Motivation and Classroom Climate

Research, beginning in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s, has shown that teachers’ classroom interactions, including instructional/assessment practices, not only directly affect students’ development of understanding but also classroom climate, student motivation, and thinking skills, which, in turn, also influence students’ learning and their dispositions to learn as well. This is an illustration of the processes that occur in every classroom – math, social studies, visual art, music, etc., and with new, veteran, great, and emerging teachers.

Figure 1.

Motivation

Motivation has several shadings, but for this article the categories of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are sufficient. Extrinsic motivation is the result of conditions outside the person, while intrinsic motivation is an outgrowth of internal needs or desires related to the task itself. Students’ motivations are influenced by two aspects of the teacher’s interaction: 1) the nature of the learning tasks; and 2) the instructional/assessment strategies based on certain inborn traits common to all of us.

Learning Tasks

Learning tasks are a significant source of motivation. While entertaining and enjoyable qualities in tasks are important, tasks that combine these with more substantive qualities will elicit deeper student engagement. Students respond quite differently to tasks that are authentic “real-life” tasks – tasks that adults confront and that have importance beyond the classroom (e.g., creating artworks for a school-wide or public exhibition; critiquing one’s own musical performance; preparing for a concert) than to tasks without such traits. Further, in a summary of motivational research (Kellaghan, Madaus, and Raczek, 1996) found that students respond positively to tasks that they perceive as challenging but “do-able” and that have relevance (value) to them. Also, creative tasks, which provide the student a degree of freedom in their resolution (e.g., creating artworks that use design principles and functions to solve specific visual art problems embodied in the standards;
composing a musical composition) can be a source of personal pride and intrinsic motivation. To maximize motivation, then, teachers should develop tasks that are authentic, appropriately challenging, relevant, and creative.

**Instructional/Assessment Strategies**

Instructional/assessment strategies that make use of the three following inborn factors in human development also foster student motivation.

- an “itch” to learn
- a desire to grow up – fast! (the emerging “adult ego state”)
- an urge to have greater control of their lives (an “internal locus of control”)

These are survival instincts, born of eons of evolution in a hostile world in which a survival advantage belonged to those who matured quickly, had a desire to learn about their environment, and had the wit and will to control or accommodate to it.

While these behaviors can be nettlesome to parents and teachers who must answer the “Why” questions of the young and deal with the drive for independence of later years, they are important sources of motivation. Active student involvement in which students help decide the task’s important targets and levels of proficiency includes these motivational factors. This has been described as a “learning loop.” (Figure 2)

![Learning Loop Diagram]

Figure 2

Such involvement helps them

- assume a degree of autonomy; (control)
- take more responsibility and ownership for their own learning (an adult role);
- gain a feeling of presence in the adult world by making artistic decisions on their own;
- develop empowerment to “scratch” that itch to learn by helping them internalize the learning targets, construct understandings more readily, and recall and transfer them more easily.

These strategies, part of the learning loop, are based on these inborn traits.

For instance, in a music class preparing for a performance (e.g., a PTA performance by an elementary general music class or a concert or festival by an ensemble), students could address standards A/B, F, and G (National Standards 1/2, 6, and 7) by analyzing and evaluating tapes of their own practice sessions or rehearsals. Using these tapes and the students’ critiques, the teachers will give supportive feedback on both their performance and their critiques. They will use criteria previously developed with the students, such as accurate, detailed error detection; specific references to locations in the score; use of music terminology; suggestions for revision; and linkage of suggested solutions to the indicated problems. Rubrics describing these criteria at different proficiency levels will have been developed by students and teacher.

A visual art example might be a standards-based project in which students plan and draft, as a class, in small groups, or as individuals, a design for a new school building or a redesign of an older one to present to the administration and board of education. Before beginning, the class and teacher discuss the elements of design, the functional and physical characteristics of the building, and qualities such as utility and aesthetic effect. During the project the students sketch and develop their ideas and regularly take part in self/teacher/peer assessment of their works in progress. In music, composing a theme and variations for performance could be similarly addressed.

In this process, students assume a degree of control by having input on the learning targets before the beginning. This and the formative self-assessment during the project are tasks that adult professionals address. Such instructional strategies encourage students to scratch that itch for learning, often going beyond what the teacher would expect. And such a task is authentic (has significance beyond the classroom); challenging; creative (more than one solution and more than one way to arrive at it); and relevant (is valued by the student). This use of the learning loop can encourage an important habit of mind: reflection – standing off from the product of one’s work, viewing it objectively, and making judgments about it – in effect, using self-assessment as a learning tool.

