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6 Intrinsic Motivators to Power Up Your Teaching - ASCD

13-17 minutes

Think of something you love to do that also requires some effort and commitment. Perhaps you play the cello, and you practice several days a week. Or you might be into photography—on the weekends, you set your alarm early so you can get up and out in time for the "good light." Do you hike or sing in a choir or garden or write? *Why* do you do whatever it is that you do? What motivates you?

I run. Five days a week I hit the pavement, whether I'm home in Durham, New Hampshire, or on the road working with schools. Through heat and humidity, rain and wind, and even ice and snow, I get out there. As I think about what keeps me going, several things come to mind.

The first is that I have goals: I'm currently training for a half marathon, and I'd love to get close to the time I clocked two years ago. Each day when I hit the pavement, my workout has some connection to that goal. Once a week I do a long run, another day I work on speed, and the remaining days are nice and easy—which help my legs recover while also increasing my endurance. My running log—a simple notebook where I record each run I complete—helps me feel a sense of accomplishment.

Another motivator for me is the people I run with or who I've connected with. I'm running the half marathon with a good friend, and we train together when we can. I also feel a kinship with the running community, whether it's folks I've connected with on the Strava app, athletes I run with through a local running club, or even *Runner's World* contributors who write articles that inspire me.

There are plenty of other things that keep me going. I love to be outside, and running is a great way to get some fresh air and explore new places. Upbeat music loaded onto my exercise watch keeps the running fun and enjoyable.

As you think about what keeps *you* motivated to garden or sing or hike, chances are, it's some of these same things. You enjoy the challenge of mountain biking on a new trail. You love the camaraderie of your book group. It's energizing to sing in front of an audience.

Your students are no different. We are all driven by the same intrinsic motivators—psychological needs that keep us energized and engaged with pursuits: autonomy, belonging, competence, purpose, fun, and curiosity (Anderson, 2021).

Wouldn't it be great if we could foster that same kind of intrinsic motivation for schoolwork in our students? Imagine the energy students would have as they felt agency, connection to others, purpose, a sense of accomplishment, fun, and connection to their personal interests!

If our goal is to move beyond compliance in the classroom—to have students who are truly self-motivated, who have the energy and enthusiasm to dig into powerful and important learning—we must leverage these six motivators. Although not new or groundbreaking, each is foundational to good instruction.

1. Autonomy

The need for self-direction is vitally important if we want students to be self-motivated. Learners are more likely

to be fired up and excited about their work when they have some power and control over what or how they're learning. In fact, according to Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, the cocreators of self-determination theory, autonomy is perhaps the most essential of intrinsic motivators (2000).

There are many ways to increase students' sense of autonomy in the classroom, but perhaps the most obvious is to offer them choices about their learning. Let students choose from a variety of fantasy and science fiction books as a part of a genre study. Offer them options for how they demonstrate their understanding of science or social studies content. Give students the choice of where to work or which materials to use as they learn. Even simple choices can help meet students' need for self-direction.

2. Belonging

Although Deci and Ryan argue that autonomy is the most important of the intrinsic motivators, my guess is that Abraham Maslow might push us to prioritize belonging. His theory of human motivation (1943) makes the case that people's needs for connection and affiliation are practically as important as our most basic needs for food, water, shelter, and safety.

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Mike Anderson

We know that students crave a sense of belonging and connection with others, so let's make sure to meet that need *through* their academ

ic work. Of course, collaborative learning structures are efficient ways to foster a sense of belonging between students. Group projects, lab partners, book clubs, Socratic Seminars, and even simple think-pair-shares are all ways to connect students through daily academic work. It is important to recognize, however, that we have to do more than put kids in groups and tell them to cooperate. Students need direct instruction and guided practice to build social skills, just as they do academic skills. Let's offer students the skill-building and support they need so group work can be a positive and productive experience.

We need to make sure that classroom communities are safe and inclusive spaces where all students feel like they belong. Let's not count on icebreakers and get-to-know-each-other activities in the first weeks of school to build group cohesion. This is an ongoing and year-long endeavor that we can support through effective collaborative learning.

3. Competence

In *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn*, John Hattie and Gregory Yates make the point that we are all "motivated by knowledge gaps but demotivated by knowledge chasms" (2014, p. 6). This speaks to the importance of students having a sense of competence. When challenges are within reach, and when students see themselves growing and getting better at something, they are more motivated.

This, of course, is why differentiation is so important—not just because the just-right challenge level allows for incredible cognitive growth, but because it creates learning experiences that are pleasurable. When learning is too hard, it's frustrating. When it's too easy, it's boring. It's the just-right sweet spot where learning can be fun.

Too often, however, we make differentiation harder than it needs to be. Although sometimes it might be important to differentiate the instruction (providing specific strategy or skill instruction to small groups, for example), usually we can create differentiated learning options for the whole class and help students learn how to choose their just-right fit. These options might include assignments, demonstrations of learning, or tasks to complete.

