

# 10 strategies that promote motivation

Motivation plays a significant role in student learning. Students with high motivation levels tend to have the best learning outcomes. Motivation is particularly useful in encouraging persistence in applying effort to a learning task and trying new approaches. Although motivation is highly influenced by student characteristics and tends to vary across different learning areas, the classroom context also plays an important role in influencing student motivation. There are many strategies that teachers can use to promote and support their students' motivation. As many theorists define motivation as arising from a need to satisfy psychological desires for autonomy, competence and connection or belonging, the following motivational strategies focus on meeting those needs.

## 1. Build strong relationships

Positive relationships with teachers are significantly related to positive motivation and to greater achievement. Motivation is affected by the level of **emotional and social support** students perceive. Students who believe their teachers are not interested in their learning report more negative motivation and experience lower achievement. Research has demonstrated that relationships with teachers are particularly important for Māori students.

Teachers need to **show support and concern** for all students and be interested in their ideas and experiences, as well as what they produce in class. Try to ensure you communicate a **sense of caring** for how each individual student is doing. Showing **sensitivity and kindness** to students enhances the affective climate of the classroom, whereas threats, sarcasm, directives and imposed goals result in negative affective experiences for students.

## 2. Promote students' sense of membership of the classroom and the school

Students' motivation is strongest when they believe they are **socially accepted by teachers and peers** and their **school environment is fair, trustworthy and centred on concern for everyone's welfare**. Motivation tends to be lowest in environments that are perceived as unwelcoming and untrustworthy. When students have a strong sense of membership of the class and school, they are more likely to adopt the values endorsed by the school. Students from negatively stereotyped groups are most sensitive to cues of belonging and trustworthiness.

Teachers are authority figures who can set the tone for relations in the classroom, and make students feel they are valued group members. Provide plenty of opportunities for **positive interactions** with and among students. Try to create a **sense of belonging** while also valuing students' social and cultural identities. Activities that engender a **shared sense of purpose** will motivate students and enhance their sense of belonging.

## 3. Enhance task interest and engagement

In classrooms characterised by **positive attitudes and emotions**, and **high levels of interest in the tasks** undertaken, students report greater motivation and perceptions of competence. Students who engage with activities and tasks relating to their interests find learning easier, more enjoyable and more related to their lives, and they perform better than those without personalised content.

Linking content to existing interests of the students also helps students to connect their prior knowledge to academic learning.

Interest can be fostered through **well-chosen texts and resources**, as well as **activities that engender students' curiosity** through provocative questioning or generating suspense. Interest is further enhanced by providing a choice of activities and using hands-on activities connected to the learning content, although be wary of adding irrelevant or decorative details to a task in ways that detract from learning outcomes. Students themselves might be able to adapt academic problems to a context within their areas of interest if invited, although task interest is not simply a matter of allowing students to engage in work that aligns with their existing interests. Promoting a positive affective climate in the classroom can help improve students' attitudes towards the subject being taught, and strategies such as **humour** can enhance their enjoyment of the topic. The teacher's enthusiasm for the subject or task can also help to engender students' interest.

#### 4. Emphasise the relevance and importance of the learning

Research finds that when teachers emphasise the importance of learning a particular strategy or piece of content, student motivation increases. Students perceive more challenging classes as more important, although it is necessary to find the optimal level of challenge: when challenge is too low or too high, students attribute low importance to the learning task.

**Elaborating on and clarifying students' responses** and summarising learning regularly throughout the lesson send the message that the learning is important. In addition, **discussing the new knowledge students have developed** through the application of particular strategies encourages students to perceive those strategies as valuable. In contrast, emphasising speed, coverage of content or accuracy over understanding, and failing to probe students' answers for explanation and justification, reduces the level of challenge and also implies that student performance, rather than learning, is most important.

