Navigating the

Motivation ebbs and flows, but it's ever present in the classroom. Here's how educators can harness its power.

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Many educators struggle with questions about student motivation in the classroom. It's our premise that, despite how things may appear at times, all students are motivated to learn.

Educators have described motivation in many ways—and how they view it influences both their beliefs about their students and their approach to teaching. Two metaphors we commonly hear in our work as teacher educators are motivation as a gas tank and motivation as a garden.

The gas tank analogy compares motivation to the amount of potential energy or drive a student has. A student may have a full tank, an empty tank, or something in between. From this perspective, motivation is a fixed quality that drives a student. This metaphor assumes that motivation is a characteristic *of an individual*, like height or intelligence, and that teachers are powerless to influence a student who has little motivation, or an empty tank. Our experience suggests that this is not the case.

In contrast, the motivation-as-garden metaphor emphasizes the influence of the environment on a student's motivation. This point of view encourages teachers to concentrate on making elements of the classroom, such as the curriculum, materials, and instructional approaches, more motivating. The problem with this metaphor is that it can set up an unrealistic "field of dreams" mentality that assumes that as long as we build the right motivational

Classroom Current

environment in the classroom, all students will be engaged. We believe that this conception of motivation is also too simplistic.

Beyond Gas Tanks and Gardens

We propose a different metaphor for thinking about classroom motivation—that of whitewater rafting. Here, the current of the river represents motivation. It may ebb and flow, but it's always present. It's up to the guide and the rafters to use the current to facilitate the journey.

From this perspective, an individual's characteristics, such as prior knowledge, interests, goals, and self-efficacy, matter very much. All this information helps the teacher access the motivational energy that exists in learners as a current in the classroom.

But context matters as well. Just as the shoreline, water depth, and other geographical features shape the current of a river, features of the learning environment, such as the prevailing culture of achievement and the availability of resources, influence classroom motivation.

On the river, it's up to the guide to use boat, paddles, and other tools to navigate for a successful journey. Similarly, educators must understand how they can use the tools and strategies available to them to foster motivation and achieve their goals for student learning. This metaphor emphasizes that motivation is best understood in relation to the dynamic interactions that take place among three components: individuals, the environment, and the specific activities in which people are engaged.

A WARM Stance

If we understand motivation as something that teachers and students can tap into and leverage to foster high levels of engagement and achievement, we can then think about how to structure teaching and learning activities with the students and context in mind. This begins with the stance teachers take when preparing to engage students in learning.

We identify four characteristics—the elements of a WARM stance—that enable a teacher to tap

into student motivation: Teachers must be *Watchful* during an instructional activity so they see what they need to do to adjust their instruction to meet each student's needs, they must be *Adaptable* enough to make those changes along the way, they must be *Reflective* about their practice and open to new ways of teaching, and they must be *Modest* enough to understand that there's always room for improvement.

Lack of student engagement in a given activity doesn't mean that students aren't motivated, just that they're motivated to do something else at that moment. Like river guides, by being watchful and adapting to the situation at hand, by reflecting on what we're doing and how we're doing it, and by being modest enough to recognize that we can always improve our technique, we prepare ourselves to navigate the obstacles in teaching and to harness the motivation that is ever present but sometimes buried deep beneath the surface. Skillful navigation may enable teachers to redirect the current of motivation toward the desired goal.

Practices That Motivate

Just as river guides use their paddles to negotiate the current and guide the raft toward its destination, teachers can orient their instruction toward the following motivation-enhancing practices:

■ *Promoting student voice.* Students should have choices about things that relate to the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *how* aspects of the classroom. However, it's best not to provide too much choice. Research suggests that thoughtful, structured, limited choices work better than an unlimited range

of options (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). For example, a middle school science teacher might allow his or her 7th grade students to choose a weather phenomenon and, using a common scoring rubric, create a presentation in the medium of their choice.

■ *Designing meaningful tasks that are interesting, useful, or both.* Students can complete a short interest inventory at the beginning of the semester, and teachers can use this information to shape academic content and future

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learning activities. Teachers can also point out a task's usefulness in the world outside school or its alignment with a standard that students need to master. For example, in a social studies classroom we observed, students summarized interviews they had conducted with local citizens involved in the civil rights movement and the influence their actions had on their communities.

■ *Providing challenge and scaffolding for success.* Learners need to believe that if they expend the appropriate effort on a challenge, they'll have a strong chance of success (Schunk & Pajares, 2005). Unfortunately,

the reverse is also true: Failure to succeed on difficult tasks may lead to disengagement.

So how can teachers know their students' actual levels of comprehension so they can provide the appropriate challenge or scaffolding? They can begin discussions about specific content with student-generated questions, as opposed to teacher-generated ones that give little feedback about what students do or don't understand. Teacher-generated questions can be too hard or too easy, and students will disengage. However, beginning discussions with the students' own questions engages students because they get to talk about what caught their attention or confused them, and it focuses the discussion on their actual level of comprehension. If teachers need to ask some clarifying questions, they can do so after this initial scaffolding.

■ *Fostering positive adult and peer relationships.* Students are more likely to exhibit higher levels of motivation and engagement when they perceive that their teacher cares about them (Noddings, 2005). Positive relationships among learners also play an important role. Cooperative and collaborative learning tasks tend to have a much more positive relationship with achievement than do school practices that promote competition among students or comparisons of grades or performance (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008). Practices like student advisories, when used to develop relationships, may tap into students' social motivation for engaging in school.

Feedback as Motivator

Let's see how these approaches play out in the context of a common instruc-

tional strategy—giving feedback, which recent research suggests is a powerful way to support student achievement (Hattie, 2012). Although we focus on feedback here, teachers can look at many other instructional activities, such as curriculum design, assessment, and student grouping practices, in light of these four approaches and come up with their own motivation-generating strategies.

