

Inspiring Student Self-Motivation

Virginia Brackett, PhD
Associate Professor of English
Park University

While normally appreciative of the invitation to join colleagues in a discussion of pedagogy and what “works” in the classroom, I have in most instances reluctantly participated in discussion of student motivation. I dip my toe into this philosophical quagmire only if permitted license to substitute the phrase student *inspiration* in place of student *motivation*. I also find it helpful to turn the rhetorical tables, as it were, and consider *self*-motivation on the part of students. The concept of individuals who hold some sense of self that a classroom mentor may nurture through student inspiration is one in which I place a modicum of trust. To “inspire” is literally to “breathe in,” to actively pull sustenance from a proffered external source. Active student determination based on some sense of self may couple with instructor inspiration to promote academic success.

The idea of student motivation elicits discomfort on the part of instructors for various reasons, the most important being that it has been discussed for eons without clear determination of how to achieve or even define it. Its study has been approached in a number of ways. For instance, the nature of motivation and its link to “learning and achievement” (Maehr 177) remains an integral consideration in goal theory, one dependent upon a social-cognitive (information processing) framework. That theory suggests many questions about motivation yet to be answered satisfactorily. Two examples are, first, do we measure motivation in education in terms of goals achieved, and second, what might the nature of those goals be? Additional pertinent points arising from discussion of quality motivation are how goals “operate in framing action, thought, and feelings” and goal theory’s suggestion “that goals are closely linked to a varying role of self in determining the nature and direction of action, feelings, and thought” (177).

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Etymology reveals that motivation did not enjoy use in the psychological sense of a stimulus for action until 1904. Early in the century behaviorist and psychoanalytic forces remained the rage until, as Frank Pajares explains in “Toward a Positive Psychology of Academic Motivation,” another force entered the field. It took exception to the passive focus of behaviorists and the focus on abnormalities by psychoanalysis. Representing this third force, Maslow proposed a theory “in which internal and intrinsic motivating forces and affective processes lead to personal, social, and academic well-being,” a perspective “of academic functioning in which subjective experiences and positive attitudes play a prominent role” (par. 1). Although “intrinsic” forces, those resources contributed by the student, figure prominently in academic success, optimism on the part of the classroom guide remains the most emphasized element in much of the discussion on motivation. Pajares explains, “One of positive psychology’s signature constructs is optimism . . . typically defined as holding a view of life events and situations . . . characterized by positive thinking” (par. 5). The claim that students remain dependent upon an instructor’s ability to create a perky, positive, optimistic environment slams like a chain mail cloak across my sagging shoulders. I hold little confidence in my ability to turn on optimism at will, like some metaphysical bulb that will light my students’ paths.

However, Pajares’ additional comments buoy my spirits. He cites a slew of scholars, noting that few studies *support empirically* the necessity of optimism in the successful classroom. I welcome even this moderate suspicion, a shadow cast

across the unrealistically sunny nature that the idea of free-floating optimism and Pajares' "positive attitude toward the future" (par. 5) connotes. Yet optimism remains anecdotally essential. Researchers conclude, despite the lack of measurable evidence, that "an optimistic explanatory style" on behalf of a classroom guide shows better relation to student "academic achievement, positive goal orientation, and use of learning strategies" (par. 5). I do find helpful the conversion of the term "optimism" to an adjective to elucidate the way an instructor might explain matters. Pajares writes that an explanatory style includes offering students various learning strategies. This I agree with vigorously. I see that I can offer my students critical learning tools, such as developing the ability to synthesize and analyze the ideas of others, therefore *inspiring* them through such tools to form their own ideas.

However, Pajares adds, it follows that a more "pessimistic explanatory style is associated with negative outcomes and with learned helplessness" (par. 5). So there it is again. At least in theory, student ability to learn remains inextricably linked to our capacity for sanguinity and brightness, the latter term not meant in the intellectual sense. Such perkiness seems best suited to a cheerleader, and I admit that I occasionally not unwillingly fulfill that role. However, it remains secondary to the suggestion that solid critical thinking will aid in developing the survival instincts sorely needed by students in an often pessimistic world. And it places a distant third to offering students ideas from literature that better explain and inspire than I could ever hope to.

