

Motivating

INTRODUCTION

The oldest three of my five children all undertook music lessons of some form or another when they were in the younger grades of elementary school. My oldest daughter began with piano lessons, got bored, and switched to guitar; she got bored with that as well and then stopped altogether. The second oldest also took piano lessons, got bored, and stopped. Number three took a year of piano lessons, got bored, switched to violin lessons, got bored with those, and then stopped. Overall, our third daughter lasted the longest in her musical pursuits by a good 2 years, which was still not long enough to sustain her through middle school. After three iterations of this same experience, my wife and I decided to give the twins a pass and have not subjected them to this same frustrating (and expensive) cycle. In the case of our three eldest children, however, I can see a clear surface explanation for the recurrence of this cycle. All three expressed an initial interest in taking music lessons; it was not our idea. We have a piano in our living room, which I play occasionally, so they heard music around our house and must have been curious. That curiosity sustained them for the first weeks and months of their lessons, and they seemed to enjoy themselves in those early stages of

their brief musical careers. They enjoyed going to lessons and, at first, practiced willingly. But, as anyone who has ever attempted to master a musical instrument knows, eventually you have to buckle down and engage in lots of practice (ideally mindful and creative practice, like the type described by Langer (1997) in her piano-playing experiment, but practice nonetheless). On the piano, this includes playing scales, which are like finger exercises that help you strengthen your muscles, master the positions of the notes on the keyboard, and learn the different key signatures of Western music. The further my children pushed into these types of practice exercises, the more their interest in their musical instruments waned. Initial interest and curiosity gave way to grudging and irregular bouts of practice and then finally to complete abandonment of the instrument—with one exception.

All three girls started lessons with the same piano teacher, who focused on teaching them classical music. When my third daughter took up violin, though, she found herself with a teacher who played folk and Irish music and who loved to teach her students those kinds of song. As it happens, I also love folk and Irish music, so my own occasional music playing—on the piano, accordion, and tin whistle—usually falls into those genres. As my daughter moved further along in her violin lessons and became capable of playing some songs that I knew, I would sometimes sit with her and we would play songs together. This was really the only time that she ever would practice without complaining—when I played with her. As we were discussing what she would play for her end-of-year recital, I proposed that we play a song together, with me accompanying her on the piano. She liked this idea, so for months and weeks in advance of the show we practiced together on her recital song. We enjoyed this process so much that when a friend asked me if I would play some music at a local church service he was organizing, I asked my daughter if she wanted to

join me. She did, and thus ensued another round of enthusiastic practice. After that service, though, a series of obligations in my own life meant that I had to take a hiatus from doing much playing or practicing. Shortly after we stopped playing together, she decided that she didn't want to play violin anymore.

If you browse the research literature on motivation and learning, you will find frequent reference to a contrast between two overarching types of motivation: *intrinsic* or *internal motivation* versus *extrinsic* or *instrumental* motivation. Extrinsic motivators include the rewards that the learner expects to gain from successful learning, such as prizes or accolades or praise or even grades; intrinsic motivators are the ones that drive learners for their own internal reasons, such as love of the material or a recognition of its utility in their lives or of its ultimate value on some broader scale (e.g., their personal or spiritual development). According to this theory, the best and deepest learning takes place when it is driven by intrinsic motivators—when, in other words (and put simply), the learner cares about the learning itself or the matter to be learned rather than about some reward she will receive at the end of the learning period. Of course, this binary opposition between internal and external types of motivation hardly exhausts the field of motivation studies, which constitutes an entire subdiscipline crossing the borders of psychology and education. To give just one other example, Susan Ambrose and her colleagues argued in *How Learning Works* that another approach to motivation involves breaking it down into two elements: *subjective value* and *expectancies* (2010, p. 69). The extent to which the learning or the subject matter seems important to the individual learner represents its subjective value; the extent to which the learner feels as if her work and practice will lead to a positive outcome represents the learner's expectancies. Both of these elements must be present for motivation to be high.

