



Motivating Reluctant Learners

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IN BRIEF

This Research Report examines the reasons why some students are reluctant to learn and what can be done to motivate them. The key is to focus on students' self-efficacy—the belief that they can accomplish meaningful tasks. Making instruction relevant to their experience, giving them choices, helping them establish goals, and acknowledging their accomplishments all help achieve this.

Reluctant learners need to be both challenged and supported if they are to develop the self-efficacy they need to take risks and succeed.

They avoid challenges, don't complete tasks, and are satisfied to "just get by." They are reluctant learners, who often have the potential to excel but don't seem to care about achieving in school. Identifying the reasons behind these students' reluctance to learn is integral to engaging their interest and helping them to succeed.

Many reluctant students have received the message over time that they are poor students. As a result, they feel frustrated, inadequate, confused, or even ashamed (Hebb 2000). As they continue to receive negative feedback from teachers and parents, they have even less motivation to excel and become even more disengaged from academic tasks. This situation is a recipe for failure.

Students' beliefs about their capability to accomplish meaningful tasks—known as self-efficacy—directly affect their motivation to learn. Those with high self-efficacy willingly approach learning, expend effort, persist in the face of challenges, and use strategies effectively, while those with low self-efficacy more typically avoid challenges, expend little effort, and give up (DiCintio and Gee 1999; Lucking and Manning 1996).

Other beliefs that harm or hinder students' self-efficacy include:

Lack of relevance. They may believe schoolwork is unimportant and does not relate to their life or interests.

Fear of failure. They may feel it is safer not to try than to try and risk failure or embarrassment.

Peer concern. They may opt to appear “cool” to their peers by not trying to learn.

Learning problems. They may find it difficult to keep pace with peers and simply give up in frustration.

Lack of challenge. Their apathy toward schoolwork may stem from assignments that are below their ability.

Desire for attention. They may be trying to gain the teacher's attention and support by appearing helpless.

Emotional distress. Their lack of interest in schoolwork or ability to focus may actually be an indication of anxiety, distress, or depression.

Expression of anger. They may perform poorly in school as an act of rebellion against parental pressure to excel (Shore 2001).

Many reluctant learners do not know how to study effectively, and little classroom time is spent helping

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them develop such skills. Tumposky suggests that, along with teaching key strategies such as time management and how to summarize reading material, teachers should help students focus on these skills by asking questions such as “What strategies did you use?” and “How much time did you spend working on this problem?” (2003).

Make Learning Relevant

Self-efficacy starts with students believing that what they are working on is meaningful. Consequently, they need to know why what they are learning is important (Harris 1991). An instructional tool known as the Lesson Infusion Process is designed to address this need. As part of the process, teachers should:

Review subject matter to determine what they plan to teach, then ask themselves, “What about the lesson objective really matters to the children?”

Make a connection between students' experiences and the curriculum content;

Begin each lesson with an activity that uses strengths students already possess, including activities that draw on their experiences; and

Reflect on their instructional experience to note new insights and considerations for change (Williams and Woods 1997).

Involve Students

Another way teachers can make learning relevant to students is to allow reasonable choices in their assigned activities. For example, teachers can sometimes allow students to

choose whether they will work in groups or individually on a particular project (Gehlbach and Roeser 2002).

Other specific techniques for motivating students through involvement include:

Allowing flexible sequencing and due dates. This technique enables students to determine the order of their assignments. For example, students may be allowed to establish the sequence and due dates for a social studies unit that requires a product map, a written summary, and an oral report within a particular time period.

Incorporating self-scoring and self-correction. For example, students may be given seatwork assignments that fall within their independence level (*i.e.*, above an 80 percent accuracy level) so that the need for assistance is minimized. Instruct students to self-score their work and to make necessary corrections independently, using answer keys placed in an unobtrusive area of the classroom, or with the assistance of a “study buddy.”

Varying assignment lengths. Assignments can be constructed so that answers to the most critical questions are contained within the initial section of the exercise or worksheet. By setting a target (*e.g.*, 90 percent correct) at a certain point within the assignment, teachers can reward students who achieve the accuracy criterion by exempting them from the remainder of the assignment (Fulk and Montgomery-Grymes 1994).

Help Them Set Goals

Setting goals builds students' self-efficacy by helping them develop an internal sense of control and responsibility for their learning. These goals should be:

- Specific and measurable in quantity of achievement;
- Something the student wants to improve upon;
- Attainable and practical for a specific time period; and
- Stated in terms of expected

results, creating a “road map” that allows students to form a mental image of each goal (Martino 1993).

Encourage Reluctant Learners

Teachers can do small things that make their classrooms places where reluctant learners feel safe and are encouraged to take risks. For example, teachers can:

- Congratulate five students during each class on something they have achieved;
- Respond non-evaluatively at least three times per class by offering comments such as “That’s an interesting way of looking at it”; or
- Regularly acknowledge students for demonstrating improved effort or performance (Mendler 2002).

The reasons why a student is a reluctant learner are often complex, and educators need to consider not only the student in isolation but also the interaction between the student and the school/classroom environment. Reluctant learners need to be both challenged and supported. They need to be actively engaged by instructional approaches designed to maximize the possibilities for engagement. Finally, they need to feel safe enough to take the risks of participation instead of retreating from them. ■



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WEB RESOURCES

"Motivating Reluctant Learners" is the newsletter in the ERS Supporting Good Teaching series that was the basis for this article.

www.ers.org/goodteaching.htm

Increasing Student Engagement and Motivation: From Time-on-Task to Homework is a guide produced by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

www.nwrel.org/request/oct00/

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