The subject matter of a National Public Radio interview titled "Students' View of Intelligence Can Help Grades" serves as a prime example of the necessity of facts and critical thinking as more valuable than simple instructor motivation. Research psychologist Carol Dweck spoke of her study, which recently appeared in *Child Development*, that confirms the importance of student self-empowerment. The study indicated that if seventh graders with low math scores were taught one fact, which is that one's intelligence is not fixed, but can grow, their math scores increased. About 100 such students were assigned randomly to what were labeled "workshops on good study skills. One workshop gave lessons on how to study well. The other taught about the expanding nature of intelligence and the brain" ("Students' View"). By the end of the semester, the group who had been taught that the brain can grow smarter had significantly better math grades than the other group who were encouraged to develop better study skills. Steven Asher, Duke University child psychologist, reinforced Dweck's findings by stating "Teaching children that they're in charge of their own intellectual growth motivates a child to work hard" ("Students' View"). Such studies also support the idea that students must confirm their own classroom power, developing a sense of self, long before they reach the college level.

While optimism remains desirable, it is only one ingredient of many in a complicated recipe for success. I enjoyed the guidance of several wonderful teachers during my own education, one of whom was not at all a positive personality. And in the classrooms of those most positive to whom I responded positively in turn, a number of fellow classmates remained miserable and detached. Motivation carries a connotation of cause/effect that ties it to the achievement of those benchmarks with which goal theory deals. But my response to those certain instructors did not necessarily relate to any specific goals. Rather, these instructors inspired me, my reaction more in a spiritual than cerebral realm.

I distinctly remember, for instance, one advanced freshman English professor, a man with a deadly dull delivery style, introducing our class to literature that focused on the theme of power. One of the novels assigned was Charles

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Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. With my professor's suggestion in mind, I suddenly recognized the power inherent to Madame Dufarge's knitting. Her stitches and purls acted as signs for names that composed a death-squad victims list. Thunderstruck by the idea that a seemingly harmless woman controlled life and death in the Faubourg St. Antoine, I recognized for the first time the female capacity to rule through silence. That recognition left me momentarily breathless. Then it inspired my realization that I had the capacity to consider new ideas and perhaps apply them to my own life. Along the lines of the teach-a-man-to-fish philosophy, that professor's approach promoted the development of an attitude that could support a number of possible future outcomes, one being the simple pleasure of identifying my place in this world in relationship to those around me. I remained prepared to do so, because I had entered the classroom with some awareness of a personal value system, the sense of self that cognitive theoretical perspectives acknowledge plays just as major a role as do goals (Maehr 178).

As an additional concern, I recognize daily the negative effect of falsely optimistic promises so inherent to our consumer culture on our students. That popular culture, in which such optimistic promise through empty rhetoric has become the marketing norm, necessarily complicates our relationships with our students. We are under siege by ideas from a commodity culture in which some of us wonder how the traditional promise of enlightenment through education can survive. When consumer forces demand that we consider the student a customer to be acted upon, to motivate, if you will, we can little wonder that students themselves may come to view the university as a one-stop shopping experience. They should be able to select courses, place them in their baskets, and make a bee-line to the check-out stand. Such commodity exchange demands marketing because, as any first year business major can tell you, marketing motivates people to consume, creating a desire, rather than satisfying a need.

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If students come to us without any real *self-identified* needs, but instead bring to the classroom a passive nebulous desire for a certain something that an outside agent is to supply, few will enjoy a satisfying academic experience. Students must arrive with some sense of self, which, combined with the desire to contribute to classroom experiences, will help that sense grow and mature and take chances in order to enjoy academic success. Try asking students to bring to class printed advertisements and then discuss what those ads are actually "selling." Rather than an automobile or beer, ads are peddling success or inclusiveness. Such application of semiotics can quickly reveal to a student, perhaps to her surprise, a value system she may not know that she holds.

