

A LINE ON LIFE

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Motivating Students to Learn *

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Since school is starting, it seems appropriate to write an article about motivating students to learn. Psychologist Edmund J. Sass had 700 of his educational psychology students (in 22 different class sections) analyze two different class periods – one in which they were highly motivated and one in which their motivation was very low. They were encouraged to think critically about what made their classes more or less "*motivating*." In each class, individuals shared their views in small groups. Each group reached a consensus of characteristics in a class situation that motivated them.



Although this list varied from group to group, each list of characteristics associated with high motivation almost always included the same eight categories. The characteristics are given below in order of importance as determined by student rankings. In the rankings, *enthusiasm* and *relevance* were virtually tied for first, with *organization* coming in a relatively close third. The other characteristics ranked considerably lower.

1. Enthusiasm.

Teachers in these classes have high energy levels, and their interest and enjoyment of the subject matter are obvious. As students often put it, "How can teachers expect us to be interested in a topic, if they don't seem interested in it?"

2. Relevance (Relatedness). The course material is seen as relevant, applicable and important to the students. They can relate what they learn to their lives, their experiences and their career goals. Teachers often make this relevance explicit to the students through their explanations and examples.

3. Organization (Well-planned, Prepared). Teachers of these classes did not "*wing it*." Their classes were organized, and their preparation was obvious. To put it in the students' words, "We can see that they have done their homework, which makes us feel more responsible to do ours."

4. Appropriate Difficulty Level. Most of the students see the class as a challenge, but "doable." The instructor's expectations are not so simple as to "insult their intelligence," yet most students perceive the material to be understandable and tests to be fair and "passable."

5. Active involvement. Students are actively engaged in classroom learning, which may involve group discussion or other "hands-on" activities. In a lecture class, students may be actively involved through frequent questioning by the instructor.

6. Variety. The same instructional techniques are not used in every class. Monotony is avoided by using a variety of strategies such as lecture, class discussion, media, or discovery learning.

7. Rapport. The teachers are perceived as approachable and friendly. They appear interested in the students and their learning. They talk to students before and after class, know at least some of their names, and create a comfortable climate.

8. Use of Appropriate Examples. Course material is made real, concrete and understandable through the use of appropriate examples and related anecdotes. This quality is particularly crucial in a lecture class.

Not surprisingly, the characteristics viewed as non-motivating are essentially the opposite of those just described. Characteristics on this list typically include:

1. Lack of variety (generally all lecture)
2. Disorganization
3. Little or no active involvement
4. Perceived lack of involvement on the part of the instructor
5. Perceived lack of interpersonal warmth from the instructor.

These findings are in essential agreement with previous studies. Although these characteristics are not a "sure cure" for all motivation problems in the classroom, incorporating more of these characteristics into classes is likely to improve student motivation.

The above results seem to demonstrate that student motivation is not determined solely by achievement motivation – the desire to make a "good grade." Student motivation is only mildly affected by specific course content, days offered, class hour, or other factors over which the teacher has little control. The teacher and what s/he does (or does not do) has major impact on students' willingness to make a persistent effort to learn.

If you are a teacher, it would be helpful if you re-examined your teaching methods to see if you are making the most of these characteristics. If not, try to incorporate more of them into your classes.

**Teachers need constructive feedback about their teaching methods.
It helps them to know which methods to continue
and which to abandon.**

On the other hand, if you are a student, you can rate your classes to see if they have the characteristics to improve motivation. If they do, let the teachers know that you appreciate what they are doing. If not, you might want to send the teachers copies of this article with the appropriate points highlighted.

However, there is one last point for students. Any teacher's job is to provide the best learning environment that can be given. Unfortunately, they cannot learn the material for you. That job is *yours*.

* Adapted from Edmund J. Sass, "Motivation in the College Classroom: What Students Tell Us," *Teaching of Psychology*, April, 1989, pages 86-88.