

5 Questions to Ask Yourself About Your Unmotivated Students

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37: How to Motivate Students: Five Questions for Teachers

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When I ask teachers what their biggest struggles are, one issue comes up on a regular basis: student motivation. You are able to reach many of your students, but others are unreachable. No matter what you try, they have no interest in learning,

no interest in doing quality work, and you are out of ideas.

For a long time, I had no solutions; the problem was too complex. I have had my own unmotivated students, and I never had any magic bullets for them. Still, the issue kept coming up from my readers.

So I decided to do some research, to try to find what the most current studies say about what motivates students. This is what I found:

1. Students are more motivated academically when they have a **positive relationship** with their teacher.
2. **Choice** is a powerful motivator in most educational contexts.
3. For complex tasks that require creativity and persistence, **extrinsic rewards and consequences actually hamper motivation**.
4. To stay motivated to persist at any task, students must believe they can **improve** in that task.
5. Students are motivated to learn things that have **relevance** to their lives.

To dig deeper into this research, you'll find a link at the end of this post to a collection of resources that explore current studies on each of the above findings.

STOPPING THE BUCK: THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN STUDENT MOTIVATION

The research on motivation wasn't hard to find; it seems as if any teacher with an Internet connection and an hour or two should be able to learn everything they need to know about the topic.

So where's the disconnect? If we as a collective group of educators already know what works to motivate students, why are so many students still unmotivated? When I talk with teachers about the problem, I don't hear much about the research.

Instead, we blame technology: "Students are so distracted by their phones."

Or we blame the parents: "Parents just don't want to be bothered" or "They don't want their kids to fail/experience setbacks/take responsibility."

Or we make sweeping generalizations: "Kids today just aren't like they used to be. They act so entitled."

Are we passing the buck? Maybe. It's certainly easier to blame outside forces than it is to make big changes in the way we teach. Unfortunately, even if ALL of the above statements are true, *we can't do anything about those things*. The only piece we really have control over is what goes on in our own classrooms.

So let's look at our own practice. When we set aside all the outside factors and just focus in on our time with students, how are we doing? How much alignment is there between our own instructional moves and the research on student motivation?

I have put together a list of five questions we can ask ourselves to see if we really are doing everything we could to boost student motivation. To keep me from getting too preachy, I'll do the exercise with you, reflecting on the years when I was a classroom teacher with middle school students.

Okay, let's go.

THE QUESTIONS

1. HOW IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR STUDENTS, REALLY?

Multiple studies have shown a significant connection between student motivation and the quality of the teacher-student relationship. A good teacher-student relationship provides students with a sense of stability and safety, which sets the stage for more academic risk-taking. So what kind of relationship do you have with your least motivated students? How well do you really know them? Do you have conversations with them about the things *they* care about? Or have you more or less given up on them?

My response:

At first, I'm thinking I did pretty well in this area. I taught English language arts and my students kept journals, so I got to know them well. But when I think about my less-motivated kids, I'm not so sure I can say the same. The connection I had to Andre, one of my seventh-graders, consisted entirely of me getting him to make up missed work. It was all we talked about: the missing work, why he wasn't turning it in, how important this stuff was for his future. When Andre saw me coming, he probably just saw a looming cloud of nag. We never really talked about the stuff that mattered to him.

How we can do better:

Just becoming more aware of the value of relationships is the most important step. From there, consider one of these resources:

- Jim Sturtevant's book, [You've Gotta Connect](http://cultofpedagogy.com/connecting-with-students/) (<http://cultofpedagogy.com/connecting-with-students/>).

, is full of specific strategies for building stronger bonds with your students.
(Episode 9)

- Smokey and Elaine Daniels' [The Best-Kept Teaching Secret](http://cultofpedagogy.com/best-kept-teaching-secret/)
(<http://cultofpedagogy.com/best-kept-teaching-secret/>)

describes how dialogue journals can help us get to know our students better personally and academically.

