

Motivate the Future

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I've never really been a morning person. When I was a kid, my dad always had to wrangle me out of bed. He'd come into my room every morning and drone out the same tiring line: "Time ta get up." This routine drove me nuts. I remember asking him to change the line once in a while—to spice it up, add some variety—but we never really got there. In college, I drove my roommates nuts with the snooze bar on my alarm clock. After college, things didn't change much. Mostly, I drove myself nuts. Only recently have I overcome this, and I think it has something to do with going to bed at night rather than in the morning. But something else may be at play here.

The alarm is a signal that something needs to happen, but generally it does not motivate us. This may be why the alarms didn't help me to become a morning person. As a college professor, I've come to think of the classroom in these same terms. Like alarms, homework, essays, exams, and projects are signals that something needs to happen. Unfortunately, too often students hit snooze on these. Not because they're not aware of them, but because the motive for doing them, the motivation, is not strong enough—or perhaps is misguided.

When I was designing my first college class, I tried to focus on motivation. I started with a single goal: I wanted the students to get better at integrating information, thinking critically, and communicating effectively. To work toward these, I started with a discussion-based format. Classes where discussion was prominent were always my favorite when I was a student, and that is what I wanted to do in my class now that I was at the front. But, how to do this well? This seemed like a challenge I was up for, but I needed a strategy.

First, I needed content that students could get excited about. A compelling story. In this case, a story about environmental conservation. The story was clear enough in my head: Conservation is complicated. Next, I set about trying to find books and magazine articles and movies and songs and games and activities to help me tell this story. So I filled the syllabus with diverse content, including stuff that

wouldn't normally belong in a class on conservation—mad libs, Frosted Flakes, Elvis—but it helped me to tell my story. Now, how to get them to read so that they can come in and discuss it? Here, I borrowed and tweaked some strategies I got from sociology classes I took in grad school. Everyday, there would be more than an hour of reading. And everyday, there would be 10 to 15 homework questions to answer. And everyday, students would get full credit for their homework if they handed it in on time. And this homework grade would be 50 percent of their final grade. Simple as that. If I want them to do a lot of reading and writing, I figured I had to provide a significant incentive, or motivation. So, I put a significant grade on it.

I'm prepared for some pushback from other educators on this. "You're just giving away grades!?" I suppose so, but I'm also creating a real incentive for them to do an enormous amount of reading and writing, which, in turn, gives us a tremendous amount of fodder for class discussion. Plus, students don't feel the tyranny of the grade all semester and can take more risks on



their homework without fear of failing. This is a real benefit. With the readings and the questions, I'm also covering a great deal of material and I'm teaching them how to read, through my questions. It works well. In fact, it's been the centerpiece of all of my classes. I call it "reading notes."

Reading notes do a lot of the heavy lifting for me in terms of my goals to improve students' abilities to integrate, think, and communicate. But more can be done to assess this improvement and to promote it. In my courses, I generally have two exams: a midterm and a final. My goals for these assessment tools mirror my goals for the course. I want to see that students can integrate the course material, think critically about it, and communicate effectively—typically in just a single ambitious question. Two other factors shaped my exam design: (1) I wanted the exam to function as a learning tool as well as an assessment tool; and (2) I wanted students to get better at organizing their writing. Correspondingly, my exams are open-book, open-note, multiday take-home tests where stu-

dents are asked to prepare an outline, not an essay. They are instructed to make strong, clear, broad, integrative arguments that are supported by more specific sub-arguments, which, in turn, are supported by very specific material from the course. So far, this approach to exams has worked quite well. Initially, at the start of the semester, students are pretty freaked out, but generally they adjust.

Around the middle of every semester, I have the students assess the course and provide anonymous feedback. I ask them to list three things that are helping them to learn and three things they would change to better facilitate their learning. Generally, they tell me that the discussion, the readings, and even the exams are helping them to learn. So, more or less, I feel like things are going pretty well in my courses. I'm invested in my strategy for teaching; I feel like it's thoughtful and centered on specific goals. Yay for me... right?

Hold up. There are still days—more than I'd like—where students simply aren't fired up. I mean, some days they

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come in revved up. Other days, not so much (the same could be said for me). Recently, I've started thinking again about motivation and my approach to designing a class. I've been using grades to motivate. Mostly, this is what we do in higher education. If we want the students to do something, we have to put a grade on it. If I want them to read, I have to put a grade on the reading, not just the exam. If I don't put a grade on the reading, many of them won't do it. This way, I get the students to read my stuff, answer my questions, take my exams. We can certainly use grades in innovative ways to get our students to do things, even new exciting things. That doesn't mean that students are going to come into class everyday with that fire in their eyes. But what if the readings, the questions, the exams were theirs?

To circle back around, I think assignments sound the alarm; they provide the signal that something needs to happen. But, it's the grades that get them out of bed. So this is what I decided: In our system, grades are a primary motivation for learning—which ultimately kills the fire and undermines the learning. This idea started to gel for me a while ago when I started hearing about studies in social psychology and behavioral economics, initially in *Drive*, Daniel Pink's book about motivation. Pink reports on the findings from numerous studies, which show that





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incentives, or extrinsic motivations, often lead to diminished performance, especially for complicated tasks. This is because the task becomes about the grade and not about the task, especially in the case of complex tasks. Alfie Kohn has written extensively about the effect of grades on learning, most notably in his book *Punished by Rewards*. Empowered by these ideas, I decided to experiment in my class to see if we could move from a grade-based motivation for learning toward an intrinsic one. So, in the spring semester of 2013, I rolled out an assignment where students were instructed to skip class, do anything they want, and give themselves a grade. I called it “pink time.”

Initially, the students freaked out. I was expecting cheering, tears of joy, applause, or something, but I just got blank stares and then several “Wikipedia projects.” I started wondering if this was a good idea. But we did this three times and had a handful of heart-to-hearts. Pink time, I told them, was about pursuing your passion. And

the hardest part, I followed, was having one. I told them to go learn about something that fired them up—and learn about it in the way that makes sense to you. And then tell me how well you think you learned it for that period of time. Like with the exam, they adjusted. Big time.

I’m ready for more pushback. This seems like a crazy idea, doesn’t it? I can already hear the critiques. “Skip class?! Do anything they want?! They already do this!” Precisely. “Why would we give them credit for this?!” We need to tap into this. Despite our clever readings, our engaging discussions, our grades, and our plans for their learning, something else compels our students. Something else gets them out of bed. Something intrinsic. With pink time, I’m trying to draw this out, give it life, add structure to it, and bring it into the classroom. Really, I’m trying to annex their lives.

With a great deal of help from David Kniola (Virginia Tech Office of Assess-

ment and Evaluation), Shelli Fowler (Technology-enhanced Learning and Online Strategies), and my graduate student, Ashley Lewis, I’m collecting data on the efficacy of pink time in terms of promoting course engagement and self-regulating learning. Conclusions are still a ways off, but some things are clear. Students are pursuing a great diversity of activities that span experiential, creative, and traditional academic forms of learning. They are bringing their passions into the classroom and imbuing them with lessons from the course. They’re thinking more critically about assessment, and they’re recognizing that learning is taking place all the time, not just in the class, and that one goal of higher education is to recognize, discipline, and direct this learning.

Most importantly, they’re having fun and the fire is back—and that gets me out of bed in the morning. ●