
Motivating Your Students

A Book Summary by J. Rex Armstrong

Introduction and purpose. A common problem faced by many teachers in their classrooms is the lack of student motivation. This is particularly true when the class being taught is a mandatory core course in which the students may feel they simply need to get a passing grade in order to get their credits. These students or groups of students seem thoroughly uninvolved in the goals of the class and can be a source of discouragement to their teacher.

But what can be done about poor student motivation? Is it the student's fault? Or is it the teacher's responsibility to somehow create motivation? If the latter is true, then how can it be done? My search for answers to these questions led me to bookstores and the Internet where I hoped to find some resources dealing with the motivational factors of university students. I was particularly looking for research that could be applied both directly and indirectly to foreign language classrooms. However, the vast majority of available material concerns itself with elementary and secondary school students. There is much less material regarding the motivation of university students. This may be due to the fact that many university students are generally *seeking* to further their education and would therefore, naturally be

motivated. This is not, of course, always the case.

In this paper, I will summarize the main points covered in a book written by Hanoch McCarty and Frank Siccone entitled, *Motivating Your Students*. (See publisher information in bibliography.) Although the book was not written for any specific student age group, the information aptly applies to those studying at a university. In fact, examples are used from university settings and occasionally from second language classrooms. I have chosen to summarize, in my own words, those ideas in the book that are most applicable to university students and teachers. When direct quotes from the book are used, the reader will find corresponding page numbers directly following the passage. It is the purpose of this book summary to provide ideas, both philosophical and practical, that will inspire teachers struggling with unmotivated students.

The authors. Hanoch McCarty is an educational psychologist who is best known as an author of several of the enormously popular *Chicken Soup* series. He was a professor of education at Cleveland State University, Southern Illinois University and the University of Hartford. Perhaps he gets most of his practical suggestions from his experience as an English and history teacher in inner city and urban schools. These days, he is a private consultant for school systems in the United States and Canada. He deals with issues such as motivation, parental involvement, self-esteem, and the general improvement of the learning process.

Dr. Frank Siccone is the founder and president of Siccone Institute, which has offered programs that promote personal and professional development for over 20 years. He often conducts workshops for administrators, parents, and teachers and has taught at several universities.

He has used his knowledge of motivation to help students achieve their career goals.

The challenge of motivating students. McCarty and Siccone believe that it is nearly impossible for an individual to motivate someone else. At first, this may seem to be a startling and even discouraging statement. They go on to explain that motivation is not *given* to a student, but rather, it is a matter of a teacher tapping into the motivation that already exists. For example, unmotivated students may appear frustrated, bored, or even angry. But what makes them that way? It could be that students are frustrated because they have been studying English for six years and still cannot speak or understand it. They may feel bored because they see no place for English in their future academic or vocational lives. They may be angry because they feel they deserved to be placed in a higher-level class. Their poor attitudes may not stem from academic issues at all. It may be that they don't like their schedule for that particular day of the week, or the long distance they have to travel just to attend one class.

Whatever their reasons, the students have any number of unmet needs or wants. These unmet needs and wants are the beginning point for the teacher who wishes to light the fire in his or her students. It is a daunting task. As is obvious from the examples in the previous paragraph, the issues, problems, needs, and wants of each individual may be vastly different. And to complicate matters, any one individual may have different needs and wants on different days.

Even experienced teachers will not be able to motivate all of the students all of the time, but it is important to aspire to reach each student every class period. When the teacher fails to meet this lofty goal, he or she

should simply accept it and prepare for the next day. The truth is, some students will be moved, some will not. While this may seem overwhelming, there is one positive point to remember: nearly *everybody* is motivated by *something*.

