

5 Shockingly Simple Ways (you haven't heard of) to Motivate Students at the Secondary Level



Motivation...we've all been there before - or at least I hope I'm not the only one. I'm talking about those moments when teaching feels more like pulling teeth. You push, pull, twist, bend, do a cartwheel, whatever – and they still don't budge.

But you are not a dentist, and you sure aren't paid like one. Whether it is trying to get them to do an assignment, participate in an activity, or contribute to a class discussion, some days it feels like you are doing all the pulling.

I'm going to assume you already know some of the more widely known strategies to motivate students. You already know that students are motivated by choice. Their perception of **autonomy** is, indeed, a strong motivator (Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016; Cheon & Reeve, 2015). But just because you let them choose whether they read *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Catcher and the Rye* doesn't guarantee they are actually going to read either one, does it?

Chances are good you know that **relevance** is another powerful motivator. Students pay attention to things that are behaviorally relevant to them (Oudiette, Antony, Creery, & Paller, 2013). So, you build a math lesson that relates to Minecraft, or a language arts lesson around the latest YouTube craze. Sure, it peaks some of their interest, but what if they still aren't motivated to DO the accompanying task or assignment? Then what do you do?

You likely know that students are also motivated by **success** (Ryan & Deci, 2013). When students KNOW they have actually learned something, or done something right, the natural reward system of the brain releases dopamine. You might have heard of

dopamine in discussions around addiction. That's because dopamine drives someone to come back for more. If it is a drug, they want more. If it is a feeling of successfully completing a long division problem, they want more. But what do you do if you are trying to motivate them to try their first long division problem, or something else new that they haven't experienced success with ... yet?

Autonomy, relevance, and success are all powerful motivation tools that can peak student's interest, get them started on a task, and keep them coming back for more dopamine. When these tools work, you experience the magic and joy of learning. You feel energized and connected to your purpose of being a teacher.

When your efforts to motivate students with some of the tools above doesn't work – and they don't ALWAYS work – do you feel defeated, exhausted, and perhaps even frustrated with your students and yourself? Have you ever experienced how your student's level of motivation impacts your own motivation? To keep everyone's motivation levels WAY UP, check out these 5 more motivation tools:

1. **Boost Your Connections with Top 3 Leaders in Class**

WHY THIS WORKS: Let's be honest - It can be tough to like an unmotivated learner. But the stronger your relationship with them, the more motivated they will be. Plus, when the class leaders are working hard, their peers follow. The leaders of the "pack" have a huge social influence over the rest (Brechtwald & Prinstein, 2011).

HOW THIS WORKS: Begin by having one-on-one conversations with them about topics NOT related to school. Does he regularly have his earbuds in? Ask about what he is listening to. Overheard her talking about her plans for recess? Join that activity for 5-7 minutes during recess. Keep your focus ONLY on building the relationship. The motivation will naturally follow. Students consistently show higher levels of motivation when they believe their teacher cares about them personally (Urhahne, 2015).

2. **Friendly Competition**

WHY THIS WORKS: A friendly competition works for a few reasons. Remember the power of dopamine with success? Well, people like to win. It feels good. Also, young people are driven by social status. In other words, they like to look good to their peers. A healthy level of competition releases testosterone and cortisol in the brain in doses that boost motivation (Casto & Edwards, 2016). If the competition is too intense or the stakes are too high, cortisol levels could create stress levels too high for learning ... so keep the competition friendly.

HOW THIS WORKS: You can use both of these to their learning advantage by creating some friendly competitions between classes. Having one student competing against another individual can be too risky and some students might "forfeit" before giving any effort. Class-wide or team to team competitions keep the individual stakes

low. Invite one of your colleagues (or another one of your classes) to join the competition for most pages read, # of days with all HW turned in, longest streak without a tardy, etc. Keep it friendly where the winner gets to receive an act of kindness from the other class or another privilege.

3. **Make it Too EASY; Begin with a “Side” Step**

WHY THIS WORKS: Some students are unreceptive to your traditional motivational tools because they lack the efficacy to believe they can succeed. They either don't believe in themselves, or they don't believe in their ability level. Learned helplessness is a belief that one's behavior does not influence the outcome; therefore, one makes little effort to improve their situation (Maier & Seligman, 2016). It is one of the most detrimental mindsets for student achievement.