- If you want something faster, take a look at the [2 x 10 strategy](http://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/2014/10/the-2x10-strategy-a-miraculous-solution-for-behavior-issues.html)
(<http://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/2014/10/the-2x10-strategy-a-miraculous-solution-for-behavior-issues.html>)

, shared by Angela Watson, which has teachers spend two minutes a day for ten days casually chatting with underperforming students.

- Remember that relationships between students matter, too. A well-chosen [classroom icebreaker](http://cultofpedagogy.com/classroom-icebreakers/)
(<http://cultofpedagogy.com/classroom-icebreakers/>)

can begin building a sense of community in your room.

2. HOW MUCH CHOICE DO YOUR STUDENTS ACTUALLY HAVE?

Study after study points to choice as a major factor in motivation. Most of us have probably heard this, but we may not have fully embraced it. After all, providing choice can be messy, with students completing different tasks at different rates, making it hard to be consistent with grading. It can also mean a lot more prep work: If you're going to give students three different options for an assignment, that means you have to prepare all three options ahead of time. Or do you? Isn't that kind of prep work more in line with worksheet-oriented teaching, where students are doing low-level work that was largely prepared by the teacher? If

students are engaged in more long-term, authentic, creative projects, it's much easier to provide them with choices, because we aren't constantly trying to provide them with new busywork every day.

My response:

I was pretty good about letting students choose topics for writing assignments, but I also required a lot of seat work as well. I wanted students to do their work at about the same pace, and I knew next to nothing about differentiation. Now I'm thinking about Matt, another one of my unmotivated seventh graders, who was incredibly smart. He sat way low in his chair in the back of the Gifted & Talented language arts class he'd been assigned to, way cooler than all the others, and he gave minimal effort. I used the same nagging approach I'd used with Andre, with minimal success. Now that I know more about differentiation and choice, I realize I could have had a conversation with Matt about letting him work ahead on some things. I could have allowed him, and his classmates, more input on the larger assignments I gave them. If I had given Matt a more active role in his own learning, he might have been more engaged.

How we can do better:

There are lots of ways you can allow more choice in your classroom without having to completely overhaul your way of doing things. Even adding a small amount of choice to what students already have is an improvement. Consider letting them choose:

- seating: Could students do some assignments on the floor? In the hall? Or just in different seats?
- work groups: Some students thrive in groups, while others do better on their own.
- intake mode: If you want a student to read a particular book, and an audio version is available, you could occasionally make that an option.

- output mode: For some assignments, it may be possible to have students deliver their response in an audio or video recording, rather than in writing.
- timing: If students don't absolutely have to do the same thing at the same time, why not let them choose the order of activities they do?

3. ARE YOU RELYING HEAVILY ON CARROTS AND STICKS...OR JOLLY RANCHERS?

Many, many teachers count on rewards (“carrots”) and punishments (“sticks”) to motivate students. And those who study motivation tell us that extrinsic reinforcement can be motivating if the task is something easy: If you're trying to get students to clean up the classroom quickly, for example, offering class points toward a party can get them to speed up. But for tasks that require creativity and complex thought, extrinsic rewards actually *reduce* motivation. In your class, how much of your motivational approach is extrinsic? How often do you use grades, treats, privileges or punishments to prod students into doing something they don't really want to do, something they have no real interest in? If extrinsic reinforcement is your primary approach, you may actually be killing off any natural motivation students might have otherwise had.

My response:

I score myself pretty low here. As a teacher, my classroom management was a mess until I learned how to control students with names on the board, extra credit, whole-class rewards for good behavior, and the ever-reliable bag of Jolly Ranchers. I did those things because they worked. But there's a difference between *getting kids to do what you want* and truly, deeply motivating them.

How we can do better:

Try to catch yourself the next time you're about to tie a challenging activity to a reward or consequence. When introducing a task, try focusing on its inherent

interest or value, or how much students are going to learn, rather than on a separate reward or grade. Consider the difference in these two statements:

- I'm going to give you a sheet of math problems. The first ten are required, the last two are for extra credit.
- I'm going to give you a sheet of math problems. The first ten should be fairly easy, but I want to see how many of you can do the last two—those are the challenge problems. You guys have learned enough that I think you can solve at least one of them, maybe both.