Helping light the fires of intrinsic motivation in our students, or foster high subjective values, might seem like an unbeatable candidate for the Least Likely Subject for Small Teaching award. It sounds pretty idealistic to expect that 10-minute segments of class can suddenly infuse an 18-year-old with no interest in literature with a deep and abiding love of the British novel. Attempting to think about motivation in those terms, in my experience working with college and university instructors, can feel overwhelming. So in true small teaching fashion, we are going to step away from viewing motivation in terms of this ambitious goal and instead lock in on a very simple lever that psychologists have established as a powerful potential pump for human motivation: emotions. When my daughters all rubbed against the tough work of learning a musical instrument, their initial motivation—which may have been an intrinsic one, simply based on their curiosity about music—faltered and died away. Most of our students will experience such faltering in the motivation they bring to their courses, just as we experience such faltering in our own learning. Remember what you felt when you were on page 147 of your dissertation and couldn't stand the thought of writing another sentence? Your students feel the same way on Tuesday morning at 8:30 a.m. when they are facing another challenging problem set. What separated the musical experience of my third daughter from that of my older two was my participation in the process; what marked that participation as distinct was the presence of emotions in driving her learning. When I joined her on the piano, music practice became a shared social activity: we spoke and laughed together, we were physically close to one another, we worked cooperatively to join our melodies together. For her, as a 10-year-old, the process also undoubtedly became bundled into a younger child's natural desire to please and spend time with her parent.

Together we faced the frightening prospect of the recital and the church service and the triumphant feeling of conquering it. These kinds of emotions, both shared and individual, have strong motivational power.

Approaching motivation from the realm of emotions does not conflict in any way with thinking about motivation as intrinsic or extrinsic or reduce the scope of what we are attempting. Consider emotions as a motivating force that have the power to drive both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated learners under the right circumstances. Leveraging the power of positive emotions like purposefulness or wonder might help whip up the small flames of intrinsic motivation in students or provide timely boosts to extrinsically motivated students. After all, even learners with deep intrinsic motivation will need a push now and then to get them through the daily challenges of new learning. Students who are driven by extrinsic motivation, perhaps because their interests lie in other subjects, can still find themselves swept up by their emotions into a powerful learning experience in your course. Emotions, as we shall see, also represent the best route for practitioners of small teaching to pursue in seeking to motivate their students. We can leverage emotions into courses and classrooms in a host of small ways; in doing so, we are working with our shared neurological heritage to give them the motivation they might need to push through the next challenge to their learning. In this chapter, then, we shift the question from the usual one that teachers ask about student motivation—how can I foster internal or intrinsic motivation in my students?—to one that acknowledges the reality and power of emotions in the classroom: How can I elicit and work with the emotions already present in the room to give students frequent motivational boosts throughout the semester?

IN THEORY

Sarah Cavanagh is director of the Laboratory for Cognitive and Affective Science at Assumption College and author of *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion*, a powerful new analysis of how emotions impact learning in and outside our classrooms, especially in higher education. Cavanagh surveyed a large body of research that demonstrates the incredibly important role emotions play in almost every aspect of our lives, including in the teaching and learning process. “Emotions are at your side,” she concludes,

Guiding your hand in every decision you make, from which three plums to select from a basket of fruit to whether to leave your spouse. It is not hard, then, to suppose that emotions are similarly guiding our students in every stage of their learning, from selecting which courses to take in a given semester to how willing they are to participate in the discussion you’re trying to drum up on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. (Cavanagh 2016, p. 15)

You know this already, whether you are drawing on your experience as a learner or a teacher. You might know it from an experience like the one I described in the introduction to this part of the book, in which powerful emotions like love or grief interfered with your ability, as a student, to concentrate on a learning task or a course or even an entire semester’s worth of courses. And you likely know it in more positive ways as well, such as when you were toiling away in the laboratory or reading in the library and had a sudden realization and became flush with the excitement and curiosity and happiness that sparked

your dissertation or an article or book project or even an idea for a new course. Or you might know it in a more mixed way, when you felt stymied or frustrated or confused by something that drove you to resolve those emotions by learning something new.

Three key elements of the research on emotions and learning seem to me ripe for exploitation by college and university faculty, so we’ll focus on those—although they don’t by any means tell the whole story of the connections between emotions and learning. First, and most generally, emotions can help us *capture the attention of our students*. “Activating [student] emotions,” Cavanagh wrote, “results in a number of cascading effects in the body and brain, all of which are designed to maximize cognitive and physical performance and make memories stronger” (p. 14). According to Cavanagh, this connection between our emotions and attention stems from the very reasons we have emotions in the first place. Emotions originally helped draw our attention to experiences that we might want to remember for survival purposes:

Emotions were selected for because they both influence motivation—driving us toward things that are good for survival and reproduction (high-calorie foods, attractive sex partners) and away from things that threaten our health or well-being (venomous spiders, rotten food)—and because they influence learning, tagging certain experiences and skills as important and thus critical to both attend to and remember. (p. 14)

As our brains were evolving, emotions helped us recognize more carefully what was important to learn and remember from the range of experiences we encountered every day. Terror inspired by a predator helped us better remember to avoid that particular path through the woods; the pleasure experienced while

eating that nutritious fruit helped us better remember what that tree looked like and where we might find it again tomorrow. The environment in which we live has changed, but we all continue to face socially, emotionally, and physically threatening challenges and driving pleasures. Our emotional brains continue to operate in these circumstances as they always have: when we feel strong emotions, our attention and cognitive capacities are heightened.

