

# Creating Motivating Learning Environments: What We Can Learn from Researchers and Students

*Eschewing punishment and reward schemes, and with references to current academic research and comments from secondary students, Daniels suggests concrete methods for helping students motivate themselves.*

I began my career teaching kindergarten. All 38 of my students (this was before class size reduction) showed up to school excited to be there and eager to learn. When I moved to the middle school, it was an entirely different story. I was stunned when most of my students didn't care whether or not they were successful academically. I encountered the same attitudes years later as a ninth-grade English teacher. Many students told me they "hated" reading and that school was "boring." At faculty meetings across the years, colleagues have spent countless hours discussing students' lack of motivation and brainstorming strategies for engaging them. Some students responded well as we tried to make our presentations more exciting and our assignments more hands-on. Others continued to sit with their hoods up and heads down, disinterested in the content or the process.

In 2007 I left the full-time English classroom and began teaching in a college of education, but I have stayed connected to students. As I observe in dynamic teachers' classrooms and interview students to find out what makes them motivated, I have learned a lot. The students are excellent at articulating what they care about and what they need, and we can learn a lot from listening to their stories.

Additionally, academic researchers (for a good review of the literature, see Anderman and Anderman) have spent decades researching motivation and have developed a clear definition. Briefly, "to be motivated means *to be moved* to do something" (Ryan and Deci 54; italics in original). When we combine the two bodies of information—academic research

and student interactions—some clear strategies emerge. First, however, it is essential to understand what motivation looks like in a school setting.

## What Is Motivation in School?

Sustained motivation comes from within an individual (Ryan and Deci 54), but it can be influenced by contextual factors. Teachers cannot *make* someone motivated, but they *can* create motivating learning environments. Students feel motivated when

1. They feel some sense of autonomy or control (Ryan and Deci 57).
2. They feel connected to the class and the school (Daniels 53; Deci and Ryan 12).
3. They feel as if they possess the skills necessary to meet the challenges of school (Csikszentmihalyi 53).

The students I have spoken to over the years echo this research. They are not looking only for "easy" work. They are not looking only for "nice" teachers. They are looking for clear and specific instruction from their teachers so that they know what they need to accomplish (autonomy), knowledge that their teachers care about and are committed to the class (relatedness), and a belief that they *can* do what is being asked of them (competence).

When students learn that they do have control over their choices, thoughts, and actions, it means that their teachers have created motivating learning environments. They are more likely to learn the material or complete the tasks because they feel it is their choice (Anderman and Anderman 17). When students engage because they see value in the

learning experience, that intrinsic motivation leads to increased engagement (Bandura 102).

In one high school English classroom, Heather K. Casey found that students were engaged with reading when they made decisions about what they would read and how they would participate (290). Their teacher allowed them to choose from a range of texts to demonstrate their understanding of the literature concepts she taught. The autonomy that came from allowing students to make their own choices led to increased motivation. They wanted to perform well because they were invested in their work. It was not another mindless lesson that meant little to them personally.

Students in middle school and high school both want and need to know that they can exercise some semblance of control over their lives (Deci and Ryan 15). Motivation in school often results when students

are allowed to make choices over how they will demonstrate their learning. If a teacher needs to know whether the class understood the universal truths in *Romeo and Juliet*, giving them a choice among writing an essay, doing a presentation, or making a video results in the same knowledge. When teachers allow their students to make choices about what is right for them, students develop ownership over their learning, which

leads to increased desire to participate in school (Mednick 2). If their learning matters to them, students will care more about demonstrating what they know.

I am convinced that there are several conditions that allow teachers to create motivating learning environments. Two of the most important are (1) ensuring that, more days than not, the classroom is a place filled with active learning and the construction of meaning; and (2) listening to what worries our students and teaching them how to manage that stress so they can concentrate on their academics.