How does a teacher meet the needs of students? The underlying, fundamental philosophy of this book is that the act of motivating students "demands that you understand and attempt to connect with their feelings, concerns, values, experiences, and unmet needs." (p. 2). Or, put another way, "Speak to the heart. Find what is at the core of your students' concerns. Keep your eyes and ears tuned to finding out those central, most important feelings, concerns, issues, or values, and speak to them directly. That is the key, the foundation, the secret to the art of motivational teaching." (p. 9)

What motivates people? McCarty and Siccone inform their readers that a key to becoming a motivational teacher is to know what motivates your students. In order to help the reader better understand the nature of meeting needs and wants in students, the authors discuss the hierarchy of needs as developed by the famous psychologist, Abraham Maslow. This hierarchy has motivations that are positive and negative. They include physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of a human's life. Some of these needs are more important than others and must be met before other goals can be achieved.

If basic physical needs, for example, are not met, then expecting your students to respond to academic goals may be impossible. If a teacher notices that the students are tired or restless, he or she can do an activity that requires some physical motion. It might be as simple as writing answers on the chalkboard or walking around the room conducting a survey of

classmates. The authors mention the use of music and even stretching exercises to break up the monotony of a lesson plan. Although some teachers may balk at such "silly" activities, they can produce a positive atmosphere and enhance the teacher's ability to direct the students toward the goals of the class. It shows that the teacher is paying attention to students and is trying to meet their needs.

Another of Maslow's needs is *safety*. While physical safety may not be a problem in most classrooms, there does need to be a psychological sense of safety. Students will not respond if they feel they may be ridiculed or harassed because of their actions or answers. "Creating a climate of inclusion in your classroom where students treat each other with mutual respect will pay dividends educationally as well as socially." (p. 19) A motivational teacher must recognize that students have a need to be accepted and that the fear of rejection can pose a serious hindrance to any teacher's academic goals.

After a sense of safety, a student has to deal with *self-esteem*. Students, like all people, need to feel their ideas are respected in order to grow in confidence. When a teacher recognizes a student's ideas as worthy, he or she is actively promoting self-motivation as opposed to external rewards. Teachers can ask students what they want to learn and why they want to learn it. They should actively praise students who reach their goals. Helping students to express their goals and then reaching them will not only motivate them in your classroom, but will also establish good attitudes and skills for their future lives.

Another element of Maslow's hierarchy is *curiosity*. What are the students curious about? A language teacher can ask students what it is about the culture of the target language that they would like to learn. Is it the

holidays, religion, sports and entertainment figures, economics? The teacher can then build a framework that will allow the students to pursue answers to their curiosities. I have sometimes done cooking or science experiments in my classrooms. Arriving early, I set up the articles on a table in plain view and as students walk in, they naturally begin to wonder and ask questions. I ask them to look at the items and make a guess as to their purpose. This is an example of how students can be motivated by their own curiosity.

Besides Maslow's hierarchy of needs, McCarty and Siccone developed a set of additional needs they feel are of value to the motivational teacher.

1. *Touch the "heart space"*. This is the appeal to what the students' parents taught them: the sense of right and wrong, generosity, sharing, conscience, etc. This inner voice will help students feel good about themselves.

2. *Sympathy, empathy, and identification*. Sympathy, our ability to feel emotions similar to those of another, empathy, understanding and caring about another's situation, and identification, the sharing of a personal experience through a story, can all lead to a connection between the students and their teacher.

3. *Achievement, pride, and feelings of competence*. These universal motivators can be implemented when the teacher shares the successes of individual students with the class.

4. *Anger, hurt, resentment, and the need for revenge*. Although negative, these motivators, when used carefully and creatively, can also be used effectively in a classroom. Teachers can direct students to explore the

sources of their issues and the negative effects they produce, and thus avoid the drain of energy and talent in their lives.

5. *Competitiveness and the desire for excellence.* The spirit of competition is closely related to excellence - athletes are well aware of this. The teacher has a plethora of methods to reinforce this: awards, prizes, standards, tests, etc. Perhaps the greatest level of competitiveness students can reach is when they learn to compete with their own last and best achievements.

