

The Just-Right CHALLENGE



Stevi Quate and John McDermott

Here's good news and bad news: Every student is motivated—just not necessarily in the way teachers hope.

Some students are motivated to dig into *The Scarlet Letter*, whereas others are motivated to dig into CliffsNotes. Some students scurry into the

classroom, eager to start; others are motivated to stroll the halls during class time.

Teachers struggle with how to move learners from the motivation to avoid schoolwork to the motivation to plunge into it. During our years of K–12 teaching, both of us strove to understand how to motivate students. When we transitioned to consulting and university teaching, including observing teacher candidates in student-teaching

placements, we began studying classrooms where students *were* deeply engaged in learning. We studied research on motivation and engagement, and we interviewed teachers and students throughout Colorado and other U.S. states. And as we consulted with entire faculties and individual educators, we saw how teachers got students in many different settings pumped up to do hard work.

These students clearly *wanted* to feel stimulated at school. Ninth grader Lupe told us, “I want to wake up excited to go to school each morning. I don’t want to do something just to get a grade.” Another student, Gabe, said he wanted classes “where the gears of my mind get going.”

Across the contexts we observed, we realized how much teachers make a difference in fueling passion to learn—and that a key ingredient in fueling passion is making sure students feel intellectually challenged.

Teachers who create motivating conditions take a stance of unwavering belief in students as intellectuals. This stance leads teachers to assign challenging work and to regularly check in with students as they work, making sure they have the right supports, the skills to grow intellectually, and the confidence that with effort they can reach their goals. Let’s look at how these three elements—teacher stance, the nature of assigned work, and checking in—fuel motivation.

Teacher Stance

Fourth grade teacher Nicole Miller started her teaching career during the last quarter of the school year, when she was hired by a Colorado school at which 90 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. The previous teacher had left unexpectedly, and the students’ misbehavior had driven away two substitutes. Despite



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being new, Nicole created a context in which students cared about learning. She describes the attitude that shaped her actions:

I knew they’d turn it around. I just kept increasing my expectations and building structures for success. If you expect kids to misbehave, they will; but if you expect them to perform academically, they will.

Nicole established classroom routines that showed students she believed they could take charge of their learning. For instance, she launched a checkout system through which kids filled out cards if they needed to leave to go to the restroom, library, and so on.

Nicole soon realized the students needed to talk about their feelings and that organizational routines wouldn’t be enough. So she instituted Sound Off time. Students could state whatever was on their mind about an issue (initially about the topic “your teachers leaving”), and Nicole couldn’t respond unless the students asked her to. Students expressed their anger, hurt, and bewilderment about their

abandonment. This ritual, which continued weekly all year, enabled the students to trust Nicole as their emotional and educational leader. They did turn it around, in both their behavior and their achievement.

A motivational stance goes beyond the cliché of holding high expectations to focus on three commitments to students: (1) be passionate about seeing students as intellectuals; (2) commit ferociously to students’ potential; and (3) believe that students can “grow smartness” (Quate & McDermott, 2013). These commitments are the teacher’s North Star, keeping him on course or pulling her back on course after stormy times.

Always View Students as Intellectuals

Ryan McKillop, who teaches 9th grade at North High School in Denver, has watched too many people discount her students because they come from immigrant families, speak Spanish as their first language, and live at or below the poverty level. Although she acknowledges the obstacles they face, she is solidly committed to seeing and treating them as intellectuals: “[My students] know . . . I will drag and push all of them to reach my high expectations.”

She communicates to students that she sees them as highly capable through her language; she grounds comments on students’ work in terms of effort and affirms their contributions to the classroom. Rather than scolding students for missing assignments, Ryan might say, “For our class community to work well, we need everyone to contribute—especially you.” When students pose a question, she frequently asks a question back and patiently waits for their answer to show them *they* can do the thinking.

The learners appreciate this attitude. Lupe declared, “A teacher I want to

work for won't give up on me. . . . I'm more motivated to do the work when I know that a teacher believes in the 'future me.'"