We don't want to whip up emotions in the classroom randomly, though; some emotions seem particularly helpful for deepening learning. A second line of research in this area, then, suggests that we focus on infusing learning with *a sense of purpose, and especially self-transcendent purpose*. In *How We Learn*, Benedict Carey noted first that purposefulness tunes the attention of learners toward things that matter: "Having a goal foremost in mind tunes our perceptions to fulfilling it. And that tuning determines, to some extent, where we look and what we notice" (p. 140). A sense of purpose drives our attention *toward* certain things and drives it *away from* other things, just as emotions like fear and pleasure do. So imagine that you are driving to meet a friend at an unfamiliar location in an unfamiliar town. You are looking for a red building on Elm Street. Everything you see and pay attention to runs through those two filters: Is it Elm Street? Is it a red building? After you have arrived at the red building on Elm Street, with your attention having been so focused on the route, you would be likely to recount to your friend exactly how you got there but very unlikely to describe the general layout of the city, the number of black buildings you passed, or the woman in the blue dress who was waiting to cross the street as you drove by. Your sense of purpose tuned your focus to what mattered to you and helped you achieve your specific goal. If we can help create that sense of purpose in our students and can ensure that their purpose aligns with what we want them to learn, we are likely to

heighten their attention and cognitive capacities in our courses and to turn their minds in productive directions.

A particularly fascinating new line of research in this area can refine our small teaching work ever further, since it suggests that not all senses of purpose are equal—and that the most powerful forms of purposefulness arise when students see the ability of their learning to make the world a better place. In 2014 a handful of researchers published a long study, wonderfully titled "Boring but Important," which explored what types of purposefulness most inspired learners to persist in learning repetitive or challenging yet essential tasks for future learning or academic success (Yeager, Henderson, Paunesku, Walton, D'Mello, Spitzer, and Duckworth 2014). The surprising result of this research was that self-transcendent purpose produced the strongest driver for students to persist through challenging academic tasks. Self-transcendent motivation contrasts with self-oriented motivation, which describes a desire to have a great career or enhance one's knowledge or abilities. Self-transcendent motivation describes a desire to help other people, to change the world in some positive way, to make a difference. The superior power of self-transcendent motivation appeared first in surveys of low-income high school seniors who planned to attend college the next fall. (The ones who had the highest levels of self-transcendent purpose were most likely to actually enroll.) However, it also appeared in experiments in which college students who were faced with the prospect of solving or studying difficult review questions before a final exam were reminded beforehand about the self-transcendent power of their learning:

Results showed that a self-transcendent purpose for learning increased the tendency to attempt to learn deeply from tedious academic tasks ... Students spent twice as long on their review questions when they had just written about

how truly understanding the subject area could allow them to contribute to the world beyond the self, compared to controls. (p. 571)

As long as we are thinking about how to infuse our student learning with purpose, we may be getting the largest possible bang for our buck if we can help them recognize the power of their learning to make a difference to the world: in doing so we are both helping direct their attention and giving them the motivation to persist through learning challenges.

Third and finally, emotions are *social*—which helps explain one aspect of the experience I had with my daughter. When I became interested in learning her recital song, she became interested in learning it, too. Borrowing a phrase from Marjorie Keller, this is why Cavanagh calls emotions a *contagious fire*: they can be catching. Again, let personal experience be your best example here. How often, when you are home alone watching a television sitcom or comedy film, do you find yourself laughing out loud? Far less frequently, I would wager, than you find yourself laughing out loud when you are watching a comedy with a group of friends or watching a film in a theater. Humans are social animals, and we feed off each other's emotions. This is as true in the classroom as it is in the movie theater. The most concrete way this contagion has been analyzed in the classroom relates to the enthusiasm of the teacher and the effect that strong enthusiasm can have on student learning. For example, Cavanagh pointed to a study in which researchers measured markers of enthusiasm among teachers of secondary students in a Swiss school and found a startling correlation between those markers and the experiences of the students in the classroom: "The enthusiasm of the educators statistically predicted their students' ratings of enjoyment and perceived value in the subject matter" (Cavanagh 2016, p. 64). This latter finding represents the one we should pay special attention to. Remember

that Ambrose et al. (2010) identified subjective value as one of the key drivers of motivation in education, and we can see here that teacher enthusiasm positively impacted precisely this quality, here described as perceived value in the subject matter. The emotions that we demonstrate to students, especially our positive emotions connected to the subject matter we are teaching, can create a strong positive boost to student motivation.

