Motivating Students to Higher Levels of Rigor

Barbara R. Blackburn

One of the challenges to increasing rigor in the classroom is student motivation. You may teach students who are already not motivated to learn what you are teaching. If so, how are you going to motivate them to learn at higher levels? Let's look at three specific aspects of student motivation that can impact rigor: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Intrinsic Motivation, and Growth Mindset.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

One of the most basic frameworks for motivation is from Abraham Maslow, who identified a hierarchy of needs that people experience.

Maslow's Hierarchy
Self-Actualization
Esteem
Love/Belonging
Safety
Physiological

He proposed that before one can focus on the need for knowledge or understanding (self-actualization), that the lower level needs, such as esteem, belonging, security, and survival must be met. For example, if I'm a student attending a new school, I care more about finding my classroom than I do about today's lesson. As you see, his work applies to rigor. Let's adapt his material a bit to consider at how this might look in a classroom. Our goal is self-actualization, in which students focus on learning first. But notice all the other learning needs that must be met.

Needs Identified by Maslow	Application to Students
Aesthetic (self-actualization)	Focus on their own learning first.
Need for Understanding Need for Knowledge	Will I have the knowledge to be successful? What level of support will I have?
Esteem Needs Belonging Needs	Will I be successful? What will others think of me if I work hard?
Security Needs Survival Needs	What happens if I am unsuccessful? Do I have what I need today?

Notice that, until basic needs are met, students do not make it to the higher levels, which include a focus on learning at rigorous levels. That's why we should incorporate strategies for social-emotional learning as a part of our classroom.

Intrinsic Motivation

Next, we need students to be intrinsically motivated to learn at high levels. Intrinsic motivation is that which comes from within the student. It is internal as opposed to external. With intrinsic motivation, students appreciate learning for its own sake. They enjoy learning and the feelings of accomplishment that accompany the activity. There are many benefits to intrinsic motivation. Students tend to earn

higher grades, score higher on achievement tests, prefer challenging work, are more confident about their abilities, and retain information and concepts longer.

The Foundational Elements of Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation has two foundational elements: People are more motivated when they value what they are doing and when they believe they have a chance for success.

Value

Students see value in a variety of ways, but the main three are relevance, activities, and relationships. First, students typically see value through the relevance of the lesson. That's why we strive to show real-life applications when we are teaching. Sometimes relevance is how they might use the material in another lesson, at times, it is the value for the future (college or university or the workforce), and for primary students, it's as simple as hearing their name in a story. In fact, most students have a streaming music station playing in their heads, WII-FM—what's in it for me? That's why they ask you, "Why do we need to learn this?"

I was observing a student teacher when a student asked, "Why do we need to learn this?" It clearly flustered her, particularly because I was there to observe her, and she snapped back, "Because I said so." You can imagine the look on the student's face. The student teacher's answer ranks right up there with "Because we have to. It's on the test." Neither helps students understand why learning is important. Students are more engaged in learning when they see a useful connection to themselves.

Next, there is value in the type of learning activity you are doing. Students

are generally more motivated by doing something, than by simple "sit and get". Charlene Haviland, a teacher in Norfolk, Virginia, has developed lessons that incorporate this concept. She uses the Harry Potter books to teach science concepts. For a discussion on the flying broomsticks used in the game of Quidditch, Haviland said, "We can even go into Bernoulli's principle and explore how we can take that from flying on a broom to...how airplanes work...and why some fly better than others." (www.cnn.com/2005/EDUCATION/07/08/harry.potter.science.ap/index.html). I don't know about you, but I'd sign up for that class quicker than I would a standard class on aerodynamics.

Finally, students find value in their relationships, with you and their peers. I heard a speaker say that the teacher-student relationship is foundational to everything else that happens in the classroom. I believe that is true. The old adage, "they don't care what you know until they know how much you care" is true. Students need to feel liked, cared for, and respected by their teachers. Many students also need the same from their peers. If they feel isolated from other classmates, they are disengaged and less likely to see value in what they are doing.

Success

Students are also motivated when they believe they have a chance to be successful. And that belief is built on four building blocks: level of challenge, experiences, encouragement, and views about success.

First, the degree of alignment between the difficulty of an activity and a student's skill level is a major factor in self-motivation. Imagine that you enjoy playing soccer, and you have the chance to compete in a local game. You will be playing against Lionel Messi (Argentina and Barcelona), named World Player of the Year four times in six years. How do you feel? In that situation, there's plenty of opportunity for challenge, probably too much challenge! Or perhaps you love reading novels, but the only language you can read is

Russian. How motivated will you be in a literature class? For optimal motivation, the activity should be challenging but in balance with your ability to perform. That's a struggle for many teachers; but that is the foundation of our jobs—starting where a student is, and moving him or her up to increasing levels of difficulty and providing appropriate scaffolding for learning at increasing levels.