Ways to communicate the importance and relevance of a topic to students include:

- increasing **challenge**
- providing opportunities for students to grapple with the **central tenets and abstract principles** of a topic
- inviting students to **personalise a topic** by putting themselves into the context of a topic
- discussing universal human **experiences** that relate to a topic
- inviting students to explore the relevance and importance of their current learning by investigating how particular academic concepts are **used in their communities**

#### 5. Connect with students' goals, values and identities

When students see learning tasks as **useful and relevant to their goals**, they develop more interest, persist longer and perform better. Students who **see their future adult self as being dependent on their educational achievement** spend more time on homework and have better grades. Students might have between one and five core goals for their self-development and future plans. It is helpful if school goal setting can tap into and co-ordinate with these goals. Students may value a learning area as important for their self-worth and identity, or they might value an area for its usefulness in accomplishing future goals relevant to their career or life plans. For example, one student may perceive mathematics as useful for eventually owning a business, another may view mathematics as handy for calculating cricket batting averages, and another may simply enjoy maths for its own sake.

It is important that students feel that **learning activities are congruent with their personal identities**, as this makes them more motivated to persist with difficulty. If learning activities are at odds with students' personal identities ('This activity is not for people like me'), then difficulty is taken as proof that the activity is pointless and unachievable.

Knowing your students well means you can promote interest in an academic topic by linking it to the **students' recreational activities or career goals**. Otherwise, you can ask students to reflect on a curriculum unit and generate their own connections so that they discover the importance and usefulness for themselves – this is also an opportunity to learn more about your students.

Not all activities and lessons can be inherently interesting to students, in which case it is important to ensure you offer a rationale for why the activity or lesson is useful to the student and worth the effort.

Teachers can influence students to see their future adult self as dependent on achievement. **Posters and images of possible careers** might provide ongoing reminders so that students' desired goals remain in mind. It is also important that parents value school and subject areas. Some research shows that **providing information about the importance of a subject to parents** leads to increases in student motivation and achievement within that subject.

## 6. Give students autonomy and responsibility

Motivation is impaired when students feel they have no control over a situation. Giving students choices and **empowering student initiative** enhances motivation, effort, interest, positive emotions and perceptions of personal control and competence, as well as achievement. Most students perform better on self-adapted tests in which they can select test items from various options. **Providing choices** can also increase risk taking and help students develop interest for particular activities. However, for students from some cultural groups, motivation might be highest when authority figures or peers make choices for them.

It is important to carefully plan how to make choices available to students, basing them on your students' ability to understand and make choices. Some students may need **scaffolding to help them make appropriate choices**. Choices must be appropriate for students' abilities and needs, and be a good match with student interests (although be wary of trying to align all learning activities with students' current interests at the risk of compromising the quality of the learning or missing the opportunity to create interest and build knowledge in a new subject area). It might be that students get to choose from a list of topic-related activities provided by the teacher, or that they select their own tasks to work on. They might also be involved in setting due dates, choosing student working groups, and the order of task completion. Being able to choose how to apportion their time, as well as among several different versions of a task, might be most motivational for students with skills in self-regulation. However, it is important that all students, not just the highest-performing students, get to choose activities and resources.

Some choices are more effective than others. The best type of choices:

- allow students to reflect their **personal interests, values and goals**
- are **unrestricted choices**, with no indication of which option to choose, rather than controlled choices
- offer choice between **2–4 options**: more than 5 options increases thinking effort and therefore decreases motivation, and less than 2 options undermines the perception of choice
- allow students to **repeatedly return to a list of options to make another choice** rather than making single or multiple choices at one time only

## 7. Develop students' self-efficacy

Students have important needs in relation to feeling competent. Motivation is strongly influenced by students' **perceived expectations of success or failure**, which are in turn influenced by [teacher expectations](#). Motivation, self-efficacy and achievement are positively affected when outcomes are represented as the result of student effort and action. Optimal learning experiences occur when the student perceives the challenge of the task as equal to his or her skills to achieve it. When challenge and skills are unbalanced, learning activities are not rewarding and perhaps even evoke anxiety. The highest levels of motivation occur when there is **both high challenge and high feelings of self-efficacy**.