If you have a tendency to go for the first option, you are going for the easy win, the extrinsic reinforcement. If you find that this doesn't do much to motivate your underperforming students, try moving more toward the second option and see if anything changes.

4. DO YOUR WORDS CONTRIBUTE TO A GROWTH MINDSET OR A FIXED MINDSET?

What could be wrong with saying “You're so smart”? It's nice, right? It boosts their confidence, no? Well, it's more complicated than that. Students are motivated to persist at a challenging task when they believe they can get better at it. That requires them to have a growth mindset, a belief that their intelligence and abilities can be developed with effort. Teachers can have an impact on this mindset with the things we say to students. So when we say “You're so smart,” “You have natural math ability,” or “You're a great writer,” we are telling the student it's their natural ability that got them where they are. We're contributing to a fixed mindset. And that's not motivating.

My response:

When I was in the classroom, I knew nothing about growth mindset. I thought kids would feel great if I told them they were smart or talented. I can remember a

conversation with Janae, a student who commanded the attention of her peers with ease but got into trouble a lot and did poorly in school. I remember pulling her aside and telling her that I thought she had strong leadership qualities, and that if she could just get her grades up, she had a bright future ahead of her. Yeah, that didn't work. If I wanted her to "get her grades up," I would have been better off noticing a well-constructed sentence or complimenting the way she got her group back on track during a cooperative learning activity, showing her exactly what kind of choices she should keep making to be successful.

How we can do better:

- Instead of praising something innate and fixed about a student, focus on specific things students can actually control. So instead of telling a student she's a great student, notice the level of detail in her lab report. Marvel at the level of difficulty she was able to handle on that challenging math problem. Point out how much preparation she must have done for the presentation she gave. It's faster and easier to just tell them they're awesome, but taking the time to be specific and focus on effort will pay much larger dividends.
- When you have constructive feedback to give, follow the same principle and make it specific. Rather than telling a student she "needs to work harder" on her assignments, tell her *what to work on*. Is neatness an issue? Does she need to read the questions more slowly? Is she doing the advanced math right, but messing up with the basic addition and subtraction? If a student knows what to work on, she will be far more motivated to do that work.

5. WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO MAKE YOUR CONTENT RELEVANT TO STUDENTS' LIVES?

I think this is another one of those principles that's been around for so long, we assume we're doing it more than we actually are. But showing students how the content relates to their lives really does make a difference. When students believe

they are doing something authentic, something that will improve their lives or have some kind of impact, they are naturally motivated. So how are you doing in this area? Do you regularly provide opportunities for students to connect what they're learning to the world they currently live in?

My response:

I got pretty lazy about this. Just like crafting a good opening and closing for each day's learning, I often cut corners on making my material relevant. I was often much more focused on getting through content and tasks than I was on making it meaningful. I was pretty good about giving writing assignments on topics that mattered to them, but I don't know how clearly I connected what they were doing to how it could help them. For example, with something like argumentative writing—I was probably more focused on “this is how you get a good grade on this” rather than on “this is how you change someone's mind.”

How we can do better:

- Plan it, then say it: Making material more relevant can be as simple as occasionally stopping an activity to explain its relevance. When students are studying the Lincoln-Douglas debates, show parallels with the current presidential election. When you're studying bacteria, talk about all the places bacteria hang out in students' daily lives. Making these kinds of connections is a natural practice for many teachers, but if you're like me, you might forget to add these connections into a lesson. So just add them into your lesson plan; literally write down a few connections you plan to make some time during a class period, then check your plans before class is over to make sure you did it.
- More reflection: Even asking students to think about how course material connects to their lives can make a difference. One study (see the *Motivation Matters* document in the collection) had teachers ask students to write weekly reflections on how the material they were learning related to their lives;

lower-performing students in these classes did better compared to those where teachers didn't use this intervention. Researchers referred to these as "value interventions."