### Active Learning: Constructing Meaning

When I taught kindergarten, our days consisted of reading and acting out stories; making letters out of beans, rice, or other food products; sorting blocks

to form patterns; and chronicling the life cycle of our pet turtle. In other words, they were “rigorous” and would have been standards-based (if the standards had existed then), but they were also active, imaginative, and fun. The students were motivated to learn because they were involved in hands-on, active learning over which they had ownership or control. Although that was kindergarten, the secondary English classroom also benefits when active learning is the norm.

Literacy is about communication. People read and listen to make meaning and speak and write to convey meaning. However, reading, writing, speaking, and listening are not the only ways to communicate. As James Paul Gee says, “Images, symbols, graphs, diagrams, artifacts, and many other visual symbols are particularly significant” (17). Teachers who encourage students to demonstrate their understanding of English content or literacy skills through imagery and symbols when appropriate create motivating learning environments. For example, doing a one-page paper to show the theme of a novel through quotes, words, pictures, and symbols allows the students to construct meaning as they decide what is more or less important.

One student, TJ, described how students often rise to the challenge and learn from each other when given the opportunity. “There’s this one kid in our class that usually has bad grades, and he did the legend of Sleepy Hollow. He got this 3D model of it. He got all these cool trees, and then he got the figure of the character. It was really cool how people can get bad grades but still do well on creative things.” TJ went on to explain how most of the students in his English class worked diligently because they were actively involved in their learning. Their teacher taught the standards, modeled how to do the work, and gave activities that allowed students to apply their learning in a variety of ways such as making models, writing essays, and participating in discussions.

Another student, Courtney, continued by saying that merely emphasizing right and wrong answers also decreases student motivation. They want to know exactly what will be on the test so that they can focus their studying and get it “right.” However, Courtney said, “When there’s no perfect answer, then you just put whatever and can keep on going.” The English curriculum is well-suited to

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asking students questions and encouraging them to formulate opinions based on background knowledge and text evidence. Courtney, her classmates, and most students want to be able to wrestle with the content, talk to each other about their emerging understandings, and identify where/why/how the content matters in their lives. When we put students in control of constructing understandings, they learn better and feel more engaged. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains, “the quality of experience of people who play with and transform the opportunities in their surroundings [and, one could argue, in their learning] . . . is clearly more developed as well as more enjoyable” (149).

### Active Learning—Relevance

“An academic discipline . . . is not primarily content, in the sense of facts and principles. It is rather primarily a lived and historically changing set of distinctive social practices” (Gee 22). Based on Gee’s description of an academic discipline, it is no wonder that students without any context are not motivated to learn. Teenagers both need and want to know how their academic learning connects to their lives and to have the background knowledge to make sense of that content. In the English classroom, motivating teachers remember that the canon of excellent literature may not mean much to a 21st-century teenager because that teenager may not have meaningful experiences with the social practices associated with reading, thinking about, and understanding classic texts. They may not understand the historical context that existed when the novels were written. They may not have had exposure to the type of language written during another time period.

This does not mean that we should not teach the canon nor does it mean that we should not challenge students. It does mean that motivating teachers provide experiences for students to actively engage with the texts and to create understandings as they connect their current experiences with the social expectations of the authors’ time. In other words, “active, critical learning in any domain should lead to learners becoming, in a sense, *designers*” (Gee 96; italics in original). Motivating teachers create lesson plans that encourage students to connect the content to their own lives and thus design their own understandings.

Creating active learning experiences and ensuring relevance in the curriculum are essential. They are not the only elements of motivating learning environments, however. Students also need to learn how to manage the myriad demands on their time so that academic involvement does not slip to the bottom of the priority list.