6. *Adventure, excitement, change, risk, and danger.* There are three levels at which students respond: the survival level, where they are just doing their best to keep up, the maintenance level, where they have some energy left over to plan how to avoid and overcome problems in their learning, and finally, the enhancement level, in which students actively seek new challenges. It is this final level where students are ready to be challenged and where teachers must make every effort to engage them creatively. Such students will become bored if their classroom activities are largely unchanged over a period of time.

7. *Use humor, fun, playfulness, and lightness.* School can be a stressful place for students. Classrooms can be intense, heavy, and filled with pressure. Humor and fun can help ease the situation by lowering the amount of anxiety. Students who are not burdened down with external worries are more likely to be active and to participate in the educational process is renewed. (edited from pp. 23-28)

As stated above, students have needs and wants, but the authors make

clear that the teacher does not need to solve the problems students have. Instead, motivation can be achieved by simply offering a view of how to solve a problem, or by convincing students that their needs can be met sometime in the future. Simply stated, "Motivation is not something that you do *to* people, it is something you do *with* people." (p. 12) True motivation comes from within, or what some educators refer to as "intrinsic motivation".

Teachers must understand the main sets of motivations already existent in groups of students in order to reach them. A good place to start is for the teacher to "research" the needs of these specific groups of students through personal contact or through the use of a survey. When students realize the teacher is making an extra effort to tailor his or her lessons to their needs, their interest will increase.

What is a motivational lesson? A motivational lesson is not one that simply disseminates information or develops skills. Although information and skills may motivate some students, it would be an indirect result rather than a direct one. Motivational lessons, as defined by McCarty and Siccone, are those whose intent and purpose are designed to inspire and induce students to learn. Motivational lessons come in many forms: personal stories from the teacher, amazing facts, humor, friendship, and other emotionally based methods. Whatever the form may be, a motivational lesson will always act as a springboard that leads to a commitment from the students toward the goal or goals of the lesson.

What is a motivational teacher? The authors assert that there are several factors to successful motivational lessons. Even more powerful than handouts, computerized presentations, or the chalkboard, is the power of a

teacher who believes in his or her message and carries it to the classroom every day. Equally powerful is the concept that teachers do not create new motivations, but rather, discover motivations that are already there. If it is believed that students are simply blank slates, a teacher may see himself or herself as all-powerful, the giver of knowledge and former of attitudes. This may appeal to some teachers, but it can also lead to motivational problems in the classroom. Learning that is a cooperative experience between students and teacher is more likely to produce a more successful learning endeavor. A cooperative experience will require that the teacher know the students well in order to involve them. When a teacher can touch students' hopes, hurts, fears and tap into their expectations and desires, they will respond. Motivational teachers should make themselves vulnerable to the students by sharing their own dreams and hopes.

An encouraging idea for a teacher to remember is that the students are truly on your side. They *want* to be motivated and will be grateful for the sincere efforts made on their behalves. Hanoch McCarty has a poster in his office that summarizes this idea: *A friend is someone who knows your song and sings it to you when you forget.* To be a motivational teacher, one must, "find out what your [students'] song is and sing it to them, unashamedly, with spirit and conviction, with flamboyance, and with your own inner fire. Make yourself equally vulnerable by sharing how much of that song is yours, too." (p. 41)

Motivation and the power of persuasion. Having set up a philosophical base for their motivational philosophies, McCarty and Siccone complete the second half of their book by describing the techniques, or persuasive powers, that motivational teachers can use in their classrooms. They do this by

applying the five principles used by advertising agencies to sell their products. They admit that some in the "higher" profession of education may balk at the idea of such a comparison, but they hope the reader will keep an open mind. Besides, they argue, excellent teachers have been employing such principles and techniques all along.

Principle #1: Know your audience. The authors have already stated that teachers must learn all they can regarding their students. But heretofore, the emphasis was mostly on the material being presented. It is also useful to understand the many ways students process information. One popular method of grasping these processes is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator which categorizes personalities. These personality types are as follows: extraverts, introverts, sensors, intuitives, thinkers, feelers, judges, and perceivers. (In this paper, only a brief summary of each group is presented as it pertains to motivational teaching. For a complete reading of these personality types, please see the bibliography at the end of this article.)

