CTL Bulletin

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Motivating Students to Learn

This Bulletin summarizes the main strategies for enhancing student motivation as they are described by Marilla Svinicki in chapter 7 of her recent book Learning and Motivation in the Postsecondary Classroom, Anker Publishing, 2004. The CTL is also using this chapter for our series *"Readings on College Teaching,"* which you are invited to attend this Thursday, Feb. 19, 2:45-4:00 p.m. in Library Room 310. The readings are available in the NEIUport group *College Teaching Readings*, which is open to all NEIU faculty.

Svinicki synthesizes the most applicable concepts from motivation theories in the following chart, and she proposes that instructors use it to think of interventions that keep student motivation high. We can only provide a taste of the insights provided in her book and encourage you to read the chapter in NEIUport groups.

Motivation toward a goal is influenced by the learner's goal orientation,
whose strength is determined by two types of mechanisms:

The **value** of the goal, which is affected by:

- Perceived needs
- Intrinsic qualities of goal
- Utility of goal
- Control and choice
- Influence of others

The learner's **expectation** that the goal can be achieved, which is affected by:

- Difficulty of goal
- Prior experience with goal
- Match with learner skills
- Encouragement/example of others
- Self-efficacy with respect to this goal
- Attributions about success and failure
- Beliefs/attitudes about learning

The distinction between motivation that comes from valuing a particular goal and motivation that is influenced by one's expectation regarding the achievability of that goal generates important strategies for the classroom. Svinicki outlines seven such strategies, of which we outline five on the next page. We start with Value-Related Strategies:

"If you're having trouble with unmotivated students, trying to determine if and how they value what you're asking of them is the first step in motivating their best work." (p. 157)

1. Choose learning tasks with utility, challenge, and interest value

Make tasks intrinsically interesting to your students by showing them the connection between the course and their own interests. This may take on such diverse approaches as helping students understand how your course will give them an edge in the world of work; turning the course into a community of learners that supports students' need to be accepted by a group; and supporting students' need to feel competent and have high self-worth.

2. Provide choice and/or control over goals or strategies to the learner

Classes that provide little freedom of choice because the instructor calls all the shots and supervises students' behavior too closely, lead students to abdicate responsibility for their own behavior. On the other hand, if students are given the opportunity to make decisions for themselves, they are more vested in the outcomes of those decisions and therefore more likely to invest whatever effort it takes to make those outcomes happen. Having made their own choices, students are also more likely to make the connection between their own behavior and the consequences connected with that behavior. Research has shown that self-determination results in more creativity on the part of students and a willingness to take greater risk.

Let's now move to the motivational strategies that are related to Student Expectations!

"Increasing students' belief that they will be successful at reaching the goal … is more difficult because we have less access to and ability to manipulate the bases for student expectations for success." (p. 157)

3. Encourage accurate student self-efficacy about the course

Self-efficacy refers to learners' beliefs that they are able to engage in the skills necessary to be successful at a task. In research on student achievement, self-efficacy is one of the strongest contributors to success. Self-efficacy is not the same as expectations of success that are sometimes overly optimistic. Learner self-efficacy must be based on realistic appraisal of one's skills. Instructors should therefore help students make accurate estimates of their potential for success. For example, they should outline clear prerequisite statements that students could use to assess what they know and can do with regard to the content.

4. Encourage attributing success to effort and interpreting mistakes as learning opportunities

Research suggests that students tend to have one of the following two beliefs about ability: It is either fixed or malleable. These beliefs about the nature of intelligence and ability can influence students' reactions to learning situations. If they attribute their success or failure in certain academic tasks to inborn ability, then extra effort to improve on a task is seen as fruitless. Instructors should demonstrate models where increased student effort leads to success. Students who believe their abilities can be changed interpret mistakes as learning opportunities, and they are interested in getting as much feedback as possible so they can improve.

5. Communicate high expectations that are in line with student capabilities

Challenging goals are more motivating than easy goals. However, there is a balance here that has to be considered. Challenge is good, but too much challenge threatens learners' expectations for success. Challenging tasks should be embedded in safe environments. Make the classroom a safe place to take risks. If students know that they will be supported if they try new things, they are more likely to do so. Instructors who accept mistakes as a part of learning are making it possible for students to take risks and push themselves.