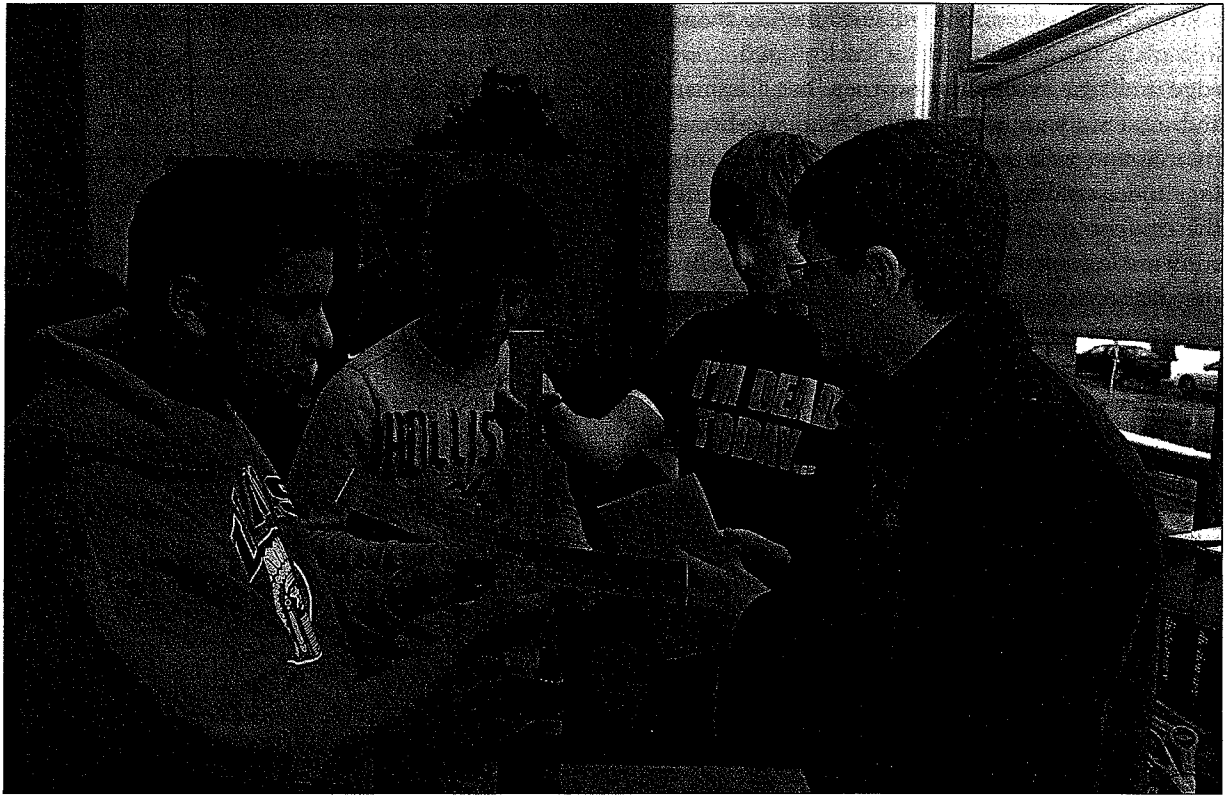
### Managing Stress

Secondary school represents a significant change from elementary school. In middle school and high school, students have more teachers, more homework, more responsibility, and more stress. According to the students themselves, the sheer increase in stress contributes to their lack of motivation to achieve. Although they rarely complained about the stress in our conversations, the students were overwhelmed and desperate for ways to manage their stress and prioritize their time.

Buffy was failing Math. She had responsibilities at home that consumed most of her afterschool hours, and her parents expected chores to take precedence over homework. She told me, “I’m not that fast at doing homework. At home my parents yell at me if I don’t do my chores so sometimes I don’t finish my Math homework. I’m failing that class. I just don’t think all the teachers understand how much homework they are giving us. It’s hard to keep up.” On the other hand, Buffy was earning an A in Social Studies because “the teacher knows how hard everything is. She knows giving too much is too much. I can finish all my homework in that class, so it’s my favorite class.”