Just as we've discussed in many other areas, a student's experiences are an important factor. I'm more likely to believe I can be successful in science if I've been successful in other science activities. On the other hand, if I've had multiple negative experiences reading poetry, I'm less likely to want to read poetry, because I don't think I can.

A third building block to feelings of success is the encouragement a student receives from others. Encouragement is "the process of facilitating the development of the person's inner resources and courage towards positive movement" (Dinkmeyer & Losoncy, 1980, p.16).

When you encourage, you accept students as they are, so they will accept themselves. You value and reinforce attempts and efforts, and help the student realize that mistakes are learning tools. Encouragement says, "Try, and try again. You can do it. Go in your own direction, at your own pace. I believe in you." Encouragement can be in the form of words, but you can also provide encouragement through a consistent, positive presence in your students' lives.

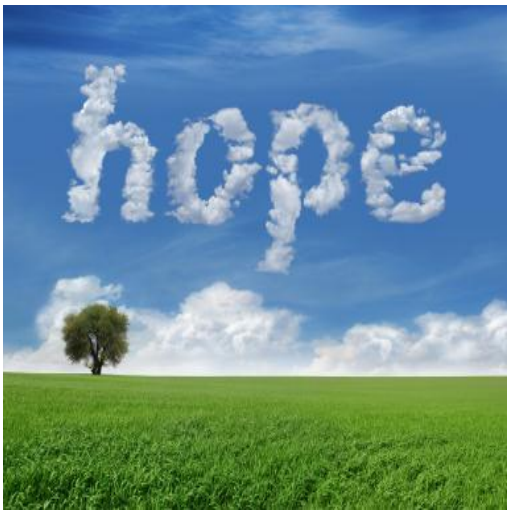
It's also important for students to read and learn about people who failed before they succeeded, because the final building block is a student's views about success and failure. Many students see failure as the end rather than as an opportunity to learn before trying again. But there are countless examples, from Abraham Lincoln to Steve Jobs, of people who have experienced failure in their lives,

only to become successful. How you define success and failure drives many of your beliefs about your own ability to succeed.

Growth Mindset

A third aspect of motivation and rigor is having a growth mindset. Part of the success factor in intrinsic motivation is having a growth mindset. Have you ever seen a large oak tree? We had one in our yard when I was growing up, and I was always surprised at its size. But what really amazed me was to realize that huge tree started as a small acorn.

Our students are like that too. They will grow into a tree, but right now they may be acorns. And what will help them grow are our actions. Will we stand by and just assume that our students will always be acorns? Or can we see that they have the potential to be oak trees? More importantly, do students view themselves as capable of growth? In a rigorous classroom, the teacher and his or her students believe that learning is a process, and that it will happen with high expectations and the right support.



Strategies to Develop a Growth Mindset in Your Classroom

How do you develop a growth mindset in your students? First, be sure you have a growth mindset. I remember one time thinking, I'm not sure my students will ever learn this! They just don't have it in them. That's a fixed mindset. I wasn't purposely changing my view—I was just frustrated that my struggling students weren't being successful, and in my frustration, I was temporarily giving up on them. We have to be careful that doesn't happen, especially in a rigorous classroom. When we raise the level of challenge, it's easy for us (and students) to give up. Keeping our focus on the potential for growth is critical.

Once you have a growth mindset, you want to encourage students to have a growth mindset too. There are six strategies you can use to build a growth mindset.

Strategies to Develop a Growth Mindset in Your Classroom
Build a learning-oriented mindset.
Focus on process as well as product.
Emphasize mastery and learning.
Reinforce effort.
Decrease learned helplessness.
Provide multiple opportunities for success.

Conclusion

Increasing the rigor in your classroom is an important, yet challenging goal. One of the stumbling blocks is a lack of motivation from your students. By addressing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, tapping into intrinsic motivation, and encouraging a growth mindset, you can enhance student motivation, and successfully increase rigor.

References

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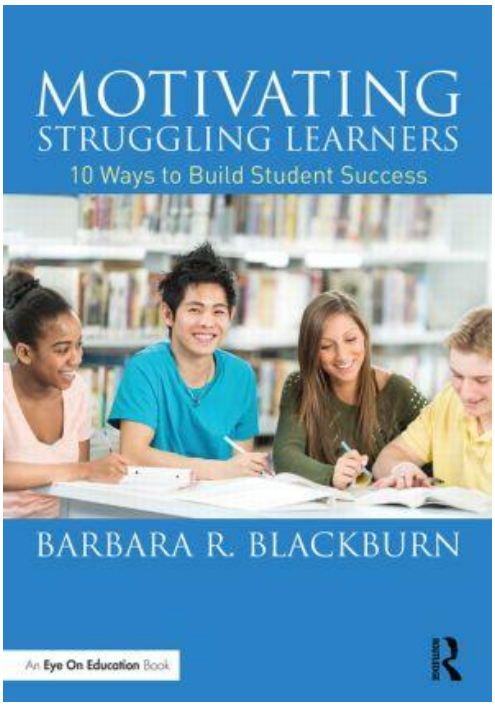

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