Commit to Students' Potential

Teachers have to be especially unshakable in their commitment to the potential of students who've been unsuccessful. They must believe in students even more than students believe in themselves. As she plans, Ryan balances the status quo—what her students can do now—with the potential—what they will be able to do in the near future with instruction.

Although her honors-level students arrive with a greater sense of self-efficacy and stronger skills than other students, Ryan doesn't shortchange any student. She asks for the same high-level work from them all: "I may have to do a few more think-alouds [for some students], but they'll get it. All of them deserve the right to do intellectual work."

To motivate struggling students, Ryan encourages risk taking, and she instills hope in students who have histories of failure. Without hope, it's unlikely they will exert the effort to engage in the task at hand. For instance, when a student says he or she can't "get" a particular skill, Ryan always adds the word *yet*.

This commitment demands a shift in how teachers view failure. Effective educators realize mistakes present opportunities for learning. They view failure as a productive stepping stone on the way to success. They shift students' language from talking about *mistakes* to talking about *misconceptions* or *approximations* (Cambourne, 1995) and help students acknowledge and reframe those misconceptions. Over time, with feedback, students' approximations move closer to expert performance.

Believe Kids Can Grow Intelligence

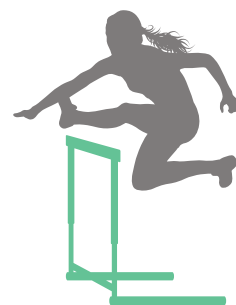
This stance of being committed to students as intellectuals isn't reserved for high schoolers. Teachers at Laredo Elementary School studied Carol Dweck's (2006) work to learn how to foster a culture with a growth mind-set (a belief that academic achievement comes through effort) rather than a fixed mind-set (a belief that "smartness" is innate and unchangeable). Embedded in Dweck's research is the concept that effort is

they assign. Teachers can motivate students further by assigning work that offers challenge and relevance.

Challenge

For Ryan, Nicole, and other teachers, challenge is the linchpin of engagement. Students we spoke with made it clear they prefer assignments that demand something of them. "I like doing things that force me to think beyond the obvious," Spencer said. Gabe explained, "It's

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the key to learning. When students internalize this message, coming to believe that their ability to learn is related to the effort they invest, they realize they're in control.

Carlos, a student in Nicole's 4th grade class, was reading at a 1st grade level. Nicole kept delivering the message that "effort is the key to succeeding," but it was lost on Carlos. One day, Nicole put him with another student with low skills and told them to read their work aloud and listen together for punctuation errors. The boys worked hard to hear what was missing from their writing and fix their punctuation. When Carlos handed in his paper, it was perfect. Nicole emphasized the growth-through-effort theme again, and this time it hit home. As the year progressed, Carlos grew two grade levels in literacy.

The Nature of Student Work

Teachers' beliefs about the potential of their students are revealed in the work

not fun when you can just fly through it. [Challenging work] holds your attention."

Some teachers mentioned that if they assign work that lacks academic challenge, students chat about the weekend or peck away at text messages under their desks. But when the work has the right amount of challenge, teachers hear a buzz of engagement. Students debate, annotate, and infer. It's a balancing act: Work that's too easy leads students to shrug it off, and work that's too difficult erodes students' feelings of hope.

Ryan challenges her high schoolers by assigning them articles from *The Economist* or *The New Yorker*. Students sometimes have to work hard reading these articles, but they use strategies Ryan gives them for working through challenging text: annotating the text to stay active while reading, chunking the reading, working with peers to construct meaning, and reading a range of texts on the topic to build

their background knowledge.

Gina Ruscitti, a student teacher at Laredo Elementary, was convinced that the work for 2nd graders outlined in the district curriculum required too little intellectual effort. She bumped it up by adding an element of problem solving.

Students learned about the roles of local government officials by working in triads, with each member given a different card describing the responsibilities of mayor, city council member, or citizen. The students discussed the roles, asking clarifying questions and pushing for further information. When she was confident that students understood the roles, Gina challenged them: “Imagine that you are the government of your city. Choose a problem in your community and discuss how your mayor, city council, and citizens could solve this problem.”

The 2nd graders engaged immediately with this challenge. While working hard to accomplish the goal, one girl looked at the clock and lamented, “We don’t have time to finish.” A teammate retorted, “We will finish!”

