

HOW CAN I STIMULATE STUDENTS' MOTIVATION TO LEARN?

"Motivation is that which gives direction and intensity to behavior" (Gagne, 1985, p. 302). At some point during your career as a student, you probably have asked yourself questions such as, "What is the point of this exercise?" ; "What is this course good for?" ; "Am I ever going to use this information in the real world?" In short, you were looking for a motivation to learn. In your role as a teaching assistant you will encounter students with similar questions. Lack of motivation has been identified as one severe obstacle to students' learning and memory (i.e., ability to retain information). Generally, students will learn what they are interested in and will find it difficult to learn material in which they have no interest. While you cannot learn for your students, you can facilitate their learning by offering a learning environment that stimulates the motivation they bring to the classroom. The following section offers several ideas for getting your students interested in their learning.

A. BUILD ON AND FOSTER STUDENTS' CURIOSITY AND INTEREST.

- Ask students questions about the content.
- Ask unexpected questions about material that is familiar to the students.
- Present surprising facts.
- Tell personal stories and experiences related to the content.
- Pose a problem to be solved.
- Engage students in research experiences to introduce them to the discovery process.

B. PROVIDE THE STUDENTS WITH EXPERIENCES OF SUCCESS.

- Clarify expectations and requirements for the students to prevent ambiguity and thus increase their confidence in their abilities.
- Provide students with the support and resources necessary to make success experiences possible.
- Pace the learning process so that each step offers new insights for the students but involves only a minimal risk of failure.
- Provide the students with periodic feedback on their progress.
- Provide opportunities for the students to apply the course material to other contexts/situations and to demonstrate their mastery of the material.
- Include assignments that de-emphasize grades such as giving instructive feedback on assignments or assigning ungraded written work.
- Use supportive language when talking about assignments. Choose phrases such as "I hope you find the homework challenging." or "I will be interested in your response."

C. MAKE THE SUBJECT RELEVANT TO THE STUDENTS.

- Explain how the course goals relate to the students' present/future careers.
- Invite students at the beginning of the quarter to share their reasons for taking your course and refer back to those reasons throughout the quarter.
- Provide a variety of classroom activities.
- Personalize the content by using examples familiar to the students.
- Incorporate students' comments and contributions into the course content.
- Invite guest speakers and/or organize field trips.

D. SEE YOURSELF AS A ROLE MODEL.

- Realize that your own enthusiasm and interest in the subject matter, in teaching, and in the students contribute greatly to the students' interest.
- Look at/reflect upon the verbal and nonverbal expressions you use to communicate your enthusiasm for instructing the students in the course content.
- Identify what it is that you are doing to express your enthusiasm. Consider the following questions as a start: Are you raising your voice? Are you using gestures? Are you telling personal stories? Are you smiling at the students?

Adapted from:

Gagne, E. D. (1985). *The cognitive psychology of school learning*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.

Keller, J. M. (1987, October). Strategies for stimulating the motivation to learn. *Performance and Instruction*, pp. 1-7.

Lowman, J. (1990, Fall). Promoting motivation and learning. *College Teaching*, pp. 137-139.

McKeachie, W. J. (1986). *Teaching tips: A guidebook for the beginning college teacher* (8th ed.). Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company.

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- I. Create an Atmosphere in Which Students Want to Participate
 - A. Learn your students names, majors and/or reasons for taking the course--use this information throughout the course.
 - B. Tell students why you find the course material interesting--your enthusiasm can be contagious.
 - C. Be open to student's comments and suggestions.

- II. Establish the Relevance of the Course Material
 - A. Relate topics to student's interests whenever possible.
 - B. Emphasize the value of the course material for all undergraduates.



"Think about it, Murray... If we could get this baby runnin', we could run over hills, pick up females, chase down mule deer - man, we'd be the grizzlies from hell."

- C. Provide examples with current events, case studies, popular issues.

III. Consider Various Ways of Presenting Course Material

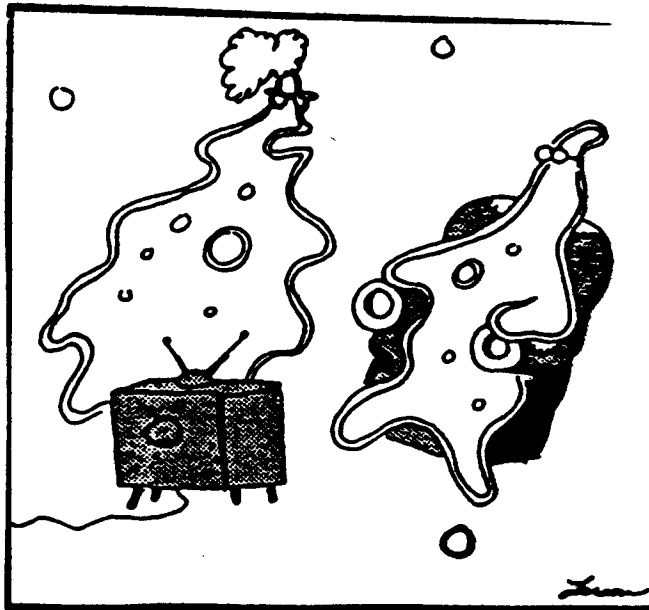
- A. Rely on more than one mode of learning: lecture, discussion, independent study, in-class presentations, review, etc.
- B. Utilize unexpected materials.

IV. Determine Student's Level of Understanding and Build on Their Foundation

- A. Review basic/essential concepts before introducing new concepts.
- B. Check for understanding.
- C. If necessary, break the course material down into smaller, more manageable topics.
- D. Encourage synthesis of basic concepts/principles with new material.

V. Consistently Provide Direct and Specific Feedback

- A. Start the course by clearly explaining what the Professor and you expect from students--consider distributing your own discussion section syllabus.
- B. Reward both effort and accomplishment.
- C. When necessary, diplomatically correct student's mistakes.



"Stimulus, response! Stimulus, response! Don't you ever think?"

VI. Encourage Students to Excel

- A. Ask each student to write down their objectives for the course at the beginning of the quarter. Suggest that they review their goal(s) before coming to section each week.

VII. Some Final Thoughts

- A. What you teach is not nearly as important as how you teach it.
- B. Instructor concern, approachability and enthusiasm are major factors in student motivation.
- C. Most successful teachers inspire their students by example.
- D. Never take yourself too seriously--be willing to take risks.
- E. Remember, not everyone will respond to your attempts at motivation--don't expect to influence all of your students!



Leslie Knapp
Department of Anthropology
341 Haines Hall