

Motivating Your Students

The more thought, time and energy your students invest in the work of your course, the more deeply they will learn. Yet given all the demands on students' time, they may not focus as much attention on your course as you would hope, especially if your class is out of their field of primary interest. If you are teaching an introductory or non-majors class, knowing something about student motivation can be especially helpful. The research on learning tells us that students are most motivated when 1) they value what they are learning and 2) when they believe they can be successful learning new or unfamiliar material.

In order to create an environment in which students will value what they are learning, you might:

- Explain why *you* are interested in the topic. Why do you believe your discipline's ways of thinking are important? How has learning this material enabled you to answer creative and interesting questions as a scholar?
- Give students questions or assignments that enable them to see connections between learning in your class and learning in other courses. For example: How does knowing historical context enrich the reading of a novel? How will an understanding of the properties of fluids prove important to their work in chemical engineering?
- Ask students to reflect on how what they learn in your course can help them approach aspects of their lives more meaningfully. How do they see art or hear music differently once they have developed a vocabulary for talking about each? What do they see in themselves and their relationships when they view them through knowledge of human psychology or social behavior?
- Structure learning so that students practice using course concepts or disciplinary ways of thinking to solve problems or answer pressing questions about, for instance, the physical world or the culture(s) they live in and among. How might they evaluate the latest diet in light of their knowledge of cellular metabolism? How might they evaluate U.S. foreign policy in light of their historical knowledge of diplomacy or their encounter with other cultures through anthropology, literature or geography?
- Underscore how knowledge and skills developed in your course can be transferred to other contexts, including their professional lives. Sometimes novice learners wonder how studying English, for instance, can prepare them for vocations other than teaching English. You might make the case that critical thinking and writing skills are essential for engaging political or legal discourse, for making and communicating decisions in contexts as various as businesses, non-profits and laboratories.

When students believe they can meet the challenge, they are more likely to apply themselves fully to the learning process. In order to develop students' belief that they can succeed at learning new and unfamiliar material, you might:

- Let your students know that you believe in their capacity to develop and do well in your course. Past teaching experience might help you state this with confidence. For example, have you seen students move from writing average papers to writing good or excellent papers as they have learned more about your discipline and the revision process? It can help to let students know that you believe they can improve because you have seen hard-working students develop dramatically in previous semesters.
- Throughout the course, promote the idea that students will succeed because of their efforts to learn, not because of fixed, innate capacities. They may need to hear you say that you do not believe that people are simply “good at math” or “bad at writing.” Provide constructive feedback on their work, reinforcing your belief in their ability to improve.
- Sequence assignments so that students can experience success early in the process and then maintain motivation for future work. For example, students might approach a highly complicated problem with more confidence, and thus motivation, if they have successfully solved similar, but less challenging problems, in preparation.
- As you evaluate student work, underscore where they have mastered goals and reflect back success. You can do this in written comments on their work or in office hours. When work falls short of your criteria, be clear about how students can improve in future work.
- Make grading criteria clear so that students have some way to assess their own learning and academic performance. If they know exactly what constitutes success, they are likely to feel more confident of their ability to meet those expectations.
- Establish high, but reasonable, expectations for your students. If they are given tasks that stretch them, but don't paralyze them, they will approach new challenges with more motivation. Reflect on what exactly you want your students to learn or be able to do as a result of taking your course and then consider what your students would have to do to show that they've accomplished these goals. The evidence that you ask for should be attainable by students at this level.

Adapted from Marilla D. Svinicki's *Learning and Motivation in the Postsecondary Classroom*. Anker Publishing, Boston, MA: 2004.