It seems there are three “musts” and three “shoulds” in planning motivational and effective teaching/learning situations.

1. Students must know the learning targets before the instructional/learning phase, and they should be involved in determining them, always relating them to the appropriate long-range goals.
2. Students must have multiple opportunities for applying new understandings, analyzing and assessing the results, and revising the product and process (the learning loop). This assessment – self, teacher and/or peer – and revision
should be done in a non-competitive climate in the context of an authentic task, one that has significance beyond the school.
3. Students must know if they are “on track” to the learning target and, upon completion, if they achieved it — and why. This should result from the ongoing assessments of the learning loop embedded in the instructional process.

Classroom Climate

Classroom climate, motivation, and thinking skills are closely allied. The students’ sense of empowerment as they develop and gain internal control of thinking skills fosters motivation. In turn, such development and control is most readily achieved in an environment that encourages risk-taking, autonomy, and mutual support. In his study of this subject, Flanders found that, for optimal learning, classroom climate should be positive and supportive and that “the behavior of the teacher, more than any other individual, sets the climate of the class.” (Figure 1)

Teachers can most readily influence climate by focusing on two complementary aspects of classroom interaction – the rapport between teacher and students and the rapport among the students. In the first, the teacher can promote a positive rapport by functioning as a facilitator of the students’ efforts, emphasizing supportive interaction and assuming the role of an ally of the students who is working with them to improve their competency, rather than a judge for whom they must prove their competency. This practice was described above as a “learning loop” and is most successful when teacher and students are engaged in tasks with a goal and purpose beyond the classroom, such as working for excellence in a performance for another classroom, the public, or a music festival.

By initiating and maintaining a supportive climate, teachers can promote a bond of trust, students’ ownership of their own learning, and a willingness of the students to take risks, be creative, and pursue learning independently. Teachers can encourage this rapport through such trust building practices as

- teacher/student interviews, in which the teacher learns of students’ backgrounds, plans, desires, etc.;
- collaborative teacher/student assessment of student work, in which the teacher takes student opinions and judgments seriously and gives non-judgmental feedback (Step #5 in Figure 2 above);
- student journals that provide communication between student and teacher;
- requests by the teacher for students’ suggestions about a musical or artistic question. This fosters intrinsic motivation by showing the students that they and their ideas are valued by the teacher. (Steps # 1 and 5 in Figure 2)

In the second aspect, positive rapport among the students promotes a sense of community that encourages creativity, a sense of security, an intrinsic desire to learn, and the risk-taking and self-initiated learning mentioned above. Teachers can nurture this by providing a non-competitive, collaborative atmosphere by
• using teaching strategies that promote collaboration rather than competition such as small and large group work toward such shared goals as improving performance
• encouraging students to use each other as learning resources
• setting up peer interviews, which help students learn about and identify with each other
• helping students learn to make constructive peer assessments and use them in their own work as learning tools

Such a safe and nurturing classroom environment, in which students are actively involved in their own learning, fosters a “community of learners” atmosphere. This is the seedbed in which creativity flourishes, a vital ability of increasing importance in the evolving workplace.

Recap
This and the two previous sections, which deal with teaching strategies that promote thinking skills, motivation, and a positive classroom climate, are based on the recognition that students are learning machines, not empty vessels. The teacher’s role, therefore, is to “light the fire” for learning, help the student develop and use thinking skills, and provide an environment that nurtures motivation and active student involvement. In the classroom, teachers find that this can be accomplished through strategies that

• utilize the learning processes and thinking skills inherent in the “learning loop;”
• engage students actively in the learning process;
• recognize the motivational potential both of students’ certain inborn propensities and the design of the learning tasks;
• provide a positive learning climate through supportive teacher/student interaction.

Finally, in addition to higher student achievement and fewer discipline problems, teachers using this approach also report such desirable effects as student self-direction, self-confidence, and a positive affect for learning – an outcome to which all teachers aspire!

The preceding is based on the Arts PROPEL model of instruction/assessment and, in music, on a combination of the PROPEL and Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance (CMP) models.

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