

# Motivating the Reluctant Learner

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It is the purpose of this document to provide the reader with the research basis for the practices and procedures advocated in the presentation titled "Motivating the Reluctant Learner" by Dr. Robert S. Barwa. While this document will provide a brief summary of the researched cited, the reader is encouraged to consult the complete text of any reference that (s)he feels will provide assistance.

A review of the research on effective instruction indicates that there are three major factors that, if addressed effectively, will significantly increase the likelihood that learning will take place and behavior in the classroom will be appropriate. These factors are:

1. A well-planned lesson that includes the use of a research-based Lesson Plan.
2. Student engagement with the material to be learned.
3. A classroom climate that creates an appropriate psychological environment for learning.

## Section 1 - Lesson Planning

*"Failing to plan is planning to fail"*

Keeping students motivated to learn begins with a well planned, exciting lesson that keeps students engaged in the learning process. The research (ERIC, 1987; Hamachek, 1990; Hunter, 1994; Eggen, & Kauchak, 1995, 2004) indicates that effective lesson plans are best written backwards, that is, written with the final outcome of the lesson clearly in mind. The research further indicates that it is important that quality lesson plans include:

- A clear statement of the planned outcome or objective of the lesson, stated in observable, measurable terms. Other research (Cole, 1995) indicates that student learning is enhanced if students are made aware of the objective(s) at the start of the lesson. This research indicates that this is especially important when working with students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families.
- Lesson objectives that are clearly related to a particular state standards or outcomes. Research (Davis & Perna, 2000) further indicates that learning will be enhanced if the outcome and/or objective is clearly communicated to the students.
- A list of materials that will be needed to present the lesson. (Time between lessons is often short and a list will help assure that the lesson can take place without interruption.)
- A timeline or schedule for the instructor to follow (i.e. the approximate amount of time to be spent on each activity.)
- Activities that will help the students recall previous learning, and establish a cognitive structure into which the new learning will be placed.
- A step-by-step plan to present the information and to keep students actively engaged with the material to be learned.
- Methods to check for understanding and to re-teach, if necessary.
- Modified instructional activities for students with special needs.
- A plan to provide the students with opportunities for guided and independent practice.
- A closure activity that allows students to review the content and to link it to other learning.

A good step-by-step guide to developing effective lesson plans can be found at [www.LessonPlansPage.com](http://www.LessonPlansPage.com). This same site contains a wide variety of usable lesson plans on a variety of topics.

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## Section 2 - Engaging Students in the Learning Process

*“Give me a fish and I eat for a day, teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime”*

Keeping students actively engaged in the learning process is the most prevalent theme that runs through the research on effective instruction. The failure to actively engage students in the learning process is also the key predictor poor student motivation. Chickering and Gamson (1987) summarize the research well when they state, “Students must do more than listen. They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in problem solving. To be actively engaged students must be involved in such higher order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. . . . Instructors must design instructional activities involving students doing things and thinking about what they are doing.”

Techniques for keeping students engaged are as varied as the imagination of the classroom teacher. The list included here is simply a sampling of the myriad of activities found in the research.

### *Whole Class Responses vs. Single Student Recitation*

One of the most often used methods of obtaining active student participation is to have a single student respond to questions asked by the teacher. Unfortunately, this “single student recitation method,” while highly engaging for the reciting student, has the strong potential for allowing other students in the class to “tune out” once they know that they are not responsible for answering the teacher’s question. The research (Bonwell, & Eison, 1991; American Psychological Association, 1992; Drummond, 2002; Davis, 2003) suggests that single student recitation be reserved for the times when students are asking questions. The same research indicates that methods that keep all members of the class engaged, should be used most of the time. Some of the “whole class” engagement strategies suggested in the literature include:

- Choral responses
- Use of hand signs and/or gestures to respond (Hunter, 1994)
- Use of colored response cards
- Think/pair/share (Chilcoat, 1989)
- Written responses/journal writing (Brunning & Horn, 2000)
- Human graphs (Chilcoat, 1989)
- Cooperative learning activities (Johnson, & Johnson, 1986; Johnson, & Johnson, 1994)
- Peer teaching (Chilcoat, 1989)
- Simulations/games/role plays (Alderman, & Hudson, 1988)
- Case studies (Alderman, & Hudson, 1988)
- The guided lecture [i.e. students listen for 10 - 20 minutes without taking notes, then spend 5 minutes writing about what they remember, and then 10 – 15 min in small groups clarifying and elaborating on the material.] (Ruhl, Hughes & Schloss, 1987)

### *Student Success*

Nothing succeeds like success. We have all felt the effects of frustration in our lives. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the research (Cashin, 1979; Alderman, & Hudson, 1988; Brunning & Horn, 2000) clearly indicates that students who are not successful in school are not engaged in the learning process and are far more likely to become actively or passively resistive - and occasionally aggressive.

