

In the Classroom 112

Strategies for Increasing Student Motivation in the Classroom

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Stan Skrabut: Just moved into the house, one of the first things that I did was set up my office, and got my computers running, and now we're doing this podcast episode. As you can probably tell, I got some acoustic issues that I need to work through and primarily, it's because I got a bare office. I can hear an echo in my head. What else is going on? As of just a couple of days ago, this podcast, because of you guys, we've had more downloads this quarter than I did the whole first year. I'm really excited about that. Thank you ever so much for tuning in. I really do appreciate it.

In Episode ITC 110, I talked about elements that you should include in your lesson plan. One of the elements I use focuses on tapping into student motivation or adult motivation. Have you ever noticed that when learners are motivated, the class runs so much more smoothly? Have you also noticed when students are not motivated or they're not interested, then your teaching is just a chore? It's like pulling teeth. I certainly would prefer to be working with students who want to learn with me. There's also some other benefits of motivated learners. They're more focused, they're more cooperative, and they stay on task a lot longer. We're going to talk a little bit about this.

What I'm going to share comes from Raymond Wlodkowski's book, *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn*. Raymond, looking at his book, it's clear that he believes that learning centers around motivation. If we, as instructors, can understand what motivates the learner, then we can enhance learning. However, if we ignore motivation and teach in a manner that inhibits motivation, then learning will suffer. As Wlodkowski pointed out, motivation is basic to our survival. Our success hinges on our motivation. If we're interested and motivated about a subject, there's a greater chance we're going to learn it. This is also applicable to the learners we work with. In his book, Wlodkowski shared research that shows a strong, positive correlation between motivation and learning. Interesting enough, this correlation is highest as you increase in age.

That's good news, but it can also be bad news. Adult learners can be a tough crowd if they're not interested. We're going to talk a lot about those aspects. One of the key takeaways that I got while reading Wlodkowski's book is that connections are strengthened through repetition and it takes more energy for somebody to learn something new than to build on previous experience. Therefore, it's important to learn about your students so you can tie instruction to their experiences. This is not new. These are some of the same concepts that we've already talked about in previous episodes. It's just we're looking at them in a different framework. We're going to look at them through this framework of motivation.

Working on the assumption that people want to learn, they want to improve their craft, they want to improve their livelihood, and therefore, learning should be a positive experiences and positive experiences lead to lifelong learning. As instructors, we cannot do anything to students to make them learn. They will learn if they're motivated to accept this information we provide, but what we can do is we can create the right conditions and environment to help them learn. Learning should be a collaborative event where instructors work with learners to set up this environment.

Now, I always frame it as the difference between want to do something versus have to do something. When somebody tells you you have to do something, what's the first thing that comes to mind? It's like, "No, you can't tell me what to do." We have a natural tendency to push back when we're told we have to do something, but if somebody wants to do something, watch out, they devote a considerable amount of energy and time to taking care of that task. I guess the key is how can we get them to want to do something versus have to do something?

There's a lot that goes into this. There's a lot of variables that come into play. Age is a factor, culture is a factor that can affect motivation to learn. While age and culture are issues that affect learning, they can be mitigated through instructor attention. I think these particular issues are not just focused on adult learners, but apply throughout our different classrooms. I'm seeing a lot more attention that is talking about diversity and inclusion. This is really what this book speaks to in a great deal. I think a lot of it has to apply.

Now, Wlodkowski, he focused primarily on adult learners and working adults. This age group that is looking at is between 25 and 64 years old. A lot of the assumptions, a lot of the premise is built on this particular group. In our classrooms, roughly 73%, 75% of all college students are considered post-traditional students who not only go to school but also have to support themselves.

There are a number of reasons why an adult would need continuous learning, for example, rapid social change in the workplace, job obsolescence, aging workers, changing lifestyles. Information in different career fields becomes obsolete in a matter of years, rather than lifetime. That's why some older students would come back into the classroom, but the students that we currently have, what we would consider traditional, there's a lot of them that are actually working full-time and trying to make college work at the same time.

