

Encouraging students' intrinsic motivation

By [Kathan Shukla](#) | Jan 28, 2013

The author looks at how teachers can nurture in students the motivation to learn and understand rather than focus on scoring well in the examinations.

Everyone who has seen the movie, 3idiots, must have fallen in love with Rancho, the genius who challenged the traditional notion of the “ideal student”. This article is not about 3idiots, but it is about analyzing the central question – “How can we nurture students to be like Rancho?”

My interest in educational research has led me to design and test numerable studies, majority of which are unpublished. In this article, I shall share one such “unpublished” social experiment and attempt to explain its results.

The study goes like this:

- Ask a group of 3rd graders what they want to become in life.
 - Ask a group of 12th graders what they want to become in life.
- That's all...

The answers that I have received through interactions with young children and late-adolescents have raised many questions in my mind. Responses of the younger ones would range from police, soldier to doctor, teacher and scientist... I have also heard responses like racecar-driver, cricketer, and music-director. On the other hand, the 12th graders usually end up with limited responses – e.g., doctor, engineer, corporate personnel, or “no-idea”.

Now the big question to ponder is – “why does this contrast occur?” Quite obviously, there can be N-number of reasons like ignorance of small children to limited access to career-counseling or societal pressure on youth. But the explanation that I find most compelling is as follows:

The younger children do not think about what they will get in return. They simply look at the fun aspect of doing the job. They think – “how would I feel being so and so?” For them, having fun doing some job is the criteria; whereas, for most of the 12th graders, the career criterion was ‘salary and security’ (i.e., SS-mentality). Anything that reduces likelihood for both salary and security gets out of the option list. I am not saying that one should overlook the salary, but I definitely feel that one should also consider – “how would it feel like doing work of so-and-so, and would it be fun?”

Another question to contemplate – Are schools playing any role in developing such SS-mentality? Unfortunately, without much intellectual exercise one can find this answer in almost every school where Skinner’s operant conditioning is blindly followed. “Reward the desired behaviour and punish the undesired one” has been motto of innumerable teachers and schools throughout the country. I do not doubt the intentions, but a ‘carrot and stick’ approach develops mental conditioning in children – “Do something when you find instantaneous rewards. When there are no rewards, don’t do it”. As we all know, in life, you do not get a reward for every positive effort, or immediately get punished for every wrong deed. Individuals are on their own and they either sink or swim. So, when a student graduates from a ‘carrot & stick’ school, s/he is looking for places which seem like carrots, and there is no consideration for personal interests.

So what is the way out? And how can schools encourage students to follow their strengths and interests?

J. Krishnamurthy once said – “if a child shows you a drawing, don’t comment on how it is. Rather, ask that child to self-judge and find ways to improve it”. Clearly, reinforcement strategies of giving stars and saying ‘very good’ every single time have their own limitations. The dependence on external motivation can leave one confused in life. The instructional

practices in schools ought to encourage intrinsically motivated functioning of students. Some of the practices that promote inner motivation in students are as follows:

School –task/activities: Learning activities can be selected in a democratic way. A teacher can include students while making decisions on class activities by providing a gamut of options, from which students can select their tasks. This will develop a sense of responsibility in the students as they are the ones who opt for a particular task. It is important that teacher provides activities that fall in the zone of proximal development (i.e., challenging but not too hard) of the student.

Autonomy support: Instead of taking charge himself/herself, a teacher can help students take charge of their own learning experiences. The students must have opportunities to select tasks, methodologies, resources, and time frames. The teacher is required to play the role of an active supporter and a facilitator. Most decisions regarding the teaching-learning processes should be taken based on a mutual understanding between the teacher and the students.

Recognition: There is a fine line between nurturing self-confidence in child and rewarding expected behavior to the extent that the child becomes dependent on external motivation. The teacher may appreciate students' improvements and efforts, but should do it privately and preferably in person. Public admiration or criticism and comparison of different students can severely discourage and hurt the self-confidence of those whose performance is below average. Quite obviously, such feelings of inferiority and loss are unwarranted in a classroom.

Grouping: It can be a great idea to form heterogeneous groups of students for class activities. Students of various abilities, strengths, backgrounds, cultures can be put together. Students can be taught how they can benefit from each other's strength and learn cooperatively.

Evaluation: One can evaluate the students based on the quality of engagement in academic activities of the school. Teachers can always explore the scope of self-evaluation depending on the tasks. The basic motive of evaluation is that the students realize their strengths and weaknesses so that they can work on their weaknesses and hone their strengths. The students should be guided to spot the areas that need improvement and the behaviours they need to continue; and to prepare a plan for their work in the future.

Time: Consistent with the previous points, students ought to be included in setting up timeframes for assignment submissions. Of course, the students are expected to learn to work according to their plan but the teacher should keep a margin of time-extension. This helps students to work in a stress-free manner, learn in-detail, and also to demonstrate their creativity and imagination. Flexible time limits will also enable students to pursue a thorough study of a subject.

These instructional practices are meant to provide the students with an opportunity to master knowledge and skills. Such practices promote in-depth study and understanding (termed mastery approach orientation) and hinder a performance-goal orientation, which is study for the test only. In other words, students realize that studying should not be for the sake of grades or marks, or any other external motivations.

In 3idiots, we hear Rancho saying –“*Kamiyaab hone ke liye nahi kabil hone ke liye padho. Success ke pichhe mat bhago, excellence ka pichha karo. Success jakh maar ke tumhare pichhe ayegi...*” [translation: Study for mastery of the subject not for cracking the exam. Don't run after success, but follow the path of excellence. Success will have no option but to follow you then.]

According to 'Achievement Goal Theory', students with a mastery approach orientation are intrinsically motivated to master the subject and to take responsibility for their learning. They make efforts to satisfy personal interest, curiosity and to improve. Also, as they are intrinsically motivated, the learning experience itself becomes satisfying and rewarding. The students value what they learn. But they desire **autonomy, flexibility, relatedness** (i.e., feeling of belongingness), **and competence**. The teacher needs to make sure that such needs of all students are taken care of.

Development of a mastery approach orientation in students will be a great investment, as it is self-sustaining, and the students' motivation does not depend much on external factors. By adopting instructional practices described in this article, a teacher can play a vital role in triggering intrinsic motivation for learning in students. On an optimistic note, someday our 12th graders will share something in-common with 3rd graders while contemplating their career –“how would it feel to be doing the work of so-and-so, and would it be fun?” Dealing with a large number of Ranchos will definitely be challenging for all teachers and educators, but what a wonderful challenge will it be!

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