The social connection between you and your students tells only part of the story, though. Of course your students far outnumber you in the room, and it seems equally to be the case that students' emotions have a powerful potential to boost each other's motivation for learning. Dan Chambliss and Christopher Takacs demonstrated in their book *How College Works* (2014) the immense power that personal connections and relationships have on the total college experience for students, including the learning that takes place in the classroom. "What really matters in college," they argue, "is who meets whom, and when" (p. 16). These conclusions stem from a long-term study they conducted on students and alumni at their institution, based on a variety of measures, including interviews, surveys, and analyses of student work. One of the key areas in which they saw social relationships and community as playing an essential role was motivation: "Motivation is crucial ... and emotional connections to others and to a community provide the strongest motivation" (p. 106). Students relay their levels of motivation through the amount of effort they put into their studying and assignments, through the ways they talk about their courses, through their classroom behaviors such as speaking (or not speaking) in class or participating in group work. As they do so, they are conveying emotional signals—this subject matters to me; I am enjoying this discussion; this professor is boring me—that their fellow students will catch and respond to. I've learned from my own experience as a teacher that a few engaged and highly motivated students can

energize an entire class; a few students openly displaying signs of boredom or frustration can likewise derail one. As Jay Howard has written in *Discussion in the College Classroom*, “the most important learning and the most effective learning happens through a social process” (Howard 2015, p. 110). Both faculty and students play a crucial role in creating and determining the shape of that social process.

At this point you might be wondering whether I am going to recommend group hand holding or inspirational speeches to create the best emotional climate in your classroom for learning. Don’t worry—I’m not a group hand holding kind of person, and I won’t recommend here (or anywhere in this book) strategies that I wouldn’t be willing to try myself or that I haven’t tried already. The models that follow, in fact, might not strike you as connected to emotion and motivation in obvious ways; I hope they will strike you as sensible teaching practices that might fit into your classroom even if you want to avoid thinking about the emotions of your students. Just know that these six models should provide the kind of positive, activating emotional boost your students need to push through the daily and weekly challenges of your courses—and they just may inspire some of them into the kind of deep and lifelong engagement that all teachers dream about for their students.

MODELS

The following models argue both for emotions that you can activate in your students, such as curiosity and purpose, and ones that you can activate in yourself, such as enthusiasm and compassion. All of them should help provide a motivational push toward better learning.

Get to Class Early, Part 1

Peter Newbury is an astronomer who now serves as associate director of the Center for Engaged Teaching at the University of California at San Diego. In a wonderful little blog post on the center’s website titled “You Don’t Have to Wait for the Clock to Strike to Start Teaching,” he described a teaching activity that offers an ideal example of how to model emotions such as curiosity and wonder to capture the attention of his students at the start of class. Drawing inspiration from the “Astronomy Picture of the Day,” a NASA website that posts a new and fascinating image from the cosmos every day, he suggests that instructors begin classes—even before class officially begins—by posting an image on the screen at the front of the room and asking two questions about it: What do you notice? What do you wonder? Let the image direct the informal conversations or reflections of the students prior to the start of class, and then use it to guide a brief discussion during the opening minutes of class. Newbury suggested that this strategy can help accomplish multiple objectives, many of which have been covered in other chapters in this book. For example, such an activity can activate students’ prior knowledge, thereby helping them form connections with what they already know; it also offers wonderful opportunities for learning activities such as prediction and retrieval. Obviously you could substitute anything for the NASA picture of the day: a great sentence in a writing class; a newspaper headline in a political science class; an audio clip for a music class; a physical object in an archeology class.

What this small teaching technique really strikes me as accomplishing is a message from the instructor that hits on several of the motivational emotions we have considered already: I find this stuff fascinating, and I think you will too. Let’s wonder together about it. I can’t think of a better way to begin (or pre-begin) a learning experience with your students.