Extraverts: These students are more likely to think out loud and to share their ideas willingly. They enjoy working in groups, although it is sometimes difficult to get them to focus.

Introverts: These students would rather work independently and may do better with passive skills such as reading and writing. They might be convinced to share their ideas, but it won't come naturally, so a teacher needs to give them time to respond.

Sensors: These are logical students who do best with hands-on learning experiences. They appreciate direct, specific answers to their questions. They are good with details, but abstract ideas may frustrate them.

Intuitives: The opposite of sensors, intuitives get bored with details and

step-by-step presentations. They grasp "the big picture" and enjoy finding relationships and connections between concepts. Explain the "whys" of your lesson plan to them.

Thinkers: Thinkers like facts and are convinced of the merit of something by reason. Thinkers are objective and have a high sense of fairness. These students might enjoy studying the rudiments and rules of English grammar, but might become frustrated with exceptions and unique contextual usage.

Feelers: On the other end of the spectrum from thinkers, are the feelers. They will make decisions based on an empathetic viewpoint. A warm, friendly atmosphere is important to them. Feelers will enjoy reading and sharing about experiences people have had and how it affected their lives.

Judgers: These students already have a fairly clear vision of what the world should be and they work to bring that vision into reality. They flourish in a well-structured classroom with established routines. They don't respond well to questions where there is more than one right answer.

Perceivers: Perceivers sit back and wait to take advantage of whatever the world lays at their feet. They are creative and spontaneous and may find too much structure suffocating. They enjoy choices and enjoy learning situations that are fun. However, they may procrastinate because they wish to keep all their options open. Unfortunately, perceivers do not usually feel at home in many educational situations.
(edited from pp. 56-66)

Teachers can undoubtedly recognize students in their classrooms who

fit these descriptions. The complete list in *Motivating Your Students* is a very helpful tool for teachers who wish to understand how varied their students are in the way they approach learning. The obvious conclusion to this knowledge is that a variety of techniques and methods must be used in any given classroom in order to tap into the intrinsic motivations held by all students. These categories can also assist the teacher when trying to understand a specific student who may be struggling in the classroom.

Principle #2: Get their attention. In the advertising world, flashy images, catchy music, and fast-paced action strive to gain the attention of consumers in a very competitive market. Teachers do not have the resources to mimic commercial techniques, but we would do well to use what resources we have to grab the attention of our students.

McCarty and Siccone mention several ideas that are well known to those involved in public speaking: 1) Start with a provocative question. 2) Ask a rhetorical question. 3) Begin with a startling statistic or fascinating fact. 4) Use props. 5) Do the unexpected. 6) Tell a joke that makes a point or use cartoons reproduced on an overhead transparency. 7) Create a mystery or puzzle to be solved. 8) Introduce your theme through a famous quotation or fable. 9) Tell a story.

It is the last point that McCarty and Siccone give the most time to. In fact, they devote an entire chapter to storytelling. They assert that great teachers, philosophers, and religious leaders have long used stories to make their points. The virtues of stories are extolled as keys that unlock our minds, open doors, and trigger emotions that will live on in our memories. Much of the chapter on storytelling is devoted to McCarty's experience with the popular *Chicken Soup* series.

But why use stories in the classroom? It is the authors' assertion that a good motivational teacher must make a connection to a student's heart, not just his or her mind. A story gives students a personal reason to remember something. There are three places they identify where a story can play an important part in a motivational lesson.

- 1) When a teacher tells a story at the beginning of a lesson, it allows the students to size up the teacher and his or her teaching style. It sets a tone for the class and the lesson. It creates a relationship between teacher and students and helps them see the teacher as a real person.
- 2) Use a story to make a point. For example, most language teachers know a funny story about how confusion was created by a non-native speaker using improper grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary. Sharing this story may drive home the idea that grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary are important. Motivation is created.
- 3) Perhaps the most important place to use a story for motivation is at the end of a lesson. These stories have the ability to conclude or sum up all that you have learned during that class period. The authors encourage teachers not to hold back or fear embarrassment because the students will respond to your passion.