Thus, I trust better a second approach described by Pajares that stresses student "authenticity—the belief that one's achievements and attainments are deserved and that others recognize these achievements as being merited" (par. 6) as a self view that results in student success. Note that the student brings the belief in one's authenticity to the classroom. The second step in this approach is recognition on the part of the instructor/guide/mentor of such authenticity as meritorious. I do engage at times in *powerlogue* with my students, offering recognition through the single avenue of positive comment. However, I much prefer the two-way empowerment exchange of *dialogue*. In such an exchange, the student's contribution remains primary, with that of the instructor's contribution, optimistic or not, secondary. *What* the classroom mentor contributes should outweigh *how* she contributes, as long as the recognition contribution exists. I do

not dispute that the delivery of my literature professor would have benefited from a dose of enthusiasm, and all instructors may practice certain methodology, such as use of classroom technology, to better gain student attention. But the most enthusiastic instructor on earth cannot, nor should she have to, keep awake the student who comes to class to sleep.

Pajares explains yet a third approach to the study of motivation labeled "invitational theory." It espouses "that the beliefs persons develop about themselves and about others help form the perceptual lens through which they view the world and interpret new experiences" (par. 7). Once again, in this view, the student leads the way in interaction by bringing methods of interpretation into the classroom and applying them. This assumes that they do have opinions about the world around them, even if limited, and that they have considered these opinions. Having warmed over the last decades to postmodernism's contingency theory, which avows that every individual perceives reality based on a personal belief system, I find the invitational theory accommodating. The consideration of a number of points of view represents the blood and guts of an active student environment, where we encourage students to freely take the pulse of a number of life forces.

In composition courses, I have used a study of marketing specifically to challenge students to evaluate ways marketers determine what will affect their target demographic, taking an epistemological approach to analyze how such appeals succeed. Students discuss the representation through concrete stereotypical models of abstracts such as success and beauty. Few fail to consider their own willing participation as a target for marketing jargon based upon inherited ideals. That consideration often inspires them to realize they can alter inherited perceptions of self. Any instructor could adopt a similar exercise to encourage students to verbalize their individual belief systems. For example, they might discuss aloud or in journal entries activities they feel distinguish their family and/or community from other community groups.

Charged with motivating students through the application of our personal store of broad energies, we who interact in the classroom expect the result to be students who are emboldened and challenged. Instead, if students prove non-receptive, we may feel we have simply wasted proffered gifts, such as the "caring and positive attitude" (20) espoused by Lynley Russek, or activities designed to "spark" student "hearts" (par. 7) discussed by Gad Yair. On the other hand, student response results in a mixture of efforts on the part of both actors in the classroom drama, that mixture representing a new combination of energies. The sum of the parts does not have to be identical for each student either, because while our contribution may remain basically equivalent, theirs can widely vary. As noted by Maehr, students "can not be passive in school if they are to develop skills and orientations" (178) allowing them to become contributing members of society. Goals remain crucial, but so does the student's sense of self. And according to McCombs, instructor motivation depends on "the student's natural motivations and tendencies to learn," not on " 'fixing them' or giving them something they lack" (3). We might help our students by asking them through writing or oral discussion to define the term of motivation and explain how they relate to that definition.

Readers who teach likely share my wonder over the obvious difference, but not-so-obvious cause, for the disparate effects we have on students. I have utilized in two different sections of the same writing course identical resources and presentation techniques within an identical length of time with surprisingly varied results. Where one group of students demonstrates the ability and desire to move forward following that class session, the other does not. Naturally, I generalize somewhat; rarely in one class does no one seem to respond and learn. However,

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the numbers of those “reached” in one class may pale by comparison to another with no perceivable cause. In one classroom, students beautifully rise to the occasion when asked to write about observations at a location of their choice. One of this happy band selects her favorite restaurant, fills her writings with sensory dependent details, and pulls the reader effortlessly forward using skillfully selected transitions. She arrives at the reflection that “People gather together in restaurants not just to eat, but as a social occasion, finding more satisfaction in an evening filled with communion than a stomach filled with food.” Her successful effort represents that of most of the students in her class. In the meantime, students from a supposedly identical section of the course having experienced supposedly identical preparation and discussion ask, “Why do we have to choose a place to go? Can’t you just tell us one?” This inauspicious assignment reaction suggests little possibility of successful engagement. The active and passive response both result from what seems to me to be the exact same stimuli, readings, discussion, and a simple writing prompt. I feel some confidence in proposing that the active response, incorporating input and engagement on the part of the student, comes from self-motivation, a result of instructor, peer and subject matter inspiration.

