

5 STRATEGIES TO MOTIVATE THE ONLINE LEARNER

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Whether you teach Kindergarten, PhD students, or anywhere in between, student engagement and motivation will always be a challenge. Online courses can present unique challenges over the traditional face-to-face class, especially since you often do not physically see or interact in real-time with your students. Without face-to-face communication, verbal queues and emotions that faculty rely on in the classroom can get lost.

Many think that keeping students interested and motivated is as easy as following a formula. Unfortunately, there is not a magic formula or a crystal ball that will help you motivate your students as each group and each class is different. Many factors affect a given student's motivation to work and to learn including: interest, perception, desire, self-confidence, self-esteem, patience, and persistence (Bligh, 1971; Sass, 1989).

Educational psychology has identified two classifications of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation comes from a desire to learn something for self-fulfilment, or to master a subject. Extrinsic motivation comes from a desire to succeed for the sake of accomplishing an outcome. Extrinsically motivated students tend to be grade-oriented and intrinsically motivated students are those that generally take interest in their work.

If you have taught online, then I'm sure you have struggled in motivating your students at times. In this post, I will share some of the methods by which I have worked to try to motivate my online learners to be engaged and control their learning. I truly believe that student engagement is the key to success in an online course.

#1: Reward students' successes

Students are not robots. Students are human. Humans like to be rewarded. Therefore, reward students' success. Praise helps build self-esteem and self-confidence, which in turn, helps motivate students to move on to the next task. When possible, introduce them to work done by classmates which is exceptional. Be sure to mix it up and use different people. It will not only provide praise to the people you are using as an example, but also provide motivation to those who truly want to do better. On the contrary, be specific when you must give negative feedback, but avoid being demeaning. There is no quicker way that I lose the focus of my kids than when I am upset and demeaning, even on accident.

Another way to reward and motivate students is to dangle the carrot in front of them that almost all of them ask me at some point during the semester—I offer them extra credit up front. If they are engaged in the course and are working on their assignments/projects/exams regularly, they get 5 points extra credit for submitting according to the course schedule. The way in which I run my online courses is to give them a recommended schedule of readings and due dates and tell them that if they follow the schedule, they should not have a problem finishing the course by the end of the term. At the same time, I understand that life happens so if they miss a due date, it's OK as long as they finish up by the end. This works for the many that submit their work regularly.

#2: Enable students to monitor their own progress

Some students are genuinely self-starters, self-motivated and a joy to have in class. However, everyone is different, and since the reason I teach is because I enjoy helping people, I, like other educators, must realize that not everyone has self-confidence when working on a new subject. These students may lack motivation. Blackboard provides some powerful assessment tools for monitoring student progress. These tools can be used to help monitor your students to help motivate them toward the course goals. Some of these tools include discussions, blogs, group projects, assignments, and holding virtual office hours, just to name a few. Each of these has their positives and negatives, and there are literally dozens of ways in which each can be used, but I just wanted to highlight my experience with them.

For my traditional classes, I find myself posting to the discussion forums more often than I do with my online courses. I post a summary of everything we do in class after class to the forums so that students can refocus their thoughts and recall what we just did. For my online classes, all notes and examples are preloaded to the Content pages in the course. I teach an intro to programming course and a database course online, so there really is not a place for lengthy discussions as each is an intro course to the topics. Blogs are useful in either setting as it gives a chance to post a detailed writing of a new topic, a breakthrough in technology, something about the latest news, etc.

I have tried group work in my online classes, but unfortunately have had bad experiences. If students are truly at a distance, they still struggle to find common times and technologies to come together. Personally, with technology, I feel all things are possible, but I have abandoned group work in my online classes for now because of the struggles. Outside of the meeting struggles, the same struggles that exist in a traditional class exist online with the strong leading the group and others following along.

#3: Create an open, accessible environment for students

One of the best methods for keeping students on task has been the creation of virtual office hours. Making myself available at a particular time for chatting or video conferences has worked well. I have also added to that the opportunity for students to text me. It seems many students would rather text than email me with their questions. I think it's the

instantaneous nature of text that they have come to expect with today's social media tools that make them more comfortable interacting in that manner over email. I make them email me their code, but several will text and let me know they have sent me an email. To me, it's whatever works the best for them, and being flexible as a professor is key. Giving them timely feedback is also key to keeping them motivated to work for you.