Get to Class Early, Part 2

I had the opportunity to attend an event recently on my campus in which we discussed how individual relationships with students can impact their learning. A faculty member offered the following fascinating contribution to this discussion. She was an introvert, she said, but she had decided that she wanted to make a more deliberate effort to connect with the students in her classroom. So in the previous semester she had shown up to every class session 5–10 minutes early and—even though she found it a struggle—spent a few of those minutes approaching individuals in the class and engaging in casual conversation. She did so in a carefully planned way, ensuring that she approached every student at least once over the course of the semester: “Even that stony-faced kid sitting in the back row—I made sure I spoke to him too.” When her student evaluations came in after the semester had ended, she was quite surprised to find that multiple students noted this simple practice of hers as something that contributed to the overall positive atmosphere in the classroom. What struck her about this particular experience that differed from previous semesters was that in the past she might have engaged in occasional parter with the students in the front row; this semester she made the effort to speak to each student individually at least once.

To help understand why this small gesture might matter so much to students and how it connects to their emotions, consider one of the more fascinating findings from Chambliss and Takacs’s study reported in *How College Works* (2014). In collaboration with others at their institution, the authors analyzed a massive survey of student writing at their college, trying to determine whether student writing improved over the course of a student’s 4 years. One surprising result of this analysis was that many students demonstrated very fast gains in writing in their first year of college—sometimes within weeks or months of arriving at the

college. This happens less because of any specific instruction, they concluded, than it does for the very simple reason that instructors at the college they studied make a strong commitment to responding to student papers, both in their comments and in individual student conferences. When the students see that instructors are actually reading and critiquing their work, they become motivated to work a little harder at their writing—and that harder work pays off in some immediate gains in their writing abilities. As Chambliss and Takacs explained, “What mattered from professors was the sheer fact of paying attention: she took the time; he helped me. Attention says to the student, ‘Writing matters’; but more, it says, ‘*Your writing matters*’” (p. 112, italics in original). This suggests that the sheer fact of paying attention to student work spurs a motivational boost. In the same way, my colleague’s experience suggests that paying attention to students in class made a noticeable difference in creating a positive atmosphere in her classroom and even—as she explained to us later—increased the number of students who participated in classroom discussions.

Technology can help both face-to-face and online teachers create these motivational connections with their students, as Jose Bowen notes in *Teaching Naked* (Bowen 2012). He urges faculty to use electronic communications and social media to “create communities” and “connect with students” (p. 30). If you have students create brief videos to introduce themselves to the class, make a comment on each of those videos. If they write discussion posts or blogs that do this, make sure you comment on each one, something more than “Welcome to the class!” If you have a class Twitter feed, reply to and favorite student tweets. These communication media can help us recognize students as individuals as effectively as a friendly preclass chat.

But if you have a face-to-face component to your course, see if you can find ways to use the periphery of the class period—those minutes before class starts, or after class starts, or outside of the

strict content of your online courses—to pay attention to the learners in your course. Chambliss and Takacs’s research suggests that this very simple act can boost the learning motivation of your students.

Tell Great Stories

Once class has started, the simplest way to tap the emotions of your students is to use the method that every great orator, comedian, emcee, and preacher knows: begin with a story. Human beings are storytelling and story-loving animals. As cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham put it, “The human mind seems exquisitely tuned to understand and remember stories—so much so that psychologists sometimes refer to stories as ‘psychologically privileged,’ meaning that they are treated differently in memory than other types of material” (Willingham 2009, pp. 66–67). Willingham pointed to the results of experiments demonstrating that people seem to find stories as having a special power to capture and maintain interest: “Reading researchers have conducted experiments in which people read lots of different types of materials and rate each for how interesting it is. Stories are consistently rated as more interesting than other formats (for example, expository prose) even if the same information is presented” (p. 68). Willingham and other researchers posit a number of different possible reasons for this, but one clear reason to me seems to be that the best stories invoke emotions. Stories have the power to induce laughter, sorrow, puzzlement, and anger. Indeed, I would be hard-pressed to think of a great story that did not produce emotions of some kind. We learned from Sarah Cavanagh that when emotions are present, our cognitive capacities can heighten; so if we can open class by capturing the attention of our students and activating their emotions with a story, we are priming them to learn whatever comes next.

You probably have plenty of stories you tell during your lectures or discussions. Perhaps you tell the stories of how certain key discoveries were made in your discipline; perhaps you tell stories about the famous people who have been major thinkers in your field; perhaps you tell stories about experiences you have had that connect to your course topics; perhaps you tell stories about things that you encounter in your daily reading, or in the news, or in movies or television shows you love. All these stories might appear in random points throughout your course, or perhaps you use them to illustrate certain key ideas when they crop up throughout the class period. The small teaching recommendation here is simply to be more deliberate about your use of stories. Take your best story and open with it. Then make sure that you are regularly renewing and recapturing the attention of your students with a story every now and then. Ideally, you should use an opening story that will help pique the interest of your students in the material to come in that class period, in addition to activating an emotion or two. For example, on the day that I introduce Romantic literature in my British literature survey course, I have historically given a lecture about the economic disparities that existed during that time and that drove many writers to focus their writing on the poor and outcast members of society. This lecture went about as well as most of my lectures go—meh—until I discovered in my own reading a heart-wrenching newspaper story from that time period of a child chimney sweep who was beaten to death by his master. My lecture on the economics of the Romantic period now opens with two stories: the tale of this poor chimney sweep and the tale of the coronation party of the prince regent, which was one of the most lavish affairs ever held in England at that time. These two stories, first individually and then taken together, help draw the students in and set them up for the statistics on wealth and income inequality that will follow. At the end of the semester, on the final essay exam for the course, I find that students still will remember the story of