I once observed a calculus teacher share a worksheet with her students that included a variety of problems to solve. She challenged them, "See if you can find the problems that are hard enough to make you sweat a little, but you can do with some hard work and a little help."

4. Purpose

One of my favorite questions students ask is, "Why do we have to do this?" It means they're searching for purpose. They're not going to do work sheep-like just because I handed it to them. They need to know the *why* before they can worry about the what or the how. The way we answer this question is hugely important. Be careful not to emphasize grown-up reasons that make sense to you but that may not resonate with your students ("Someday in high school you'll need to write a lab report, so you need to learn how to do it now"). Be ready to offer them purpose that matters to them *in the moment*.

Some schoolwork, like project-based and service learning, is already loaded with purpose. Then there are times when you might need to manufacture some purpose. One way to do this is by having students create a real product (such as a book or movie) and/or share their learning with a meaningful audience. Students can write short stories to include in a class anthology—one that will be printed and shared with families. You might create a hallway display to teach passersby about the water cycle. Or you could conclude an independent research unit with a celebration of learning where students set up poster sessions and share their work with the school community.

5. Fun

Should all schoolwork be fun? Of course not. But if we can make our lessons more fun, why wouldn't we? A little play can go a long way. There are tons of benefits (in addition to self-motivation) of play. It can help build skills of confidence and social competence (Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, & Singer, 2006) while also supporting language development, literacy skills, and self-regulation (Guirguis, 2018), to name just a few.

Perhaps there are some games you can weave into instruction. (Sure, there's *Kahoot!* but there are plenty of other options to explore as well.) One of my favorite activities is to create matching card sets (with math facts, vocabulary words and definitions, famous people and their events, and so on), tape a card to the back of each student, and then challenge the class to pair each other up without talking. Or you might invite students to

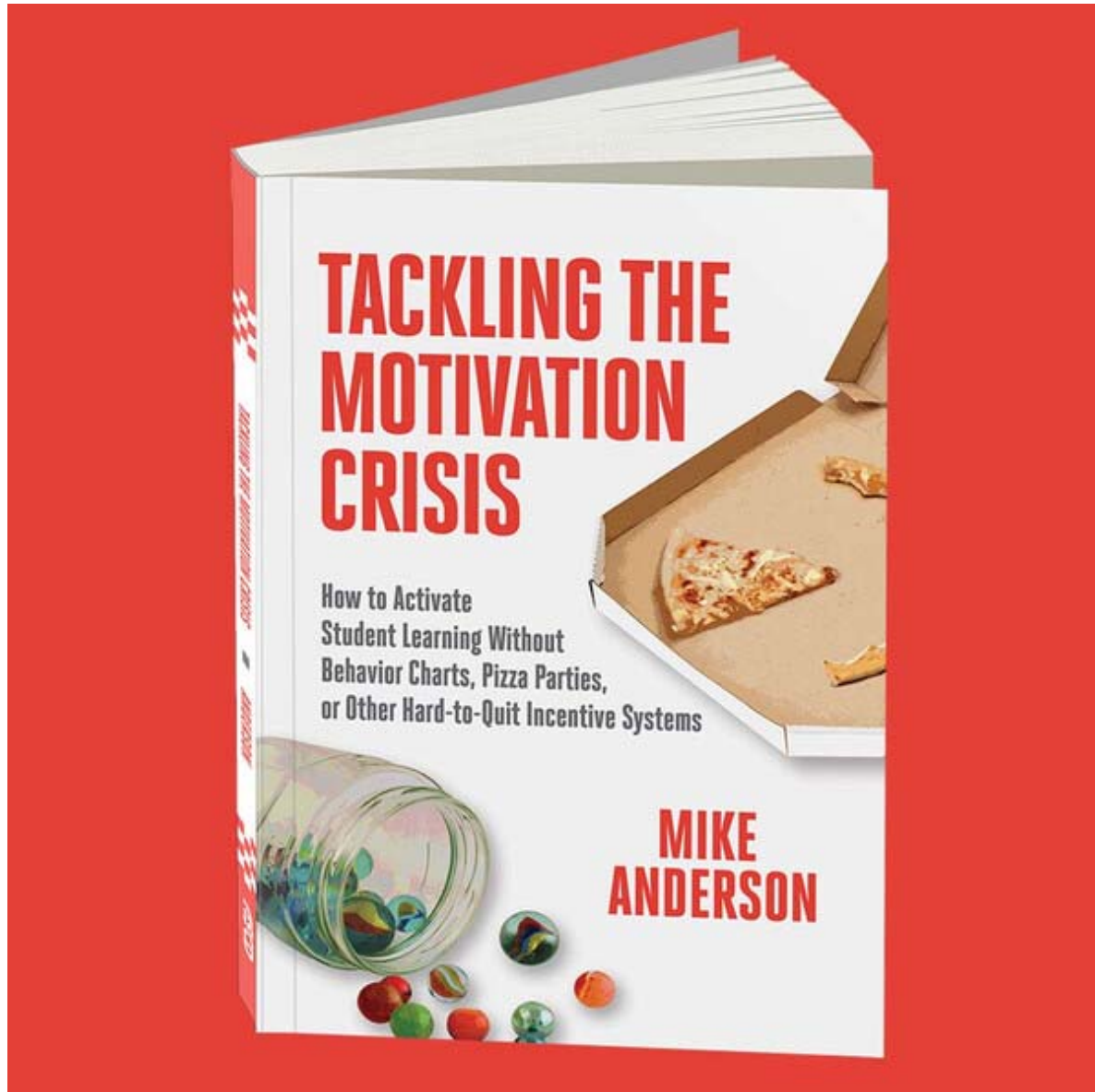
create their own games that are aligned to the content. In my experience in classrooms, even finding simple ways of adding dice, dominos, spinners, and cards into an activity can boost students' engagement.

