“Creating a Project to Intrinsically Motivate”

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2012
Creating a Project to Intrinsically Motivate

As a teacher, you can only motivate and encourage a student to work hard and do well to an extent. Students must create enthusiasm and interest in themselves. Intrinsic motivation is always an important part in educational success. Students need to learn not to rely on outside rewards to motivate them, but find self-worth in their education process. Teachers must find a way to create motivation in students and offer projects that capture interest and curiosity. In order to create and increase intrinsically motivating projects, the projects need to be relevant, have appropriate sources and support, and raise the bar to create a sense of accomplishment and pride in the work.

THE PROBLEM:

The shift from elementary school to middle school creates non-motivating tendencies in students. As “Motivation and Schooling in the Middle Grades” states, the “typical middle grade school environment is characterized by few opportunities for students to make important decisions, excessive rules and discipline, poor teacher-student relationships, homogeneous grouping by ability, and stricter grading practices” (Anderman, Eric. “Motivation and Schooling in the Middle Grades.” Review of Educational Research 64.2 (1994): 287-309. Summer). This can create an atmosphere where students feel less than worthy and acquire a lack of interest in their education. As student reach middle school, they are hit with many different experiences and the development process is hard. They are creating their own identity and focus on peers more than those adults above them. However, like the journal states in “Negative Effects of Traditional Middle Schools on Students’ Motivation”, “the assumed characteristic of the early
adolescent period are less a consequence of student’s development stage, than of the mismatch between student’s needs and the opportunities afforded them in traditional middle grade schools” (Eccles, S. Jacquelynne. “Negative Effects of Traditional Middle Schools on Students’ Motivation.” *The Elementary School Journal* 93.5 (1993): 554-569. May).

**THE RESEARCH:**

More and more people are seeing how the lack of motivation in school is not from the personal students but from the environment of the middle schools and the changes that occur from the elementary stage. Eccles states that “an increase in teacher control, a decrease in teacher efficacy and in the quality of teacher/student relationship, and an increase in between-classroom ability group” (Eccles, 567) creates the problem we are dealing with now; Where student have lost intrinsic motivation and are not as active in their educational desire. So what is to be done about this? Research has found many ways that help create activities and projects that are intrinsically motivating for students. To create and improve intrinsically motivating projects, there three important aspects that need to be covered: 1) Relevance 2) Recourses available and 3) Raising the bar.

It is important to make the project relevant for students. Students need to see the connections that the information has to their own life or the world around them. Relevance allows the student to make the project personal and therefore worthwhile to them. As Crocco states in “Putting the actors back on stage”, “projects found to be engaging and worthwhile forms of research carries their enthusiasm over into the application” (Crocco, Margaret Smith.

The first step of making a project relevant is to provide students choice in the decision making to tap curiosity. “The importance of a degree of autonomy as well as a degree of control over the context in which one is acting has been seen as figuring strongly in motivational equations for some time” (Anderman, 293). A professor at Westmont College, Dr. Jane Wilson, explains this as giving up control, allowing the students to feel like they have a say in their work. Student will find their topic and project interesting because they picked it and therefore want to work on the project. In the article “Citizenship, Curriculum, and Critical Thinking” the authors express the importance of giving up control to encourage students’ intrinsic motivation. It states, that teachers “must give up control, be flexible, and let the children make the decisions” (Ponder Jennifer. “Citizenship, Curriculum, and Critical Thinking beyond the Four Walls of the Classroom: Linking the Academic Content with Service-Learning.” *Teacher Education Quarterly* (2011): 45-65. Fall. 54).

The second part of creating intrinsically motivating projects is to make connections. Fostering real world connections provide students with the opportunity to understand why the material is relevant in today’s world and why it is worth learning. It is important to “create opportunities for students to solve problems and make meaningful connections in a real world context” (Ponder, 46). If students can see the importance behind a project, they are more willing to try and work hard. By allowing them to see how it relates to the world around them
and how it affects their daily lives, they will want to explore more and be willing to take the time to understand the information which will create a longer lasting experience.

Having the appropriate resources available for students is also an important key in the process of self-motivation. There has to be enough resources and support to help student succeed to the best of their ability. Ponder explains that “building partnership beyond the classroom to extend support for the project” (Ponder, 55) is important in making the students encouraged and value the project they create. As Wilson expresses, community is a key aspect in helping students achieve. Support can be associated with two groups: peer and teacher. Both are extremely important in promoting motivation in the classroom. Peer interaction among students has been found to have a positive effect on student engagement. By encouraging peer interaction, student gain a sense of belonging and importance. “When students believe they are encouraged to know, interact with, and help classmates during lessons” (Ryan M. Allison. “The Classroom Social Environment and Changes in Adolescents’ Motivation and Engagement during Middle School.” American Educational Research Journal 38.2 (2001): 437-460. Summer. 456) they apply more effort to the project and have a sense of pride in their work. By allowing students to help and support one another, they are able to invest even more into the project and feel like they are respected. Support does not just stop with peer groups, but continues to the teacher.

