Make Standards Engaging

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Students develop their talents over the long haul when they are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated.

At the core of education standards is a simple premise: High expectations beget high performance. But wishing doesn't always make it so. Across the United States, many schools have encouraged all students, even those who struggle in regular courses, to take advanced placement (AP) classes. As the numbers of students enrolled in AP classes have ballooned (increasing by 50 percent from 2004 to 2009), pass rates on AP final exams have plunged to as low as 6 percent in some locales (Goodwin, 2011).

In contemplating these disappointing results, a nagging question, one that strikes at the heart of the standards movement, emerges: Do all students have the necessary motivation to succeed in more demanding classes?

Problems with the Carrot Approach

A common approach to motivation, often espoused by behavioral psychologists and economists, is to reward students for desired behaviors, giving them higher grades—or even prizes or money—when they do well in school. Certainly, doling out rewards alters behavior—but not always as we hope.

Ronald Fryer Jr., a researcher at Harvard University, offered 18,000 students in four cities a total of $6.3 million in rewards to show up at school, behave better, or get better grades. In New York City, where he paid students for good test scores, he found no effects. "As zero as zero gets," he told Time magazine (Ripley, 2010). Fryer attributed the disappointing results to students' confusion about how to improve their performance; they reported hoping to raise their grades by "reading the test questions more carefully" or "not racing to see who could finish first" (Fryer, 2010, p. 33). Not one student, wrote Fryer, mentioned studying harder, completing homework, or asking teachers to explain confusing topics.

Critics of such approaches warn that extrinsic rewards may produce only short-term changes in behavior. As Alfie Kohn notes (1999), rewards often have diminishing returns; like drugs, their effects fade, requiring ever greater doses to elicit the same response.

In a meta-analysis of 128 studies, Deci, Ryan, and Koestner (1999) found that rewarding performance can diminish intrinsic motivation. For example, when young children were rewarded for drawing pictures, they became less likely to spend their free time drawing. It would seem that bribing kids for doing what they should find inherently rewarding (such as reading books) may send the message that such activities are really not enjoyable.

Deci and colleagues theorize that intrinsic motivation stems from two deep psychological needs: self-determination and competence. Simply stated, we enjoy activities when we choose them and when they offer a Goldilocks level of challenge: neither too easy nor too difficult. Accordingly, these researchers found that rewards reduce motivation when students think they are intended to control behavior. This means even positive feedback can undermine motivation if it comes across as intended to coerce students to comply with the teacher's wishes ("You should keep up the good work").

Finding Flow Experiences

In an in-depth study of 208 talented teenagers (high school students identified as having exceptional promise in art, music, mathematics, science, or athletics), psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues explored whether traditional schooling provides any periods of optimal motivation, which they called flow—a Cinderella-at-the-ball experience marked by "losing track of time and being unaware of fatigue and of everything else but the activity itself" (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993, p. 14). At random intervals throughout the day, students recorded what they were doing and their level of engagement. The resulting in-depth look at their lives offered a gloomy picture of high school.
While in class, these students reported high levels of concentration, but low levels of interest, even in subjects in which they were highly skilled. In many classrooms, teachers failed to explain the relevance of the learning to the world outside school. As one talented, yet disappointed, math student noted, “Once you have the theorem down, it would help you to know how you could use it, instead of just strictly what it is. I think it makes it more interesting and easier to learn” (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993, p. 183).

The researchers’ subsequent study of middle schools arrived at a similar conclusion. At the very age when young adolescents begin to think more abstractly (including asking why they should bother learning what’s being taught), the researchers found that middle schools often give them "a heavy dose of lecture and seat work that students find tedious and confining" (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, p. 60). It's not surprising, then, that students report a steady decline in interest in learning after leaving elementary school.

"An unfortunate by-product of the standardized curricula in most modern schools,” Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues (1993) concluded, "is the depreciation of the role of teacher to that of information technician” (p. 177). That is, many teachers seemed to perfunctorily plod through the curriculum, teaching what must be taught with little attention to explaining its importance. Conversely, in the arts and extracurricular activities, students reported high levels of engagement; yet they regarded the work as unimportant, presumably because it seemed unrelated to the demands of the real world.

**Combining Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation**

Ultimately, Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues (1993) found that students develop their talents over the long haul when they are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated—when they are able to combine enjoyment of their studies with “serious goal-directedness”—a sense of how to translate their interests into long-term rewards (p. 240).

What can teachers do to help students develop such motivation? While observing 133 high school classrooms, Deci and colleagues found that students were most engaged when teachers balanced structure with autonomy—communicating "clear expectations" for learning and "explicit directions,” while "highlighting meaningful learning goals" and providing opportunities for self-directed learning (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010, p. 588). In other words, skilled teachers use standards to structure learning, while tapping into students' interests and need for autonomy.

In Csikszentmihalyi's study, good teachers ignited student interest by modeling passion for their subject areas and by showing students that mathematics, art, or literature were worthy of long-term, professional pursuit. Moreover, they individualized learning for students, helping them connect their interests to long-term goals. For example, one student's pursuit of a fashion design career began when an insightful teacher told her that, as a nonconformist, she might enjoy reading about another iconoclast: Coco Chanel.

A standardized curriculum doesn't have to create lifeless classrooms. Indeed, research suggests that in the hands of good teachers, common curriculum standards can be personalized to student interests, providing students with both the choice and the challenge they need to become goal-oriented, intrinsically motivated learners.

**References**


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