Conversely, students who frequently experience and expect to experience success in the classroom are far more likely to conform to normal behavior standards. Therefore, it is important that teachers plan activities that allow students to regularly experience success.

### *Attribution Theory*

While having students experience success is important, the effective classroom instructor is also keenly aware of the impact of Attribution Theory on students' perception of the value of their success. Attribution Theory states that success is only valued when the person achieving that success can attribute the achievement to hard work, innate intelligence, and/or specific actions taken (Lucas, 1990; Niemivirta, 1999). Success that the individual attributes to luck, cheating, performing tasks that are too easy, and/or other factors over which the person has no control are not viewed by the individual as true successes, and do not have the same predictive value on future behavior. Thus, while it is vital that the classroom teacher create frequent opportunities for students to experience success, that success must be perceived as being the result of positive efforts.

### *Attention Span and Learning Style*

Effective classroom teachers are aware of the attention span and preferred learning styles of the learners with whom they are working. Despite the way most of us have been treated in our college education courses (remember that most of us tend to teach the way we were taught), even adults have attention spans of only 20 to 30 minutes. As a matter of fact, recent research indicates that even college-age students' ability to retain information falls off substantially after 10-20 minutes. Therefore, it is vital that classroom activities be varied in both length and type during every class period.

### *Teaching Students to Behave Appropriately*

Knapp and Shields (1990), Cole (1995) and others have found that students must be taught how to learn and how to behave just as they are taught content. The literature suggests several techniques that have proven effective, including:

- Teacher modeling of desired behaviors
- Reinforcement of appropriate behavior
- Direct teaching of mnemonic devices
- Providing opportunities for discovery learning
- Providing opportunities for discussion and reflection of student behavior
- Providing supplemental instruction that emphasizes learning strategies and appropriate behavior
- Emphasizing higher order thinking skills (HOTS) (Bloom, 1956)
- Providing assessments that measure student learning strategies as well as outcomes
- Teaching students how their brains function
- Use brain compatible instruction

### *Using Music to Promote Learning*

Numerous research studies have linked student learning to music. Strong links between training in music and intellectual development, and between training in music and academic achievement have been found, especially when the music instruction begins early in life.

There is also a growing body of research (Ponter, 1999; Gardner, 1984; Vererable, 1989; Rauscher & Shaw, 1993; Walker, 1982) that suggests that the use of music in an instructional setting helps to reinforce learning in a variety of content areas. Thus, the literature suggests that effective teachers should integrate MUSIC into the learning environment they create.

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### Section 3 - Classroom Climate

*“They won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”*

#### *Teacher Expectations/Beliefs*

Some of the earliest replicable research in education deals with the impact of teacher beliefs and expectations on student performance. In summary, the research indicates that students will meet teacher expectations, regardless of whether the teacher expects the student to behave pro-socially and achieve well, or expects poor classroom behavior and poor academic performance (Middlestat & Weinstein, 1979; Marshal & Weinstein, 1984; Kullinski & Weinstein, 2001). More recently, studies have centered on the effects of teacher expectations on members of racial minorities and on students from lower SES groups. Several studies confirm that, as early as first grade, students are able to perceive that teachers treat students differently, and that the way in which teachers treat students has an impact on how well the student performs.

Research has also identified positive factors in the lives of students, called resiliency factors, that have a positive impact on pro-social behavior and academic performance. According to Benard (1991) most studies find that these factors include:

- Supportive relationships, particularly encouragement from school personnel and other adults’
- Student characteristics such as self-esteem, motivation and accepting responsibility
- Family factors such as parental support/concern and school involvement
- Community factors such as community activities
- School factors such as academic success and pro-social skills training.

Werner & Smith (1992) refined the work and further identified a caring relationship with a significant adult as the most important factor in determining student behavior and achievement.