Reflecting again on the invitational theory of motivation, I regularly, enthusiastically, and naturally make a conscious effort to praise student “achievements and attainments” to help promote “feelings of authenticity” for each individual. I also attempt to detect the varied “perceptual lenses” worn by my students through select means. This requires no small bit of action on my part. Born squarely in the first full decade of the post-war baby boom, I realize that I must move beyond time-bound preferences and check today’s view through the lenses of my students. Only then can I accept, if not understand, their viewpoint and relate in some manner to their twenty-first century existence. Thus, when my husband asks what I’m watching on early morning television as I trip the light fantastic on my elliptical rider, I reply “MTV,” bravely soldiering on through a morass of sound and visual impact that challenges my Beatle-honed sensibilities. Music intersperses with so-called “reality” shows like *America’s Top Model* or depictions of dating rituals that leave me scratching my head, but still willing to learn. I also understand (sorrowfully) that I can no longer take for granted that students can decode once simple cultural references, careful that such phrases as “It was a David and Goliath moment” don’t go to waste on unreceptive ears. I acknowledge the age gap, the culture gap, the value abyss, and I welcome the stimuli of my students as a guarantee that I won’t fall over the precipice. I do realize I must offer students ideas and issues with which they identify and will welcome into the arena of discussion and debate. I hold sacred the act of communication as the supreme panacea for all of mankind’s ills; I live and breathe writing, for goodness sake. But the act of communication is a shared one, requiring a deliverer and a receiver. Sometimes, despite my efforts, which statistically speaking can’t all be misspent, the receiver remains unavailable.

This conundrum of why teaching approaches prove effective with some students and not others may *relate* to motivation, but I firmly believe all classroom successes and failures can not be explained through motivational theory or even the presence or absence of inspirational sources. A student once clarified this for me after observing my struggle to break through the insulation in which one extremely bright student had cocooned himself. This student possessed undisputable talent that lay dormant, awaiting only, I imagined, the enchanted kiss of education to awake. I praised, cajoled and urged. I offered anecdotes, examples, and abundant illustrations of those who overcame challenges to succeed. I pointed to specific promise in his writing, his thought process, even his immature righteous social

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anger, so admirable in its purity and energy. I gently goaded, then finally demanded, hoping to evoke any reaction that hinted he was in process of my message, all to no avail. I sat one day at my desk ruminating to the point of obsession about this young man when his friend entered my office. Not without sympathy she stated something so reductively obvious that I marveled in its simplicity: "It's just not his time."

Not the right time, not the right place, not the right combination of personalities, not the right water for that horse to drink. Any of these conditions might account for a lack of student participation, and none will respond to the most optimistic of deliveries. Thus, a student who lacks a sense of identity and desire to learn may fail to self motivate despite our best efforts to inspire.

For centuries, poets called upon the Muses, great harbingers of idea and possibility, to inspire them. They requested those ethereal beings breathe into poetry the life force that allowed the poets' words to become more than arbitrary symbols on the page. Once that act took place, the burden shifted to the reader to make those living malleable ideas their own through absorption and application. As classroom guides, muses on a pedestrian scale, if you will, we might offer our students inspiration, hopeful that it will propel self-motivated students to learn. However, inherent upon those students in the face of our efforts is to breathe, and breathe deeply.

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Brackett teaches in Park University's English Department and is Assistant Director, Honors Program. Previously at Triton College serving as Department Chair; Coordinator, Scholars Program; and Co-coordinator, International Poetry Contest; she received the Outstanding Faculty Award. Facts on File will publish her 12th book, a companion to 17th and 18th century British poetry, in 2008.