that chimney sweep and the spendthrift prince regent and will use them in their answers on the literature of the Romantic period.

Another way of thinking about the use of stories in your class would be to follow a suggestion made by Willingham and frame a class as a story: “Organizing a lesson plan like a story is an effective way to help students comprehend and remember” (p. 67). For example, you might open class with the first half of a story, one that should leave your students puzzled and wondering what comes next. Then launch into the class, explaining that they will now need some information or ideas or theories to better understand how to resolve that puzzle. At the close of class, finish the story. Another way to think about this would be to open the class with a question, one that the class period will help the students answer. As Willingham wrote, “The material I want students to learn is actually the answer to a question. *On its own the answer is almost never interesting.* But if you know the question, the answer may be quite interesting” (p. 75; italics in original). In sum, consider how you can use the opening and closing minutes of class to set students up with a fascinating question or story opener that gets resolved by the end of the class period. The bulk of what you do within the class might change very little in this model; what changes is the frame, which you tweak in classic small teaching fashion.

Invoke Purpose—Especially Self-Transcendent Purpose

Over the course of a semester, students—perhaps like instructors—are going to occasionally lose sight of the bigger picture. When they are dug in and working on a specific and thorny problem-solving exercise during the seventh week of the term, they may forget that you are ultimately teaching them skills that will help them pass the CPA exam or will enable them to become successful entrepreneurs, or will provide them with the skills they need

to end world hunger. Students need regular invocations of the larger purpose of individual exercises, class periods, and course units. The authors of a large-scale study of motivation among West Point cadets both during college and throughout their army careers argued that regular invocations of purpose are essential to creating a climate that fosters and rewards deep, intrinsic motivation. Although they used language appropriate to business organizations, the findings translate easily into education:

If organizations do little or nothing to emphasize their purposes, aside—for example—from earning profits, internal motives may wither while instrumental motives become ascendant. Small but regular reminders of organizational purpose can keep internal motives dominant ... a range of meaningful consequences should be highlighted (e.g., impact on others, mastery). (Wrzesniewski, 10995)

As we saw from the “Boring but Important” study (Yeager, Henderson, Paunesku, Walton, D’Mellow, Spitzer, and Duckworth 2014), the meaningful consequences that may prove most effective for your students are those that emphasize the power of your discipline to help their fellow human beings or to make a positive impact on the world in some way. You will have to begin the process of motivating students in this way by reminding yourself of the reasons that your discipline does matter—something we can lose sight of after years of teaching or in the long slog of the semester. In the middle of a composition course, I’m not always thinking about the fact that powerful pieces of writing or oratory have turned the tide against slavery, have created new nations, or have inspired people to drop everything and dedicate their lives to the poor. However, I know these things are true, and they have inspired me. They can do the same for my students.

When the authors of the West Point study spoke of small but regular reminders that invoke purpose, they were speaking the language of small teaching. Such reminders about the larger purpose of your course can and should appear in any of the following ways:

- *On your syllabus.* Tune the language of your course description to the promises that your course makes to them rather than to the subject material that you will be covering. What skills will students develop that will enable them to make a difference in the world? What purpose will the learning they have done serve in their lives, their futures, their careers? Invoke this language from the first day of the course.
- *On individual assignments.* Draw from that syllabus language in every assignment. Use words and phrases that tie each assignment at least one step up toward your course promises: “This paper assignment is designed to help you develop your skills in crafting a thesis and using evidence to support an argument . . . These presentations should prepare you to make effective sales pitches to organizations or groups . . .”
- *On the board, real or virtual.* The simplest way to connect individual class periods to the course purpose is to keep that connection in front of their face during class, real or virtual. Have a simple but overarching course or unit outline that you can write on the board each class period, and then note exactly where this class falls within that larger picture. This could be done on the actual board or on your course website’s individual pages.
- *In the opening and closing minutes of class.* Use those coveted time periods to remind students where they have been, where you are now, where you are going, and—most important—*why*.