As we move forward, we can expect to see more and more lifelong learners. Because of the increasingly world, more of these individuals are going back to school and lifelong learning seems to be self-perpetuating. The more involvement in adult education, the more individuals continue to stay involved. With more and more people pursuing education, they're also doing it in different stages of life. Therefore, age becomes a factor. Aging doesn't affect learning in that as adults become older, their physical functions such as sight and hearing begin to degrade. However, their capability to learn doesn't degrade. If adult learners are allowed to pace the speed of learning, they are as proficient as younger learners.

A lot of the information that we're putting out to our students, a lot of it is, is very new. Depending on what age group you are, depends on how quick the learner will pick it up. Here's some suggestions for adjusting to adult learners. A lot of this ties back to this concept of andragogy, which I talked about in Episode ITC 44.

One of the first things is allow older learners to control the pace of learning. This is one of the frustrating things I find in higher ed is we have these 16-week blocks and we're trying to shove as much stuff as we can into those blocks. For some learners, that is just too fast of a pace. It's not that they can't learn it, but they may not be able to learn it at the pace that we're putting them on. Trying to figure out how to control for that. There are some colleges that are experimenting with that and they understand that for some students, it takes a little longer.

Provide more time for adult learners to process visual material. Make those presentations available before or after the fact. Give them an opportunity to see it more than once. If you're teaching in a classroom, ensure that your presentations are within the auditory range of learners and control for distracting sounds. In some cases, you may have to go ahead and record presentations separately and make them available.

Here's a big one. Adjust presentations for instruction to account for working memory. Instruction needs to be broken down into bite-size bits of information for easier processing. I have created a slide deck talking about presentations and that is a key point. We do not need to put eight bullets on a slide. We can make eight slides instead and focus on one bullet at a time. It will make for a better presentation, it will help students learn, but right now, the way I've seen many presentations built, it's not going to help the learner.

Make the information relevant to the learner. Otherwise, it will be discarded. This goes back talking to previous experience. What experiences do they have? Can you tie that information to those particular experiences? That's what you're trying to do is tie new material to learners, previous experiences. You need to get to know your learners in order to be able to do that. Like I said, a lot of these points, I also talked about them when I was talking about andragogy.

Here's some suggestions for helping adult learners learn new material. First of all, make it relevant. Talk about the why. Why is this important to this particular learner? Use physical aids or memory aids to help organize information. Find those strategies that will help that executive function. How they can remember this information and paste the content appropriately. Just don't shove a bunch of information at them and expect that somebody will get it. I realized this as I'm working with adult learners all the time, I'm working with faculty, my newest case, how to learn a new learning management system. I know I could easily overwhelm them. That does not help the situation. Therefore, we need to break it up and have more time to talk about the topics.

Focus on one idea at a time. This is that chunking that information. With one slide, if you're using slide presentations, focus on just one item. Don't have multiple bullet points. That is not going to help the learner. Go back and summarize often. Go back

through your content, repeat things that'll help them, encourage interactive note-taking, and try to tie information to a realistic setting and pull that information together. Those are some strategies that can help you really deal with an aging crowd and how to get at work, but as I said, these are things that you should be doing regardless of the age of your learners. These principles will help in the classroom.

One of the areas Wlodkowski discussed that I found very interesting was this idea of practical intelligence. This is an area that seems to be especially important to adult learners, but more research is still needed. It basically focuses on knowledge developed through experience. This knowledge is typically used to solve problems as the learner experiences them in their work, at home, in play, or in their studies. Each discipline has specific knowledge necessary for the success of that discipline. If we're teaching them how to be a pharmacist, we need to bring that mindset of what a pharmacist does in order to help students learn it. Not just memorizing, but how does a pharmacist think when they are working in their discipline?

In my mind, this is just knowledge that's common to the field. An expert in the field is someone who has mastered this common knowledge. Understanding what this knowledge is, and identifying the gap in an individual's knowledge will help the learner develop in this particular field of study. I just thought this idea of practical intelligence. Very often, we're teaching classes that are aimed towards a discipline. The college that I currently work at, they have sports management, arts management. What does somebody who is in that profession, how do they think, how do they act, and how can we impart this knowledge on to the learners?