- Design tasks that end with a public product: In one of the videos in the collection below, educator Kathleen Cushman describes the highly engaging work students do at [High Tech High](http://www.hightechhigh.org/) (<http://www.hightechhigh.org/>)

, a school whose curriculum focuses on project-based learning. Student projects have an authentic, public end product—a video, a live presentation, a community service project, a website—something that will ultimately be consumed by people outside of their own classroom. This naturally motivates students to work harder on a task. So look at your curriculum and see if you can find more ways to build assignments around real, public products.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The purpose of this exercise is not to beat ourselves up. It's just a way of deeply diagnosing a problem most teachers struggle with. There's a very good chance that the technology, the parents, or the entitlement are playing a role in what we perceive to be reduced student motivation. But there's a very good chance that our instructional decisions play a role as well.

So pick one area and start there. Make a small adjustment this week and see what happens. Share in the comments where you think you could improve, then come back and tell us what changes made a difference. To solve a problem as complicated as student motivation, there is no magic bullet; instead we'll need a set of tools that we blend and refine over time. This is a process that will definitely be slower and more frustrating than a single, easy solution, but we're professionals. This is our craft. We can do this. ♦

READ THE RESEARCH ON BLOOMBOARD

I have collected seven excellent resources relating to the topic of student motivation. Instead of housing them here, I have been invited to gather them into a collection on [BloomBoard](https://next.bloomboard.com/) (<https://next.bloomboard.com/>).

, a new site where educators curate collections of resources then have them reviewed by the BloomBoard team before they are made available to the public. To view them, you'll need to open a free account, which takes about ten seconds. Then you'll have access to BloomBoard's growing collection of free, high-quality resources.

Throughout the month of February, over 20 education bloggers will be sharing Collections of learning resources on their blogs. Readers can check back into the [BloomBoard Blog](http://blog.bloomboard.com/) (<http://blog.bloomboard.com/>).

every Monday in February for the week's schedule of bloggers and follow along daily on BloomBoard's [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/bloomboard/) (<https://www.facebook.com/bloomboard/>).

and [Twitter](https://twitter.com/BloomBoard) (<https://twitter.com/BloomBoard>).

Go check out my collection called [**Beyond Carrots and Sticks: How Teachers Can Really Motivate Students**](https://goo.gl/6jxsc2) (<https://goo.gl/6jxsc2>).

The next blogger in the series is Gabrielle from [Teaching Special Thinkers](http://www.teachingspecialthinkers.com/) (<http://www.teachingspecialthinkers.com/>).

. Gabrielle is a K-2 teacher who serves students with autism and wants to empower others who do the same. On her site, she creates engaging resources that can meet the needs of different learning styles and ability levels and save teachers time.

Keep in touch.

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and get weekly tips, tools, and inspiration—in quick, bite-sized packages—all geared toward making your teaching more effective and fun. You'll get access to my members-only library of free downloadable resources, including my e-booklet, **[20 Ways to Cut Your Grading Time in Half](#)**

[\(http://cultofpedagogy.com/ cut-grading-time-in-half/\)](http://cultofpedagogy.com/ cut-grading-time-in-half/)

, which has helped thousands of teachers spend less time grading!

WHAT TO READ NEXT

[Why Teaching is Like Dating](#)

[\(https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/why-teaching-is-like-dating/\)](https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/why-teaching-is-like-dating/)

[How Dialogue Journals Build Teacher-Student](#)

[\(https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/dialogue-journals/\)](https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/dialogue-journals/)

[\(https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/dialogue-journals/\)](https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/dialogue-journals/)

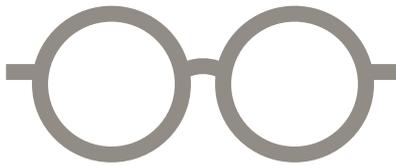
[A Step-by-Step Plan for Teaching Argumentative Writing](https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/step-by-step-plan-for-teaching-argumentative-writing/)

[\(https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/persuasive-writing/\)](https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/persuasive-writing/)

[\(https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/persuasive-writing/\)](https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/persuasive-writing/)

[Why Teaching is Like Dating](https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/why-teaching-is-like-dating/)

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