As long as you have made your initial case about the purpose of your course effectively, on your syllabus and in the opening weeks

of the semester, you should need only small reminders to help students reconnect to that purpose throughout the term.

Share Your Enthusiasm

If you want students to care about the material, you not only have to care about it yourself—which I will take for granted that you do—but also have to *demonstrate to them* that you care about it. You can find lots and lots of research in the educational literature on the role that teacher enthusiasm plays in inspiring students to learn, and you can find plenty of grumpy responses from instructors who claim that they should not have to dance around and sing the praises of the material to inspire student learning. At one point in my career, I remember reading a bunch of the literature on this subject and having this same grumpy reaction, which stemmed from my more introverted leanings. At that time I was teaching an upper-level seminar on British literature, and the students were participating very well in our class discussions. They didn’t need my enthusiasm or inspiration anymore, I reasoned. So I prepared very thoroughly for the next class but decided that I was not going to do what I normally did at that time—namely, sweeping into the classroom with lots of energy and attempting to spark their discussions with my own enthusiasm for the book we were reading. I came into class that day and sat down in the midst of the students at the long table in our seminar room, without any preliminary inspirational opening, and spoke very quietly about the book we were reading for a few minutes. Then I attempted to start a conversation. In 15 years of teaching, that class was the worst class I have ever experienced. Even though I have probably taught thousands of individual class sessions, I still remember vividly not only the horrible feeling of being in that lifeless classroom but also the profound sense I felt afterward of being *so completely wrong*. I realized at that moment that no

matter how great my students are or how well the class is going, I still have to inject some of the energy into the room. To put it in the terms of Sarah Cavanagh's book, for a contagious fire to alight in my classroom, I have to start the process by striking the match.

With that said, you still don't need to dance around and sing to demonstrate to your students that you care about this material, that it matters to some larger context (their lives, their community, the world), and that you want it to matter to them. You can do this quietly, with occasional asides in class about the moments in your own learning that really sparked your interest or led you toward some exciting new discovery. Or you can do it by noting when the course arrives at the material that you find most interesting or important: Of all the books we are reading this semester, this one's my absolute favorite—I've read it 20 times and still find new insights in it; this particular problem never fails to fascinate me; I have been waiting all semester to get to this point because now we are facing the most intriguing challenge that most of you will confront in your careers. The small teaching recommendation here simply involves allowing the enthusiasm that you felt when you were first studying your discipline—or that you show to your peers and colleagues when you are talking about your favorite features of your discipline—show in your classroom as well. The personality that appears when I am talking to a colleague in the hallway about the most recent book from my favorite novelist should find its way into my classroom. That can happen in lots of small ways; it takes only a deliberate decision to open that side of yourself to your students in as many class periods as possible. You'll have your dull and uninspiring days, as we all do. But take a few minutes before you head over to class each day to just pause and reconnect with whatever you find most fascinating about that day's material, and let it rise to the surface of your mind—allowing it to remain there throughout class.

Of course, if you're a dance-and-sing kind of person when it comes to enthusiasm, then just follow your instincts. Dance and sing.

Show Compassion

Remember what you were like at 18 or 19 or 20 years old. Then remember what it was like to have a powerful emotional experience at that age, especially a negative or distracting one. Your grandmother has died and you are devastated by the loss. Or you failed an exam in one of your major courses and you might lose your scholarship. Or your father lost his job and is no longer sure he can help you pay for your college costs, and you are wondering whether all of this time and energy you are spending in college is worth it. You manage to write a paper during this period, and turn it in to meet a deadline even though you know it's not your best work. And then you get the paper back a week later, while you are still caught up in the emotional stew of your experience, and the teacher's comments include a hectoring lecture about your recent lack of attentiveness in class and your failure to pay attention to detail in your Works Cited page. Maybe you were a better 20-year-old than me, but my reaction would have been something along the following lines: "Given everything I am going through right now, does any of this stuff you are asking me to do *really* matter?" And, truth be told, that seems like a reasonable question to me even now. So the best advice I can offer here, even in small teaching terms, would be this: whenever you are tempted to come down hard on a student for any reason whatsoever, take a couple of minutes to speculate on the possibility that something in the background of that student's life has triggered emotions that are interfering with their motivation or their learning. Just a few moments of reflection on that possibility should be enough to moderate your tone and ensure that you are offering a response

that will not send that student deeper into a spiral of negative or distracting emotions, thus potentially preventing future learning from happening in your course.