Near the end of class, students presented their work. One group posed the problem of cars speeding in their town. Their solution was for the mayor to ask the city council to install speed bumps and signs saying “Children Playing.”

Relevance

One student named this prerequisite of motivating work: “Something that matters.” Sadly, many students view schoolwork as busywork, intellectual thumb twiddling. What students need is work that helps them understand the world around them—work with a real-life purpose. As you create lessons and assignments, ask yourself, Why will kids care about doing this



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work? Does it connect to their world or their goals?

Jennifer Reinert, a teacher at urban North High School in Denver, tapped into the power of relevance when her students’ motivation to do math was waning. Jennifer was convinced that her students, who were mainly Latino and living in poverty, needed to experience math in a personal way. She revised a lesson on proportionality to make it relevant and authentic.

Students explored the differences between the best and worst jobs on the basis of criteria like safety, physical and psychological demands, and pay. Students identified what it would take to get three of the best jobs—actuary, statistician, and software engineer. Strong math knowledge and a college degree, of course, showed up as prerequisites.

Students then studied statistics about ethnicity and college graduation. Using these statistics, data on what proportion of all the students in the class were from minority or low-socioeconomic backgrounds, and

their knowledge of proportionality, the students determined what proportion of their class would probably graduate from college in four years. They calculated that out of the 25 Latino and Hispanic students in the class, five (or 19 percent of the class) would graduate from college.

Jennifer required students to consider the roles of race, bias, and poverty in graduation rates of different ethnic groups. Students began to think about what would happen if they committed to doing something to change the statistical prediction they’d just made—such as attending college. If one more person in their class graduated from college, how would that change the proportionality? What might change if they became involved in advocating for social justice and education equity? They found that if one more Latino class member would commit to attending and finishing college and take actions to make that commitment possible, the proportion of the class graduating from college increased to 24 percent.

On their exit tickets, students wrote comments like, “I’m going to college and change the stereotypes and statistics!” and “I won’t give up because that’s not in my pathway.” Because this math lesson spoke directly to students, it was motivating.

Checking In

In classrooms where students are motivated to do academic work, it’s rare to see a teacher sitting at his or her desk. Instead, the teacher will be kneeling down or sitting with students, listening in on groups, or conferring with individuals. An inspirational teacher knows the pulse of the room; she recognizes when students are stuck or when their understanding has taken a wrong turn. Because of the teacher’s awareness, he can provide

just-in-time feedback—enough so that students stay engaged with a challenge, but not so much that they no longer have to think.


Often, that feedback aims to teach the thinker, not the task. Instead of pointing out that a student read a word wrong, the teacher might ask, “Does that make sense? Remember, a reader thinks about what she’s reading. When it doesn’t make sense, she figures out if she made a miscue.” In math class, he might say, “See if you can make a mental model out of this. Use that model to check your answer.”

By posing questions like these, a teacher maintains his or her commitment to viewing students as intellectuals and apprentices them into the thinking of the discipline. Checking in is different from monitoring on-task

behavior. Once again, the difference is in the teacher’s stance. A teacher who is monitoring behavior is on the lookout for sneaky texters or loafers. A teacher who’s checking in is curious about what students understand and engages in genuine conversation. Checking in is a partnership between the teacher and the student. Teachers’ feedback should provide hope, building a student’s sense of “I can.”

Our Challenge

Creating conditions that lead students to want to engage in intellectual life at school will always be tricky. But if teachers want the gears in students’ minds to go, as Gabe put it, they need to believe in their students’ intellectual potential, offer them challenging and relevant work, and check in with them

to provide support. It may be challenging, but we must try. 

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A photograph of three students (two boys and one girl) working together at a table. They are looking at a laptop and a 3D printer. The boy on the left is pointing at the laptop screen. The girl in the middle is looking at the laptop. The boy on the right is looking at the laptop. There are 3D printed objects on the table, including a red sphere and a green object. A 3D printer is visible on the left side of the table.

The Tinkering logo, which consists of a green circle with a white 't' inside, followed by the word 'TINKERINE' in green capital letters.

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