Strategy 1: Have students set goals and make predictions.
A simple yet highly effective strategy for leveraging student motivation is to have students set goals and predict how they'll perform. Teachers must start by making the objectives and design of the learning tasks clear. Post the lesson objective on the board and, most important, continue to reference the objective throughout the lesson.

Strong objectives should also be concrete and understandable to students. Avoid vague terms like *understand* or *analyze*. For example, a clear objective might be this: *By the end of the lesson, you'll be able to define the following elements of an argument—claim, evidence, and warrant—as well as identify examples of each term in a written text.*

Once students understand what they're going to learn or be able to do, ask them to assess their current level of knowledge and skill. Students could rate their familiarity with the elements of an argument using a rating scale: 1 = no familiarity, 2 = some familiarity, 3 = I know what the word means, 4 = I can use the word in a sentence. You can also assess students' current knowledge and skills by having them respond to short writing prompts, such as, "How familiar are you with the three main parts of an argument: claim, evidence, and warrant? Explain what you think these terms mean."

Once students have an understanding of their initial level of knowledge and skill in relation to

these terms, they might predict how well they'll be able to identify the three parts of an argument in a magazine or newspaper article. Sometimes they'll struggle more than anticipated on a task, or they may fail to meet their predictions or goals entirely. But all this is valuable information that teachers can use to give students feedback. Encourage students to reflect on what they found challenging and on the additional supports they might need.

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This approach to student feedback is effective because the goal setting that students do makes the learning meaningful. In other words, students better understand the nature of the content, its purpose, and their relation to it. Also, teachers can use the information generated during goal setting and predicting to both design future learning opportunities at a more appropriate level of challenge and offer even better scaffolds to help ensure student success.

Strategy 2: Make learning visible for students.
Making student growth and learning visible is another effective strategy that helps foster motivation. Some teachers use portfolios that include examples of student work over time. When students see their competence and abilities improving, they begin to understand the link between effort and success, particularly when it comes to challenging work.

You can implement this strategy in various ways—by encouraging students to make charts and graphs of their own learning, by having them plot out their progress on quizzes, or by asking them to record how many words they write during journaling activities or how many words they read accurately in a minute. By promoting student voice and demonstrating the value of learning as related directly to improvement, this feedback strategy taps into motivation for continued engagement.

One teacher with whom we worked held student-led conferences during the year. Students identified specific work they had completed that demonstrated improvement in their content knowledge or academic skills.

Another teacher came up with an effective way for students to chart their progress. To increase her students' writing fluency, the teacher gave three-minute writing prompts every day for three weeks. After students wrote their first response, they counted the number of words they wrote and established a higher word count as a goal. They used a chart to document the number of words they wrote every day in response to the prompts. By the end of the three weeks, every student had exceeded his or her goal.

Strategy 3: Teach students how to ask for feedback from their peers.
It's often desirable to have students give feedback to their peers. The problem is, peer feedback can be too critical or too bland. Typically, this is because the student receiving the feedback hasn't clarified the kind of information that he or she is looking for. Also, students are often loath to be critical of their peers.

We've seen that peer feedback works much better when students are more specific in *how* they ask for feedback. To better understand the kind of feedback the student desires, his or her

peers can ask the student the following questions:

■ Describe what you've been working on.

■ What's been going well?

■ What's been the most challenging aspect of the work?

■ What type of information will be the most helpful to you?

In one classroom we observed, students were offering feedback to their classmates about the oral presentations they'd be giving in a few days. One student responded to the questions

students to build strong relationships through engagement in the academic work.

Strategy 4: Ask students for feedback on your teaching.
Because teaching is such a complex endeavor, there's always room to enhance one's practice—and who better to give us valuable feedback about how well we're doing than our students themselves? Some teachers we know share upcoming lessons, projects, and units of study with

develop trusting relationships between students and teacher.

Catching the Current
Motivation is a natural asset to the learning process, despite the barriers that the process of schooling or obligations outside the classroom may impose. Engagement requires teachers to skillfully navigate academic content, instruction, and students' individual differences to tap into the existing current of motivation. Teacher and students may not always seem to be paddling in the same direction, but by acknowledging the ebb and flow of student motivation and redirecting its power toward meaningful learning, we can transform our classrooms. ⓔⓛ

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above by explaining that she was challenged by the timing of her presentation: Every time she practiced, she finished too quickly. She said that she thought she had all the information she needed and that she was talking at an appropriate rate but that she was still finding it difficult to meet the time requirements. She wanted to know whether she should add more information or just talk more slowly.

After watching her presentation, two of her classmates pointed out that there was one place in her presentation where she could provide more detail. They also suggested that she pause longer between slides to give the audience more time to process the information. This student appreciated this targeted feedback. And why not? It specifically addressed her needs.

A strategy like this helps foster motivation because it leverages every aspect of motivation. Peer feedback promotes student voice because students play an essential role in one another's learning. It helps scaffold for success by enabling peers to guide others' learning. And it encourages

students and ask them to suggest improvements. Others regularly post the description and directions for upcoming projects on the class website and encourage students to identify what's not clear and how the learning experiences might be improved. Still others use exit tickets at the end of class that ask students to note the most and least helpful parts of the lesson.

One of our favorite outcomes from an exit ticket came from a teacher who asked her students to complete an exit ticket about her explanation of a research project that students were about to begin. One student wrote that it would be great to see actual examples of a good research paper during each phase of the writing process. As a result, the teacher created a display that depicted the life cycle of a research paper (much like that of a butterfly), with examples of the work at each stage, from early brainstorming through rough drafts to the final draft. Many students commented how valuable it was to see these examples. Strategies like these clearly promote student voice and help

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