PRINCIPLES

Use these three basic principles to guide both your motivational strategies and your own reading on this most important of topics for teachers at any level.

Acknowledge the Emotions in the Room They are there. You can't do anything about that. Rather than see that as a negative, instead look at the positive possibilities. You can tell stories, show film clips or images, make jokes, or do any number of things that will briefly activate the emotions of your students and prepare them to learn. You can leverage the power of emotions to heighten the cognitive capacities of your students at the opening, midway point, or closing of a course or a class period. Psychologist Michelle Miller, the author of *Minds Online*, encouraged instructors to ask themselves the following two questions: "What is the emotional heart of the material I am teaching? And how can I foreground this emotional center to my students?" (Miller 2014, p. 112).

Make It Social Use the contagious nature of emotions to your advantage. Give students the opportunity to learn together, to learn from one another, and to learn with you. If you are having a discussion, and it takes an interesting but potentially distracting turn, consider whether the value of letting the room heat up with some emotional conversation outweighs the goal of staying exactly on topic. If you are giving a lecture, don't hesitate to invite students into your monologue with jokes, stories, or questions. Give students who are working in groups the opportunity to tackle shared challenges that force them to rely on one another and cooperate like the social animals they are.

Show Enthusiasm First, care about your course material. If you are not excited by what you are teaching, and if you do not care deeply about it, don't expect your students to care about it either. But they won't know that you care deeply about it unless you are willing to show that to them, however that might seem best to you. Second, care about your students' learning. That means acknowledging that they are full human beings, not cognition machines, and the noncognitive parts of them sometimes will distract them from learning tasks. Let that awareness hover in your mind as you interact with students who are not performing as you think they should, and allow it to govern the tone—not necessarily the content—of your response to them.

SMALL TEACHING QUICK TIPS: MOTIVATING

Students bring into our courses a complex mix of backgrounds, interests, and motivations, and we can't turn every student into a passionate devotee of our discipline. We can, however, help create better learning in our courses with attention to some small, everyday motivational practices that have the power to boost both attention and learning.

- Get to class early every day and spend a few minutes getting to know your students, learning about their lives and their interests, and creating a positive social atmosphere in the room.
- Open individual class or learning sessions (and even readings) by eliciting student emotions: give them something to wonder about, tell them a story, present them with a shocking fact or statistic. Capture their attention and prepare their brains for learning.
- Consider how practitioners in your field, or the skills you are teaching them, help make a positive difference in the world;

remind them continually, from the opening of the course, about the possibility that their learning can do the same.

- Keep the overarching purpose of any class period or learning activity in view while students are working. Use the board or frequent oral reminders.
- Show enthusiasm for your discipline, for individual texts or problems or units, and for your hope that they will find them as fascinating as you do.

CONCLUSION

Before we conclude, I should acknowledge that some negative emotions have the power to create learning just as positive ones do. Miller actually suggested that “the less pleasant emotions tend to win out when it comes to memory ... negative emotions—fear, anger, and so forth—actually accentuate memory” (Miller 2014, p. 97). I always like to illustrate this point by recounting the story of the time when our dog shot out of the back door of our house and into the backyard to confront a trespassing animal he spied back there and was promptly sprayed in the face by a skunk. The next time he had the opportunity to approach the backyard, he did so with the full weight of that trauma in his memory and in an impossibly ginger manner, stepping one foot forward at a time, slowly and cautiously. To this day, more than 3 years later, he still approaches the backyard with trepidation, his senses obviously on high alert, as the memory of that foul encounter clearly lives on his learning brain.

We don't want to create traumatic experiences for students in our courses, even if they can help accentuate memory. While those emotions might imprint a learning experience deeply on our students' brains, they also might lead them to fear and avoid any future learning experience in that discipline or course or with that

teacher. In certain limited cases we can stoke up negative emotions like outrage or sadness to help capture the attention of our students and drive them to action, but we have to do so cautiously. The use of such emotions should always lead to resolution in some form; if you stir up outrage over wealth inequality, the students should have the opportunity to talk about it, address it in their assignments, and process the experience. A safer route is to focus on the use of positive emotions to heighten the cognitive capacities of our students. We can inspire awe and wonder in them by leading them to the mysteries or problems or challenges of our disciplines; we can tap into their social selves by creating a dynamic, collaborative environment in our classrooms or in their group projects; we can invoke purpose by linking their classroom work to some brighter future or greater good for themselves or the world.

Whatever we do, we have to remember that the brains in our classrooms do more than think: they feel, and those feelings can play a valuable role in our efforts to motivate and inspire student learning.