6. Curiosity

Your students bring a plethora of interests into your classroom. They are skateboarders, social justice advocates, chess and soccer players, pianists, and gamers. When we find ways of connecting learning goals to students' interests—the things they're naturally curious about—they will be more invested.

Tackling the Motivation Crisis

Mike Anderson's definitive guide to student learning.



Students can investigate their interests through independent research projects or non-fiction reading and writing units. Or you might weave interests you know your students have into daily class work. For example, when studying human body systems, students might choose one of the following comparisons to complete: The human body is like a ... (1) sports team, (2) computer, (3) forest ecosystem, or (4) (create your own).

Literacy workshop is another fantastic vehicle for connecting with students' interests. I once had a student who, when offered the chance to take on a "challenge project" and investigate something he was passionate about,

used both reading and writing workshop time to read *The Lord of the Rings*, draw a 42-piece pictorial timeline to share with the class, and write a 13-page sequel. He was in 4th grade and had just turned 10. (Imagine how many Common Core State Standards were connected to that project!)

Motivated for Life

Autonomy. Belonging. Competence. Purpose. Fun. Curiosity. Many of these motivators keep me hitting the pavement five days a week. Chances are these same intrinsic motivators keep *you* fired up and energized in your personal and professional life—and help you push through when the going gets tough. What if your students were able to tap into these intrinsic motivators as they learn to analyze a piece of text, solve differential equations, play in a musical ensemble, and conduct a scientific experiment? Can you imagine the skills and habits of self-motivation they might gain—skills and habits they can use regardless of the path they take in life?

Centering Your Teaching Around Intrinsic Motivation

Do you want to energize student learning with intrinsic motivators but aren't sure where to start? These ideas (in addition to the ones shared in the article) can help.

Look for high-impact practices: Not all students are motivated in the same ways. Some might value purpose more than curiosity, while others might crave competence over fun. So look for classroom practices that hit multiple motivators at the same time. For example, independent research projects allow students to choose (autonomy) to learn more about something they're interested in (curiosity), create projects (fun) to share with others (purpose and belonging), all while mastering new content (competence). Project-based learning, reading and writing workshops, whole-class projects, and simulations are just a few others to consider.

Stop incentivizing learning: If you want students to be motivated from within, you need to stop trying to motivate them from without. Decades of research (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Kohn, 2018) have shown that incentive systems undermine intrinsic motivation. This is one of the reasons it's so hard to have students who are truly self-motivated about learning in the presence of traditional grading systems. The more students focus on incentives (stickers, grades, pizza parties, etc.), the less they focus on learning.

Increase student choice: Choice is one of the most effective ways to tap into many intrinsic motivators (Anderson, 2016). Find small ways of boosting student choice—and make sure to help students learn how to choose well!

Emphasize student ownership as you talk about learning: Even if there are tons of intrinsic motivators cooked into a learning experience, if you still talk about learning as if you own the work ("Here are three things you're going to do for me in this next activity"), students might feel stuck in a mindset of compliance. Make sure to talk about the work through their eyes, not yours ("Here are three things you get to do in this next activity").

Start small: Take a look at an upcoming lesson or unit through the lens of the six intrinsic motivators. There are surely several present already. Which ones are especially strong? Are there any that could be strengthened? Find one or two small ways of tapping into these motivators.

Still stumped? Ask your students! Sometimes when I'm struggling to find ways of connecting with intrinsic motivators, I ask my students for help. On one such occasion, my students suggested producing a class movie to dive deeper into a social studies unit, and it was by far the best project we did all year.

Reflect & Discuss

Of the six intrinsic motivators, which ones are already strong in your practice? Which might be strengthened?

What specific actions could you take to build students'—or even your faculty's—sense of competence?



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