam.

How do we deal with students who do not take credit for their classroom experiences or, as in this case, for their failure?

- Encourage students to ask themselves the following questions following formative and summative evaluations:

  ◦ How did I perceive the content of this evaluation?

  ◦ How did I prepare for this evaluation?

  ◦ How could I prepare next time to be well aligned with the content of the evaluation?

- Invite students to observe themselves by reflecting on possible causes of their difficulties.

- Reaffirm that effort, perseverance, and the use of relevant learning strategies are most helpful in achieving greater success.

For example, on the next exam, the teacher could explain to Adam what the purpose of the evaluation is (what is meant by "analyze," if that is still what is asked) and get him to make

an inventory of the strategies he could use to prepare himself in a consistent manner. He might, for example, suggest to Adam that while rereading his notes, he question the causes of the events being studied, the persons responsible for them and those who suffered them, the relationship between these events and those that preceded and followed them, and their consequences on the situation at the time.

Do I want to achieve what is required or expected?

The following two theories explain how the goals pursued and the value attributed to an activity can also influence students' motivation to engage.

Self-determined motivation

The theoretical point of view of self-determined motivation will be discussed rather briefly, as it is fairly well known. Ryan and Deci (2002) state in this theory that individuals continually seek to develop themselves by discovering new avenues, by taking on challenges and by satisfying three basic needs: to feel autonomous in their choices (self-determined), to perceive themselves as competent and to be part of a social environment.

The authors argue that there are different forms of motivation that are differentiated by their degree of self-determination and that vary according to context. Thus, students can be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated or amotivated according to the degree of free choice they exercise in a particular context.
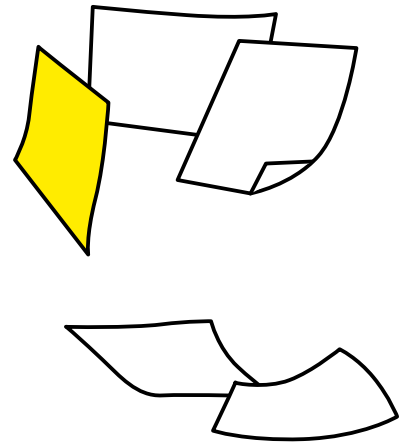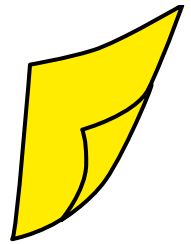
Case 3

In an English class, the teacher observes that some students enjoy practising what they have learned in English, while others seem to be forced to do so or try to avoid these exchanges altogether.

Lea is one of those who seems to enjoy learning and practising languages. She says she practises English as often as she can, both in and out of the classroom. For her, language learning is a window to the world, and she can see herself working abroad and learning other languages.

In class, Olivier pouts. Well, you have to learn English, but it's so complicated—the pronunciation as much as the inflection of verbs… Nonetheless, he regularly practises it in class and, when possible, outside of class. He knows that he has to pass this course in order to graduate and to get a good job at the end of his program. Therefore, he makes the necessary efforts.

Source: onfire.craftwork.design.com

If students are intrinsically motivated, they complete an activity for fun and to learn more. Lea is obviously an intrinsically motivated student because she enjoys learning foreign languages.

Schunk *et al.* (2008) state that many students actually have low levels of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is more conducive to learning and achievement than extrinsic motivation, so it is useful to foster it. According to the authors, teachers can help increase it through various interventions.

- Showing interest in what you are teaching.

- Providing a variety of activities that require a reasonable challenge.

- Stimulating students' curiosity (e.g., challenge their knowledge or beliefs).

- Involving students actively.

- Providing examples of applications in the workplace.

- Providing positive feedback after the acquisition of a skill or knowledge.

- Providing students with some control over the activities to be completed (choice of topic) or the guidelines.

- Being creative in your teaching (e.g., using games, simulations).

One might think that rewarding students would help maintain their motivation. Schunk *et al.* (2008) report on numerous studies concluding that the effect depends not only on the teacher's intent, but also on the student's perception of the reward. If the reward is perceived as a way to control the student's approach, it will have a negative effect on the student's self-determination. On the other hand, if it is perceived as providing information about their level of competence, it will have a positive effect.

Extrinsic motivation includes behaviours performed for instrumental reasons. Four categories of extrinsic motivation involve varying degrees of self-determination, ranging from the person who acts for a reward or to avoid punishment—like the student who tries to pass their classes in order to get the new computer promised by their parents (level 1)—to the person who has embraced external conditions even if they did not choose them (level 4) (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Olivier, our student featured in the second case, is closer to level 4. He has decided to study and practise English, even though he does not like doing so, because he wants to pass his course to complete his program as quickly as possible and enter the job market.

How do we foster greater extrinsic motivation in low-motivated students?

- Value the students' efforts.

- Invite them to follow the effort with an enjoyable activity (reward themselves).

- Put forward what they could do to achieve their ultimate goal, such as passing the exam or course, being admitted into a program, or working in their desired profession.