Although students seemed to understand that doing homework is an inevitable, even necessary, part of school, they wished it were more meaningful and deliberate. Sophia said, “I actually get why homework is important; I just don’t like having a lot of homework on the same exact thing. It should be like a puzzle, some reading, and some questions.

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Not just four pages of questions.” When teenagers face tremendous amounts of stress without a commensurate increase in support, they are less likely to develop their talents (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen 42). Jamie said, “It’s [homework] way too much. It’s way overwhelming. It’s stressing kids out, and it’s not going to make them do better.” Motivating teachers give students homework but also teach them how to break it into manageable chunks. They work with colleagues to avoid having several major assignments due in the same week. This helps students manage the stress of secondary school, which protects their motivation. When students feel overwhelmed by school, they often stop trying before they even begin.

Motivating teachers are honest about the demands of real life. When they share pieces of their lives with students, they show that everyone faces stress, conflict, and uncertainties but still ends up OK. For example, many teachers model how to write assignments in planners. Motivating teachers also model how to break the task into manageable chunks and then strategize to complete those chunks. For a long time, I diligently had my stu-

dents copy the homework into their planners, reminded them to check the planners when they got home, and then expected the assignment to be submitted on the specified due date. As many secondary teachers know, the assignments sometimes came in and sometimes did not. What I missed was teaching the students how to (1) look at and use the planners when they got home and (2) balance the persuasive paper due in English with the Math test on the same day with soccer practice after school and family responsibilities at home. Although perhaps not technically part of a teacher’s academic responsibilities, taking the time to teach how to manage time and prioritize tasks increases students’ motivation dramatically.

Another, even simpler, strategy for increasing motivation is acknowledging students’ fears, worries, and anxieties. By honoring their feelings and listening to what they are going through, motivating teachers indicate that the feelings are legitimate. They then have more credibility when they ask the students to compartmentalize their worry and focus on the task at hand. When teachers provide follow-up resources for use after the period is

over, they further develop their connectedness to students. The worries do not disappear, but students put them aside long enough to learn the English content.

Finally, collaborating with other teachers to spread major assignments out contributes significantly to student motivation. Make the major research paper due the week before or after the major math test instead of the same day/week. This allows students to focus on one major task at a time, which increases the likelihood of success. A better chance of success usually translates into more motivated students.


Sometimes it is impossible to avoid a "crunch time." When it is, students appreciate honesty. We should tell students that this given week is going to be stressful (finals week is a good example), but we should also remind them that it is just one week. Knowing that their teachers are aware of their stress increases the possibility that students will put their heads down and plow through the crunch time. Being sensitive to the stress in students' lives does not mean coddling them or not challenging them. It means sharing the coping strategies that we adults have learned through years of experience.

### Final Thoughts

The motivation paradigm that has driven most teaching practice for over a century focuses on external factors such as rewards and punishments that theoretically encourage students to work more diligently in school (Anderman and Anderman 41). *Theoretically* is the key word here. What the research actually tells us is that rewards and punishments work wonders at controlling students' immediate classroom behavior. What they do not do is foster an intrinsic, long-term desire to learn, behave, and achieve.

Changing the paradigm to focus on the factors that support internal motivation (such as active learning and stress management) is not happening quickly or easily. But it is happening. Educators are beginning to listen to the students and un-

derstand that what the students say they want is closely aligned with what the motivation research identifies as important and what effective teaching pedagogy identifies as best practice. Teachers cannot make students motivated, but they can create environments that allow the students to feel motivated for themselves.

When we talk to students about what motivates them to achieve in school, they are articulate and thoughtful about their responses. They know what makes them motivated. It is up to us to listen to them. 

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**Erika Daniels** is assistant professor of literacy at California State University San Marcos. She has taught kindergarten, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grades and worked extensively with high school English teachers as a literacy coach. She focuses on motivating reluctant learners and helping struggling students develop literacy skills. She may be contacted at edaniels@csusm.edu.