McCarty and Siccone believe that storytelling can have an enormous impact on a teacher's class. It has the power to "concretize learning, to take abstract concepts or dry facts and make them come alive and vivid in the eyes, hearts, imagination, and memory of your students. It is important to use them judiciously, carefully choosing the moments where they will be most effective." (p. 96)

Principle #3: Communicate benefits in relevant terms. Advertisers differentiate between *features* of a product and the *benefits* of a product. For example, a car may have the feature of four-wheel-drive, but a benefit would be the thrill of driving in off-road situations to get away from the pressures of life. In other words, the benefits of a product are more relevant to the consumer's life.

Whenever we have to make a choice about whether we should act or not, we will always determine if the work or money put into our action will be worth it all in the end. Students do the same. Why should they put effort and time into the teacher's plan? What are the benefits? What will it cost them? Will the benefits be greater than the cost? There are five points teachers can pursue to ensure that students will find the benefits worth the effort.

- 1) *Make the benefits explicit.* State clearly, from the students' perspective, what the purpose of the lesson is and what is to be gained.
- 2) *Make some of the benefits immediate.* Provide opportunities for students to experience accomplishment, success, and satisfaction right away. Typically, delayed gratification works best with more mature students.
- 3) *Make the benefits inherent in the participation of the activity.* Be creative in designing learning activities that are interesting and engaging. The joy of learning should be an end in itself and not only a means to some future end.
- 4) *Make the benefits intrinsic.* Use your knowledge of your students' likes, talents, and goals to construct lessons that have high interest value. Avoid creating an over-dependency on external rewards (e.g. tests) and resist the temptation to use threats of punishment.

5) *Reduce the cost of learning by making it safe to risk mistakes.* Praise students in public. Offer correction in private whenever possible. Never humiliate students in front of their peers. (edited from pp. 99-100)

Principle #4: Be persuasive. Advertisers may use a celebrity spokesperson, testimonials from "average citizens", demonstrations, or any number of techniques to persuade an audience that it needs a certain product. But what techniques can be utilized by the teacher to persuade students to learn?

The first principle of persuasion is that of *intentionality*. This, in essence, means that the teacher must be committed to and believe in the topic being taught. If a German language teacher does not honestly believe that his or her students can benefit from knowing German, how can students believe it?

Teachers must also remember that mere words will not motivate students, no matter how true they may be. Words can inform, but to make students believe in what you are teaching them, *how* you express your ideas is more important. Your face, arms, breathing, and tone of voice all add to the message of your lesson.

If teachers want to persuade students, they should choose and use their words carefully. The words *tubby*, *fat*, *plump*, and *overweight* may have essentially the same meaning, but some carry a more negative feeling. What words might a group of students react strongly to? What words are offensive or positive? Proper use of words can aid the teacher in persuading students in a positive manner.

If verbal persuasion is important, it must be said that nonverbal persuasion is even more important. Nonverbal communication would include

posture, facial expression, gestures, eye contact, timing and pacing, touch, etc. According to the authors, only seven percent of a teacher's total message is carried by the words. A non-smiling, stiff, formally dressed professor may give an impression of inaccessibility to his or her students and, therefore, may find it difficult to get the students to respond.

Finally, McCarty and Siccone encourage teachers to pay attention to their voices - especially the tone, pitch, inflection, speed and articulation of the voice. It may be painful for a teacher to watch a video of himself or herself teaching a lesson, but the experience will be ultimately rewarding in determining how the power of persuasion can be developed and utilized.

Principle #5: Make it memorable. After a short commercial on TV, what will keep the product in the consumer's mind? This is the question asked by advertisers. The answers are various: a catchy jingle, a clever slogan, and likeable characters are just a few options. But how does this principle work for the motivational teacher?