Students need to know that their teacher believes in them. If students feel like their teacher is there to help, encourage, and support their activities and projects, then students will feel positively towards the learning process and not shut down. Ryan explains that “when
students perceive their teacher as supportive they report higher levels of interest and enjoyment in their schoolwork” (Ryan, 440). It is important that students know their teachers are there to guide them and not criticize their efforts. If student have enough teacher support, then they will try hard to succeed and put in more effort than if the teacher was not invested. The main connection about support is that it is all about respect. When students view their “classroom as one where students and their ideas are respected and not belittled, when students perceive their teacher as understanding and supportive and when they feel their teacher does not publicly identify student’s relative performance, they tend to engage in more adaptive patterns of learning” (Ryan, 456).

Raising the bar is the final aspect for creating intrinsically motivating projects. Dr. Jane Wilson uses the idea of challenge and competence to explain this concept. It is important to push the students to a higher achievement so that the project can have a sense of worth and purpose. If students feel like the work was worthwhile, they achieve higher grades and feel proud of what they were able to accomplish. First, however, the teacher must remember that it is also important and essential not to set too high of standards that all students will fail to reach. As Ryan states, the project needs to be appropriately matched to their developmental needs. Students should be encouraged to achieve more and pushed to the next level, but should never be put past their actual ability. Also, when evaluating the projects, it is important to remember to promote effort and not ability. Competition among students develops negatively in the classroom and created feelings of resentment. Ryan explains that “promoting performance goals is related negatively to social efficacy with teachers and peers” (Ryan, 448). Teachers should be encouraged to base grades and evaluation on effort and not compare
students’ ability to others in the class. Once this is remembered, teachers can start to raise the bar. To raise the bar in a project it is important to give students personal responsibility and control to increase self-regulated learning. Create a variety of dimension and higher level thinking and push active involvement.

The number one factor to raising the bar is to believe and express that you believe the students can achieve excellence. High expectations are critical when increasing intrinsic motivation. If students see that the teacher believes in them and expects them to do well, then achievement is taken seriously. Students will feel a sense of obligation and try to succeed because the teacher believes they can. Self-regulated learning is an important part of giving control to students. Ryan expresses that increased self-regulated learning is associated with perceptions of the teacher as promoting “mutual respect and support” (Ryan, 452). If teachers allow students to self-monitor, then students feel more in control of their own education and can pick the pace at which they can complete the project. The next step in raising the bar is to create variety and dimension in the project. Ponder expresses “moving beyond a superficial understanding” (Ryan, 51) and introduce a multicultural dimension to class content” (Ryan, 20). As a way to introduce the importance of variety and dimension, Ponder also emphasized the value of using primary sources to add perspective and value beyond the basic lecture and text book. Active participation is another factor that will help raise the bar in projects. Encouraging students to get involved in projects and taking action makes them feel and see the effort. By showing that a single person can make a difference, it makes students want to try and makes it seem worthwhile. It takes the project to the next level and really adds a new reality
that will give them life skills. It creates more accomplishment and something they can feel good about.

**Application:**

So what does a project look like that is intrinsically motivating? The project must have relevance for the student; connection it to their own lives or the world around them. Choice and curiosity are also important factors in creating projects that motivate students. Students must feel like they have a say in their project and can choose a topic that they find interesting. This provides a sense of relevance to the project because it is a topic they want to know more about and spend time researching. Allow students to be challenged in the project, creating new criteria that will push them to a new level of achievement. This could involve many types of sources, or encouraging them to get active with the research. There should be an element in the project that the students work with that goes beyond the simple, easy, project that could feel like a waste of time.

As a history teacher, the way to apply these topics to increase motivation is to have a project that is interactive and relatable. Such projects like oral history or a Service-Learning can be a great way to create personal motivation in students. Both of these projects create relevance for the students and really allow them to take control of their learning and have life experience.

Oral history can encourage motivation by allowing students to pick the topic that they can relate to personally, and make connections to life around them. It also creates a new dimension for the students and opens up the possibility to challenge themselves to go beyond
the text. It shows relevance and raises the bar. Crocco explains that this type of project has the students “become historians and develop critical thinking skills” (Crocco, 20). Students have to figure out and investigate while giving the interview. It is up to them to decide what is important and relevant in the study. It provides individualized choice because they pick the topic and develop the list of discussion points. They have the control over the project and where it goes. This type of project also creates empathy and pushes the limit of a basic project by encouraging students to see the world through the eyes of another. They hear a personal story and are able use that account and actually understand in a different content; not just from a text.

Service-learning projects foster real world connection and active participation. It is a “teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction” (Ponder, 74). The learning is in the hands of the students and they have control to make the decisions of how to do and finish the project. They create, research, and apply all the information from the beginning to the end. It goes past the text and creates active participation and something tangible. Students gain “political awareness and responsibility regarding social issues (Ponder, 50). This also incorporates support because the teachers and student partner together to finish this project. Some who have done this project explain how the lesson can take on a whole new meaning because they get to connect the experience to what they were actually learning.

**Conclusion:**
Intrinsic motivation is an important skill for students to possess. Students need to feel rewarded in their work and have a sense of accomplishment. If the project has no importance and is considered “busy work”, then student will not put effort in it and it will be a waste of time for everyone involved. In order to create the personal motivation, projects should have a sense of relevance and connection. Students need to be able to see how the project can relate to their own lives and the world around them. Projects should also have a support system. If student feel that they have teacher and peer support, the projects will be better done. They will feel like they have a voice and others care about their opinion. Also, to have an intrinsically motivating project, it should raise the bar. There should be a part of the project that encourages students to try hard and take things to the next level. This creates worth and students feel like they accomplish more and the projects were worth something.