

## Introduction to the MOTIVATION section of *The Skillful Teacher* -- 6th Edition available September 2007

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Emotions are everywhere. There is never an instant of waking life when they are not present and influencing the energy level we bring to tasks, the level of focus, the amount of investment. This section is about those things we do as teachers that influence the emotional state of students, either positively or negatively, and thus their capacity to invest in academic learning.

Students' attention and investment in academic tasks is affected by their relationship with their teachers [Personal Relationship Building;] it is influenced by their interpersonal relationships with peers, the feelings of support and community on the one hand, or on the other hand feelings of fear and defensiveness against ridicule [Classroom Climate.] And finally it is influenced by their own confidence that they can grow their ability to perform academic tasks vs. self-doubt or belief in innate low ability [Expectations.]

For those who have wondered where the domain of feeling and the whole child enters into the picture of skillful teaching, this section is for you.

Another way to cast these three chapters is that they circumscribe our influence on student motivation. Why are students motivated to work hard and learn? This question is important because motivation is the lynchpin of student learning. As such, nurturing motivation where it doesn't seem to exist becomes part of our responsibility as teachers. For many children of poverty, part of our job is to plant motivation and grow it where it had not been before. As the Jaime Escalante character says in the film *Stand and Deliver*, "If you do not have the desire, I will give it to you because I am an expert!" We need to study that expertise and grow and develop our capacity to influence student motivation.

Do you accept that nurturing motivation is part of the classroom job? Consider this: the level of motivation any of us has is powerfully conditioned by people we consider significant in our lives, people who have power in their relationships with us and/or people we admire, respect, like or love. The adults who are the most influential figures in children's lives outside their families are their teachers. They spend more time with them, in many cases, than *any* other adult in their lives, including their parents. Therefore deliberately influencing student motivation is not a job we can dodge: we are significant figures in our students' lives and in the motivation they form to be learners. Since we are so powerfully positioned to influence it, we are throwing away legions of children if we choose not to engage this task.

So what motivates students? Any one or a combination of the following factors could be at work.

- Students have an abiding interest because the material itself is relevant and/or because the teacher has developed activities that are varied, interesting, or a match for students' learning styles. (The Learning Experiences chapter of this book is where both these topics



are addressed.)

- The students believe it would *matter* to them in some way if they did learn, i.e., they have a stake in doing well (short term stake--the grade or reward; long term stake--it will help in career and life) [VISION OF A BETTER LIFE THROUGH EDUCATION] This is a very important part of motivation, especially for children of poverty. Whole school programs are created in pursuit of this goal. Schools that do handle the issue successfully, however, make deliberate connections with the community and show their students how school learning applies in the workplace and in life success. (See Hightechhigh.org.)

Three additional factors that influence motivation are the topics of this section.

- Somebody significant in the student's life (i.e. a teacher) *wants* her to do well. The teacher can be "significant" because the student looks up to her, i.e., admires her. Or she can be significant because the student likes her and believes and feels she values and cares about her. [PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING]
- A teacher can also be "significant" to a student because he believes in the student and pushes her to realize the potential she doesn't see in herself. The teacher believes the student *can* do well and builds the student's confidence that she is able. [EXPECTATIONS]
- The classroom culture supports and even encourages her to do well. The place has a sense of community where students know each other and each member is an important part. Risk-taking is prized and protected. And students experience a sense of control and influence. All of this rubs off on the students' willingness to participate. [CLASSROOM CLIMATE]

All the above is by way of saying that influencing students' motivation to learn happens in complicated ways, but in ways that we can see behaviorally and that are quite understandable. We have, in fact, quite a knowledge base about it. This section of the book is about that knowledge. We take up the specific how-to's of this aspect of teaching by laying out the repertoires for building relationships [PRB], for communicating belief and building confidence in students [EXPECTATIONS] and constructing classroom climates of community, psychological safety, and ownership [CLASSROOM CLIMATE].

Here's an example of how the three fit together.

Suppose one day I check for understanding and find you don't understand "common denominators." I then work with you after class to unscramble your confusions; I am using clarity skills, to be sure. But the fact that I take the *time* to do this and it's with *you*, that I pursue you to make the appointment and go out of my way to really help you get it—that's something I wouldn't do if I didn't value you. In fact, the whole episode conveys a Personal Relationship Building message: "you are a valued person to me. I care about you."

Now in addition, while I am explaining common denominators to you, I may use phrases that are



encouraging (“Yes, yes, keep it up”) and I may express confidence in your ability to get it (“You’re almost there. I know you’re going to get this!”) So within this event is also the positive “I believe in you” expectation message.

When your friends hear you are staying late with me for 20 minutes and won’t be going home on the bus with them, they are quite accepting of you putting out that extra effort; they don’t make fun of you because you’re staying with the teacher. The climate among the students in the class is supportive of one another putting out effort to learn and get help, either from each other or from the teacher.

The range of these behaviors in the “common denominators” vignette above prompts us to ask: how do we conceptualize our role in nurturing motivation and inspiring it where it doesn’t exist?

### **The Anatomy of “Caring”**

The expressions “caring” and “make students feel known and valued” have been prominent in recent literature.

“Long after leaving school, (students) remember fondly and in graphic detail, those teachers who cared, and painfully those who did not. They may not recall the content these teachers taught, but their human impact is indelibly imprinted in their minds.” (p. 49) Gay.

Whether one surveys the current literature on what’s needed most to improve our schools, or on what parents and students say when asked “What matters?” the resounding theme that emerges is *relationships* and the sense that people care. How does caring present itself in the classroom setting?

“My teacher is really caring.”

“How do you know?”

“I know he cares about me because...

- he won’t let me get away with not doing my work. There’s no escape!
- he encourages me and makes me feel smart.
- he goes out of his way to help me when I’m stuck and makes sure I get it.
- he wants to know what I’m interested in and how things are going in my life.”

In the Expectations chapter we will deal extensively with the first two student responses above. The Clarity chapter presents the tools for the third response. The final response—that he knows me and is interested in me—is directly connected to Personal Relationship Building.

Consider the following from a large scale study of high schools:

Our data strongly suggest that the heretofore identified problems of schooling (lowered achievement, high dropout rates and problems in the teaching profession) are rather



consequences of much deeper and more fundamental problems. Seen through multiethnic students' eyes and the eyes of other participants inside schools, the problems of public education in the U.S. look vastly different than those issues debated by experts, policy makers, academicians and the media.

Collectively, the... issues are best summed up in the words of the high school student who when asked "What is the problem of schooling?" replied, "This place hurts my spirit." This statement not only expresses what many students say about school but what teachers, administrators and others who work inside schools often feel, and what many parents fear about the effects of schooling on their children.

**Participants feel the crisis inside schools is directly linked to human relationships. Most often mentioned are the relationships between teachers and students.**

"I think relationships are the most important thing because relationships are essential to a good academic environment. It's important because if you don't like your teacher, you won't learn as well from them as you would somebody you like and respect...I know that it does happen this way. And so many people go down because of their relationships with their teachers.

Institute for Education in Transformation, The. (1992) *Voices from the Inside: A Report on Schooling from Inside the Classroom*. Claremont, CA: Claremont Graduate School.

This eloquent passage, written over 15 years ago, is as true today as the day it was written--so enduring a theme, in fact, that it was the topic of a recent major National Research Council book *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn*, 2004. This theme will not go away; and dealing with it is a deep structure part of all our jobs.