Over the years, young people have developed shorter attention spans. This is due, in part, to the entertainment industry where seven-second focus shifts are the norm. Images, colors, camera angles, and sounds change quickly and may cause disorientation for those raised during an earlier era. But for those who were raised on MTV and VH1, this fast pace is attractive and they may find steady, but slow-paced teaching techniques boring. Some teachers may not like to think of themselves as performers, but there they are, in front of a group of students who were raised on the flash and glamour of the entertainment world.

The authors' answer to this predicament is essentially a recap of what they have stated throughout the book. Lessons that are most likely to be

remembered are those that have the following characteristics: interaction and participation, concreteness, practicality, relevance, interesting repetition, variety, and humor. They encourage teachers to use music, multimedia, and guest speakers. They also suggest immersion, which I find to be most relevant to the foreign language classroom.

McCarty and Siccone tell the story of Emily Petrou, who had an immersion experience her first year of high school. In the recounting of her first day in Spanish class, Petrou describes her shock when her Spanish teacher, Mr. Hornyak, walked in the first day speaking nothing but Spanish. At first it was amusing - a clever gimmick, but soon it turned into dismay. When students asked Mr. Hornyak questions or protested his lack of English, the teacher acted as if he didn't understand.

After a few minutes of class, a pretty, popular senior stopped by the room and began speaking Spanish with Mr. Hornyak. Then, after completing their conversation, she left. The freshmen were impressed by this encounter. Mr. Hornyak, of course, had arranged this exchange because he knew how to motivate students.

The next class was the same - all Spanish! It was complete immersion from the beginning of class until the end. Petrou admits that it was horrifying, even worse than her chemistry class. But she decided to stick it out even though she was convinced that Mr. Hornyak was nuts, too hard, and had crazy ideas about how to teach a language.

As the year moved along, Petrou and the other students began to pick up the language. The teacher exposed the students to the music, art, and literature of Spanish cultures and the panic the students had once felt turned into a sense of achievement. By the end of the year, Petrou was able to deliver an oral report on the painter Francisco Goya entirely in Spanish.

Although she normally hated giving public speeches in her native language, she actually enjoyed giving this speech in Spanish and felt a great deal of confidence. (edited from pp. 124-127)

Conclusion: Motivation is obviously not a simple matter. Its secrets lie within each individual student. Students who share certain values may group together in a classroom, and, if their unity is based on a negative premise, it could be a very long semester or year for the teacher.

Motivating Your Students provides the reader with many reasons to feel inspired. It encourages teachers with the knowledge that students essentially *want* to learn and that they have every desire to get something out of the class. But the burden of responsibility lies squarely on the shoulder of the teacher. It is the teacher who must take the time and make the effort to know who the students are and what motivations already exist.

Although not always applicable to every situation, the suggestions the authors make are usually practical and emphasize a human element. Despite the complexity of student motivation, it is the personal, human touch that may yield the greatest benefits for the teacher. For example, in my personal experience, I have found that the extra effort it takes to get to my classroom ten minutes before class starts is well worth it. It not only gives me the opportunity to set up my materials, but I also have time to talk to students about their weekends, their classes, their part-time jobs, and whatever else is going on in their lives. The time that teachers spend outside the classroom with students can also make a big difference inside the classroom. Taking a moment to speak to a student at a university sporting event, in the cafeteria, or elsewhere on campus demonstrates that the teacher has an investment in him or her. The result can be infectious, spreading to other classmates.

Likewise, teachers who teach *students* rather than merely teaching a *subject*, will have a better chance to tap into their students' potentials, meet their classroom goals and feel a greater sense of achievement about what they do.

This book spends very little time discussing *extrinsic* motivation. This would include rewards of all kinds and negative consequences (a bad grade, threats of failure) as well as tests and high homework grades. While few educators would dismiss extrinsic motivation, McCarty and Siccone clearly see it as a less effective form of motivation. There is, in their understanding of motivation, a higher calling.

In the introduction, I stated that the purpose of this paper was to inspire teachers to better motivational teaching. Ultimately, motivational lessons and teaching will inspire the teacher as much as the student.

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