One way to inspire increased motivation is to increase student's expectations of success and their sense of self-efficacy. Tell students you believe in them and that they will learn a particular content or strategy if they study hard and are motivated. Ways to ensure students experience success include:

- ensuring **optimal challenge**
- focusing on **personal improvement** rather than outperforming others
- providing feedback which helps students **master content**
- helping students set **realistic goals**
- **structuring activities** with clear processes for engagement with the task
- **reinforcing key learning** throughout the lesson, which increases self-efficacy as students are clear that they are making progress
- giving **frequent, positive feedback** focused on elaborating what students have learned and understood
- **attributing success to effort** and strategies rather than ability

## 8. Set appropriate goals and provide regular feedback for learning

Goals can motivate students by providing a purpose for using different learning strategies and **encourage students' persistence and effort** over time, especially when **goals are related to mastery of content and strategies** rather than to specific performance. What is more, when students perceive praise or feedback as intended to facilitate their task mastery, they tend to feel their autonomy has been supported and are consequently motivated by the feedback. However, when students feel that the teacher is trying to control their learning and behaviour, there is a negative impact on motivation.

Goals direct attention and action, and they also mobilise effort and motivation. For example, research has found that when students were given goals for reading focused on conceptual themes and knowledge content, they applied reading comprehension strategies with greater interest, effort and attention. Harder goals (that are acceptable to, and achievable by, the student) lead to higher levels of motivation and performance. Difficulty can be interpreted as a need to increase attention and therefore heightens motivation. Perceiving a task as too easy makes it seem not worth any effort, and motivation is consequently reduced. Likewise, perceiving a task as impossible halts motivation and effort abruptly. Between these extremes, increased difficulty enhances motivation.

Set goals with students that are **clear, measurable and provide a structured progression** through incremental goals to the final goal. Plan points at which to stop and measure progress towards the goal. Provide feedback that indicates to students how they are progressing towards the goal and perhaps offers suggestions to foster achievement of the goal. Feedback is most motivating when it:

- **allows and empowers students' choice** in subsequent learning strategies
- reflects a belief in the **students' capability** to learn/complete a task
- is **positive, frequent and elaborative**
- is used to help students **develop understanding**
- is linked to clearly articulated **high standards**

## 9. Provide opportunities for co-operative learning

Meeting students' **need for connection** with others can enhance motivation for the related learning activity. Students show increased motivation when teachers provide frequent opportunities for them to share their questions and what they have learned with their peers. Students also often demonstrate increased work effort when there is a sense of **collective responsibility for learning**. In addition, research shows students given collaborative learning opportunities engage in deeper-level processing of information.

Plan for student-to-student dialogue within a lesson, and identify activities that can be undertaken in pairs or groups. Develop group tasks in which tasks are divided between students. Ensure each student has a clear responsibility and accountability in relation to a group goal.

## 10. Explicitly teach the concept of motivation and talk about how motivation supports learning

Supporting students' understanding of motivation can aid their ability to self-regulate their levels of motivation and help them to identify strategies and behaviours that increase or lower their motivation. Although **motivational support strategies should be embedded into instruction**, it can also be worthwhile to explicitly discuss motivation with students. This helps students to understand the importance of effort in learning and how finding ways to get motivated can help them put in the necessary effort.

Emphasise the importance of motivation for success in learning. Talk regularly about how students must work hard and how effort helps them to get smarter by linking effort to outcomes. Ensure that you and your students have the same perception of effort: discuss what it means to try. Help students **differentiate between productive and non-productive effort** by explaining that effort is more than the time spent on a task but also means using effective strategies, practising and seeking help. Take the mystery out of learning something new by demonstrating that it is all about strategy and motivation.

---

## References

Oyserman, D. (2014). Identity-based motivation: Core process and intervention examples. *Motivational Interventions*, 18, 213-242. doi: 10.1108/S0749-742320140000018006

Patall, E. A., Cooper, H., Robinson, J. C. (2008). The effects of choice on intrinsic motivation and related outcomes: A meta-analysis of research findings. *Psychological Bulletin*, 134(2), 270-300.

Schweinle, A., Meyer, D. K., & Turner, J. C. (2006). Striking the right balance: Students' motivation and affect in elementary mathematics. *Journal of Educational Research*, 99(5), 271-294. doi: 10.3200/JOER.99.5.271-294

Wigfield, A., Mason-Singh, A., Ho, A. N., & Guthrie, J. T. (2014). Intervening to improve children's reading motivation and comprehension: Concept-oriented reading instruction. *Motivational Interventions*, 18, 37-70. doi: 10.1108/S0749-742320140000018001

---

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



### Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.