

# Don't Rely on Grades Alone

## by David Gooblar

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How can you motivate people to do something they wouldn't normally do? It's a difficult question, and clearly one that's near the heart of teaching.

All the knowledge, preparation, and pedagogical techniques in the world won't help you in the classroom if you can't convince students to come along with you. Particularly if you, like many faculty members, are moving away from a lecture-heavy model of teaching to one that makes more use of class discussion and group work, you need your students to be motivated to learn. Student-centered teaching depends on quality student participation, which in turn depends on student motivation.

Most of the time, our main weapons in the fight to motivate students are the grades we give out. To be sure, grades also exist to give an accurate picture of student performance. But grades typically exist as both rewards and punishments to nudge students into approaching the course the way we think they should.

Think about the way you construct your syllabi. You'll devote a higher percentage of the final grade to assignments you think are more important or difficult. You'll assign regular quizzes if you want to make sure students come to class prepared. You'll threaten to dock their essay grades if they turn their papers in late. That's how we tackle the idea of student motivation in higher education: Students understand the rules of the game, and if they fail to follow them, their grades (and presumably their future prospects) will suffer.

The tricky thing is that, while it's easy to come up with any number of carrots and sticks to prompt students to do better, decades of research have shown that such so-called extrinsic rewards and deterrents are not particularly effective tools. In fact, in many studies, subjects who were

offered extrinsic rewards to complete a complex task actually performed *worse* than when they weren't given rewards.

When grades are the main driving force behind our students' motivation, instead of trying to master the material for their own benefit and assimilate it into their prior knowledge, students figure out what's expected of them to attain a good grade and act accordingly. In addition, if we want students to develop a lifelong interest in a subject, extrinsic motivators are problematic; after graduation, when the rewards for learning are gone, the interest disappears.

Ken Bain, whose book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, provides a helpful overview of the research into extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, puts it succinctly: "If students study only because they want to get a good grade or be the best in the class, they do not achieve as much as they do when they learn because they are interested."

So how do we keep students interested? How do we teach so that they are motivated to learn because they want to learn, not just because they have to jump through the hoops we've set up?

Sparking student motivation begins at the level of course design. When organizing a course and then "selling" it to students (on the syllabus and on the first day of class), focus on big, fundamental questions and fascinating problems. You want to present students with issues that, in their difficulty and intrigue, seem to invite further inquiry. There's value in intellectual challenges, and it's worth taking the time to think through what aspects of your subject might be fascinating to 19- and 20-year olds.

Remember, although it can be useful to think about what draws you to your discipline, your students — who lack your experience with the history and minutia of your field — may need a different angle to spark their interest. The burden is to demonstrate the significance of your subject, to answer the question lingering in the head of every student in your class: "So what?"

Your salesmanship needs to continue in the classroom throughout the semester. You can't assume that students will understand the purpose of your teaching methods, assignments, or readings if you don't tell them.

Don't rely on grades alone to push students into taking an active part in the course. Explain to them what they will gain if they understand the readings, or dive deep into their research papers. Emphasize what skills they might attain through mastery of a subject, and how those skills might be of help in the future. Strive to tie your subject matter to your students' lives, looking for ways to make it relevant to them.

You can still ask a lot of your students, and expect them to do the work necessary for the course. But you will make your life — and theirs — a lot easier by creating the conditions in which they'll do that work for their own edification, not just for a grade.

Lastly, letting students take ownership of the course is a great way to motivate them. So it's worth trying to find ways to cede control in the classroom. For example:

- Give students some power over the course readings (as in Chris Walsh's brilliant "blank syllabus").
- Let them choose from a number of assignment options.
- Provide time in class for them to revise and improve their course work.

The trick — and I don't mean to suggest that it's easy — is to get them to actually care about the answers they're pursuing in your assignments, exams, and class activities. Tackle the problem of student motivation and all the other aspects of your course will be that much more effective.

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