HOW THIS WORKS: A “side step” is a strategy that gets students to do the task from a similar problem or task. To reach those students, break down the task into its most simplistic steps that are a guarantee success for all. Do ALL your students believe they can successfully stand up? Great! Start there. Next, have them find a partner from a different table. Everyone can do that. Then, have them write their names at the top of the paper together. See how little these steps are? Before you know it, they'll be designing a masterpiece display of effort and motivation.

4. **Make it Almost IMPOSSIBLE; Begin with a Micro Step (Challenge/Mastery)**

WHY THIS WORKS: For some students an approach on the other end of the spectrum will motivate them to action. With some researchers citing students already know 50% of what is being taught, it's no wonder many students have low levels of energy and motivation (Nuthall, 2005). Students need more challenge, and a challenge-seeking mindset is a hallmark of highly successful learners (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015).

HOW THIS WORKS: Do you have students who might be motivated by hearing you say, “No one has ever been able to do this. But with my help ... YOU WILL SUCCEED!”? Or maybe this would work: “Most students don't learn this until 8th grade, but I think you guys have what it takes to master it now. Now, maybe we can start with just this step first...”

5. **Make it Social**

WHY THIS WORKS: Research supports the idea that students are more motivated when they can interact and feel connected to their peers (Ryan & Deci, 2013). When students feel socially connected to the students in their class, it creates a culture of safety where students are willing to take learning risks (ask a classmate for help, admit they are struggling, etc.). Students who feel socially connected to their classmates are also more intrinsically motivated, have higher levels of cognitive attention (because they aren't consumed with worry about whether their peers like

them/will tease them), and ultimately demonstrate higher levels of achievement (Mikami et al., 2017).

HOW THIS WORKS: Create time for students to get to know each other and foster friendships, and then keep the learning activities social with partner reviews, group projects, team teaching, group competitions, etc. More importantly, let the social groups set up their own group goals and group steps to take.

Not every motivation strategy works for every student ALL the time. The more tools you have at your disposal, the greater your chances you'll meet your goal. Pay attention to what works for each student so you can replicate that strategy again. If a particular strategy doesn't work, don't give up. Keep trying until you find the tool that works.

Your Motivation Bonus: Two More Powerful Tools!

Still feel like you need more options? Here you go – two more **BONUS** tools to help motivate your students. Remember, *your* motivation level impacts *your student's* motivation. Stay positive, and be persistent in your worthwhile goal of motivation.

BONUS #1: Make it Risky

WHY THIS WORKS: The adolescent years are a time of self-exploration and risky decision making (Reyna & Farley, 2006). Most of their risky decision making can be explained by the delayed maturation that happens in the pre-frontal cortex – an area of the brain known to manage critical thinking, responsible decision making, and anticipating consequences of choices. This part of the brain is not fully developed in teens AND can be impaired even further by the high emotions that dominate the life of a teen. Their impulsive, emotion-driven brains don't always lead to the best decisions, as you might recall from your own youth. Here is how you can use their drive for risk to your advantage...

HOW THIS WORKS: Capitalize on their craving for high-risk activities with phrases like this: "I'm not exactly sure if this is safe, or even school approved, ... but we are going to try it anyway." Or, "Please don't try this at home." "This could totally backfire on us, but who here is feeling risky today?" Or even, "I'm not sure if we should try this. I think the last teacher that tried this, got fired." Then, your students might say, "Okay, okay we WANT to do that."

BONUS #2: Connect to a Greater Purpose

WHY THIS WORKS: People first begin to explore their sense of purpose in the world during their adolescent years. It is a time of exploration and beginning to notice the world outside of themselves. When students are engaged in a task that is both meaningful to themselves and contributes to the world, their sense of purpose becomes the driving force behind their motivation (Damon, Menon, & Cotton Bronk, 2003).

HOW THIS WORKS: Listen to your students to decipher what social issues are important to them. It might be an environmental issue, homelessness, youth depression, or any other social issue. Then design the lesson/activity around solving that issue. What do they believe an adolescent struggling with depression needs to hear? Use that as a writing prompt in Language Arts. Put their math skills to work to calculate all the lengths, angles, and cost of supplies to build a mini shelter for the homeless. Want to really see teens at their best? Organize a time after school for them to actually build one to donate to the community. Support your students who want to organize against gun violence or to support LGBT issues.

WHAT NOW? No one wins when students are bored or discouraged. It is bad for student learning, and just as bad for teacher morale. If you are struggling to boost your secondary teacher's engagement skills, give them the support *THEY NEED*. High engagement, high energy with evidence-based tools is my professional development expertise. I'd love to help. Contact me at: < Liesl.mcconchie@gmail.com >

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