- Have them set short-term goals that are realistically challenging, rather than ambitious long-term goals (e.g., passing the next exam rather than passing the course with an A).

As for amotivated students, they no longer perceive any link between their engagement and the results obtained. What's the point of studying; they won't succeed! We sometimes come across students who enroll in CEGEP without believing that they are capable of succeeding in their studies. These students are often absent from classes, don't show up for exams, or drop out prematurely. They often have a history of failure or low grades.

What to do if students are amotivated?

- Invite them to enroll in few courses and choose the ones that interest them the most.

- Promote classroom collaboration that allows students to seek help from peers.

- Get support from others, such as educational advisors, to develop the students' learning strategies.

- Encourage them to explore the professions that interest them.

In this case, the motivations of Lea and Olivier are different, but they are likely to help these students succeed. The challenge is quite different when a teacher is faced with students who are not motivated enough or not at all. It is then sometimes up to the teacher to find ways to maintain their own motivation to teach, because the challenge is great. It is important to offer support not only to the students, but also to the teachers who are faced with a group of students who are not giving their best.
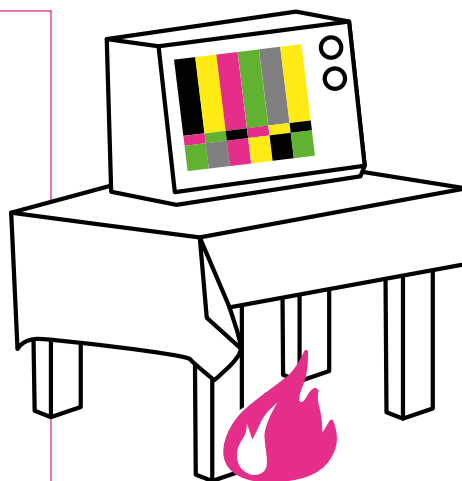
The perception of the value of an activity

Extracted from the expectancy value theoretical model, the value of an activity plays an important role in motivating students to engage in a task or activity and to persevere. According to Wigfield and Eccles (2000), students question the value of an activity by evaluating its importance or usefulness. When the activity is perceived as important, it gives the student satisfaction. Perceived usefulness indicates the extent to which a task fits into the student's education, goals or plans. For example, one student will value an exercise if they find it interesting for learning, while another will find it useful because they know that they will have to use it when practising their profession.

Source : onfire.craftwork.design.com

The students in this Computer Science Technology course calling into question the format of the activity naturally depends on the goals they are pursuing, which brings us back to the different dimensions of self-determined motivation we explored earlier. But let's look at what a teacher might do when their students question the usefulness of their course or the value of the activities:

- Define the role (importance and usefulness) that a course plays in the program at the beginning of the session.

- Clarify, at the beginning of each class, the value of the material covered in light of mastering the course.

- Explain how the exercises or tasks proposed allow for a better understanding of the subject matter and the learning required to practise a profession.

- Provide concrete examples of applications from the labour market when possible.

Hulleman, Godes, Hendricks, and Harackiewicz (2010) assert that the effects on interest and performance are even more beneficial when teacher interventions lead students to discover the importance or usefulness of the task themselves.

How can we get students to see the importance or usefulness?

- Plan time at the beginning of activities to invite students to reflect on their goals and the importance and usefulness of the learning they are being asked to do in class.

- For example, initiate a group discussion or reflection activity around the questions: What can this activity do for us, for me? Why is this interesting or important to learn for us, for me?

These activities allow students to clarify their goals while stimulating their interest in a task.

Conclusion

Four theories of motivation were explored through four case studies, and teacher interventions to motivate students or to get them to motivate themselves were described. While many teachers will find it challenging to implement these interventions, research we conducted at the college level (Menard & Leduc, 2016) confirms that it is possible to motivate students.

In fact, the suggested interventions intersect, and they all relate to what cognitivists call *student learning-centered practices* (see **Table 1**). With consistent and purposeful use, they will enable you to teach more motivated students, which is certainly more rewarding than seeing them indifferent. ▬

Table 1

Learning-centered practices

Establishing a trusting relationship with students, a supportive classroom climate.

Showing interest in what you are teaching, setting an example.

Using imagination, stimulating curiosity.

Making students participate actively.

Prompting questions and responding positively to them.

Providing examples related to the professional environment.

Providing meaningful and varied tasks that offer a reasonable challenge.

Explaining the course's role in the program.

Mentioning why the topic is being addressed, specifying task goals.

Leading students to identify how learning is useful, important, and interesting to them.

Making connections between concepts seen in class.

Avoiding competition and comparison between peers, but rather encouraging collaboration by having them work in teams, inviting them to evaluate their peers' productions to improve them.

Affirming that effort and the use of good strategies are important to success; discussing with students what strategies they might develop.

Inviting students to "reward themselves" after a major effort.

Encouraging self-observation in order to analyze how we prepare when we succeed and to identify possible causes of our difficulties.

Implementing formative evaluation to better guide students.

Offering a choice of production formats and subject matters when possible.

Providing clear instructions and grading criteria and giving detailed feedback that suggests ways to improve student productions.

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