One thing I like to do is help students find personal meaning and value in the material. I look at my class list and try to incorporate examples or comments that relate the material to each major. And think about this... how many of you had experiences in your education where instructors were hard to reach, impossible to find, took over the class and lead with an iron fist, etc? How did you respond in those classes? How motivated were you to show up day after day or try to ask questions when you needed help? You should create an atmosphere that is open and positive, which includes being prompt to their questions and making yourself available, such as virtual office hours. You can strengthen their self-motivation by not reinforcing your power as the instructor.

Even though you do not see your online students, you still have the opportunity to make them a part of the class and introduce them to their classmates and engage them in communication. Just like the physical classroom, the online classroom does not have to be one-way communication. Students need to know that you know your stuff and most importantly that you care about them and their success. Not everyone will want to communicate and not everyone learns in the same way— meaning you can provide examples, case studies, multiple approaches to conveying information about a topic to help reach different strengths, learning styles, and interests. Online classes are very beneficial for this as students will choose to review content through the methods they prefer, whereas in a face-to-face class, you may not have time to do this.

#4: Help students set achievable goals in the course

According to Davis (*Tools for Teaching* by Barbara Gross Davis, Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco, 1993), students should be encouraged to become self-motivated, independent learners. As professors, we can help accomplish this by: giving frequent, early, positive feedback that supports students' beliefs that they can do well. We can also ensure opportunities for students' success by assigning tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult. Strive to set high, but not unrealistic expectations of them in their assessments and interactions. Avoid busy work at all costs. They had enough of that in high school. By avoiding busy work and keeping students on task, you can keep them motivated.

Another approach for this is to help students set achievable goals in the course. What I do is lay out estimated completion times for each project. That way, there are no unreal expectations of getting things completed without the right amount of prep or time on task. Also, tell students what they have to do to succeed. Success is defined differently by each student, but by giving them clear expectations of what you expect for different levels of

performance, they will work to what they want to get out of the course. Be sure to point out where troubles might lie ahead of them and constantly ask how you can help and the all the while, be enthusiastic. Students can tell in how you respond, whether or not you are excited about teaching them.

#5: Allow students to participate in building the curriculum

You may think I am crazy with this next one, but when you can, let students have some say in what will be covered in a class. I do this at times while still keeping structure. Before the semester begins, I ask my seniors what they want to get out of their class. I incorporate many of the topics they recommend while keeping enough theory and practice to satisfy the goals of the course. During a class, ask for students' opinions regarding content. I can keep about 80% of a class at a schedule and allow the other 20% to flow and people enjoy and learn from the experiences. You can do this in online classes just as easily as face-to-face by incorporating new topics, encouraging/requiring discussions, and blogs. One way in which I get my students to talk about the course is to give them the opportunity to complete what I call Great/Gripe sheets (thank you Dr. David Cusick). Students point out what is great about the course and what they would like to change, their gripes. Some of the most constructive feedback I have ever been able to incorporate into a course has come from those Great/Gripe sheets.

When students ask questions, I never simply tell them the answer or give them the solutions. Ask my students—if you ask a freshman, they can tell you how upset they can get. If you ask my seniors, they appreciate the way I handle questions. I typically answer with a question, or a gentle hint in the right direction. This can be very frustrating to students, but at the same time, very rewarding once they realize they found the solution to their own question. This is also very rewarding as the instructor as I truly enjoy seeing the light come on when a student solves a problem and learns. This can be accomplished in an online class just as easily as it can in a face-to-face course through emails, texts, discussions, etc.

The overall key to success in motivating online students is to build motivation factors and engagement activities in to your course. However, do not lose sight of the main goal of the class, and that is to educate your students. On the other end of the spectrum, research shows that good everyday teaching practices can do more to counter student apathy than special efforts to attack motivation directly (Ericksen, 1978). Simply put, don't overdo it. You have to work to find the right mix. In the end, each student is different and each class is different. I will leave you with this thought: if you do not know what is working and what is not with your class, if you feel you are losing students, or if you feel that you are not being successful, simply ask them for advice. Trust me, they will talk.