In a large study involving Mexican-American students, Chavkin & Gonzalez, (2000), identified the most frequently noted resiliency factors for these students as:

- Normal – Social Competence
- Problem-solving skills
- Autonomy
- Sense of purpose and future

These conclusions were reinforced by Hollins (1993 p.96) who found that learning occurs most when the teacher is involved in the, “creation of a social context within the classroom that is comfortable and supportive for every child, regardless of background experiences . . . developing friendly and supportive relationships within the classroom.” Hollins further states that the appropriate learning environment, “has to do with getting children to like themselves and to take pride in their own accomplishments, getting children to be kind, helpful and respectful toward each other; and building self-confidence and positive interpersonal relationships.”

Hollins work includes a list of those teacher attributes that he found impacted learning, particularly the learning of Latino students. These attributes include:

- setting high expectations and standards
- incorporating the home culture
- capitalizing on students’ background and experiences
- presenting culturally relevant curriculum materials
- identifying and dispelling stereotypes
- creating culturally compatible learning environments
- capitalizing on student experiences
- using sheltered English instructional strategies
- effectively using technology

To gain further insights into promising programs that are in place the reader may wish to investigate the AVID in San Diego in which at-risk students are placed in honors classes, and the GRAD in Houston which begins preparing Mexican-American students for college while still in Kindergarten.

### *Establishing Classroom Rules*

Effective classroom teachers share the belief that their students want to know how to behave appropriately, which leads to the understanding that proper behavior must be taught, just like course content. The first step in teaching these behaviors is to establish and publish clear, enforceable, classroom rules. Some things to consider when establishing classroom rules:

1. If possible, involve students in setting the rules. It will allow them to have ownership in the rules and will assure that they are clearly understood.
2. Phrase the rules in behavioral, not global terms. For example, instead of saying, “respect each other,” list the behaviors that are involved. (i.e. Only one person at a time will speak. Derogatory comments directed at other students are not allowed, etc.)
3. Make sure consequences for breaking the rules “fit the crime” and are enforceable.

### *Managing Inappropriate behavior*

Effective teachers have a group of strategies, “up their sleeves,” to deal with inappropriate behavior. For example, an effective teacher may progress through the following strategies when dealing with inappropriate classroom behavior:

1. Publicly reinforce desired behavior in another student in the class
2. Make eye contact with the misbehaving student (“the look”)
3. Pause
4. Establish proximity to the misbehaving student
5. Say the student’s name
6. Ask the student to meet with you away from the other students
7. Contact the parent and ask for assistance in changing behavior
8. Assign a detention to discuss behavior with the student
9. Write a referral
10. Seek help from other professionals

### *De-escalating Aggressive Behaviors*

Rarely, a teacher may find herself/himself in a situation where a student has become agitated and is behaving in an aggressive manner. In this type of situation the teacher should have strategies available to de-escalate the student’s behavior. Jones and Jones (1995) suggest the following strategies to de-escalate aggressive behavior:

1. Use active listening techniques and identify the student’s feelings
2. Use “I” messages
3. Offer assistance (would you like me to explain it again)
4. Provide options
5. State expectations in a positive manner (e.g. “We agreed that during class discussion only one person at a time would talk so we can all hear.”)
6. Review available options and consequences and give the student space and time to make a choice.
7. Walk away – you will win in the end
8. Clarify to students that they must make a choice about their behavior

### *A good resource*

In their book Discipline with Dignity Curwin & Mendler (1993) summarize the behaviors of teachers who have effective classroom control:

1. Always treat students with dignity – no sarcasm
2. Responsibility is more important than obedience
3. Model and teach the behaviors expected
4. Make sure discipline strategies are practical

## A Brief Summary

Many attempts have been made to identify the characteristics and behaviors that identify an effective teacher. One of the best dates back more than 30 years, but has the same relevance today as it did in 1970 when it was written. Kounin (1970) identified several characteristics shared by teachers who manage classrooms effectively. The list includes:

1. With-it-ness: ability to spot deviant behaviors at very start
2. Ability to de-escalate defiant behavior
3. Overlapping-ness: deals with deviant behaviors while going on with lesson
4. Smoothness: absence of behaviors that interrupt instruction
5. Momentum: absence of behaviors that slow down lesson presentation
6. Group Alerting: techniques to keep non-attending students on-task
7. Accountability: believes that he/she is responsible for student behavior in her/his class.
8. Challenge Arousal: Keeping students involved and enthusiastic
9. Variety: varies methods of instruction frequently

Based on more than 30 years of classroom observations in a variety of settings, it is apparent that motivating teachers plan well, establish a classroom climate that is caring and supportive, and keep their students actively engaged with the material to be learned. Experience indicates that employing some or all of the techniques covered in this presentation will enhance learning and create well managed classrooms.

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