Another area I found to be interesting was the idea of life transition. Basically, an individual is motivated to learn something because of a problem they're facing in their life. This problem may result from a change in a life cycle. For example, if a company is downsizing, so an individual has to go out and get a new job. Well, maybe they haven't looked for a job for a while. Therefore, they have to get back into writing resumes and doing presentations and interview process, that's one thing. Maybe they have to change their job entirely, which means now they have to go figure out this new job, and they're not going to be experts at that new job right away, but there are experiences and skills that they can bring to that particular job. That's an example of a life transition.

Another life transition, maybe they're getting ready for retirement, right? They're going to have to explore different material and learn about what to do in retirement. This is not something that you're going to do at a much earlier lifecycle stage. You're just starting out in your career, you're not going to really think about retirement. You should, but you're really not going to. It's only when you get to the end that you're really focused on it. I talk from experience here because one day soon I will be retiring. Well, a lot sooner than it was before.

The last area that is really important when we're talking about adult learners that we have to understand is the challenge that cultural diversity plays on learning. Wlodkowski points out that we need to respect different cultures. I don't know if you've been watching the news over the past 5, 10 years, this is an area that we really need to focus on. People are doing some really crazy things in my mind, we

need to work towards making a learning environment that is inviting to everyone. Once again, this goes back to a learner's experience because learning is strengthened when it's tied to a learner's experience. The more we can understand a learner to include cultural differences, the more success we will have on passing knowledge. Once again, this is tapping into motivation.

One example that Wlodkowski seems to question is the need to grade on participation. He goes to point out that in various cultures, interaction and participation differ and so we need to just be aware of this and account for such differences. The bottom line is if you want to have a motivating lesson, you need to plan for it. Part of that is setting yourself up for success as an instructor. Here's some characteristics and skills of a motivating instructor. I would like to think that I'm a motivating instructor, but I know that I have some work to do.

Wlodkowski, he basically has these five pillars. Expertise, empathy, enthusiasm, clarity, and cultural responsiveness. Expertise. This seems like a no-brainer. We need to know our topic. Others would like to learn it and are willing to share our knowledge. As we've mentioned, learners come because they want information to help move their lives forward. They benefit from a lesson when the information presented adds to their experience. Because their experiences vary so widely, it's important to get to know your learners. Understanding learners can help us tie the lesson to their experiences as realistically as possible.

Wlodkowski also stressed the need to understand your topic in a manner that you can provide many different examples. The better you know your topic, the better that you're able to adjust the content. You also have to know what you don't know because the BS meter is well developed in adult learners. They can tell when somebody is fabricating something. Well, at least I used to think that. Now I'm not so sure.

Finally, Wlodkowski points out the importance of having a thorough instruction plan, they're basically blueprints, a good plan provides the beginning of a solid foundation. This is one of the reasons I talked about it in ITC 110. That having a good lesson plan will help you stay on trackable to weave in these different motivation strategies as you go forward.

Well, expertise is number one, empathy. Empathy is the second pillar. We must understand the learners so we can tie the lesson to their personal goals. We don't want to waste their time we want to provide instruction at an appropriate level for the learners. We're not able to do this without understanding who they are, what they already know, and what they want to know. Wlodkowski provides in his book a wonderful chart of methods for gathering this type of information.

Well, learning in a classroom setting is a cooperation between the instructor and the learners. Each brings their own goals. It's important that the goals mesh for the most productive learning environment. We must listen to understand in the classroom and benefit from others experiences. Sometimes this can be tough with traditional learners. They haven't built up a huge set of experiences that we can draw upon.

Sometimes they're hesitant to share that in a classroom, but we have to keep working on that.

The third pillar is enthusiasm. If you don't care about your topic, or see the importance of it, neither will the learners. You have to walk the walk. When I speak about technologies for education, I don't recommend anything that I do not personally use. You have to be sincere. Your authenticity shows when you're talking about a topic. If you're not happy doing something, it's important to find something else to do. Life is too short to be unhappy, and you have an effect on others. You can make learners unhappy and that can be a long-lasting effect, so be excited about the topic that you're talking about.

Clarity. Key takeaway for this part is, if you can't be understood, learning will be degraded. We have lots of brilliant people out there who are also instructors. However, learners can only benefit from their brilliance if the instruction is clear. It's important to provide clear examples to illustrate a concept. It's also important that visual aids are clear. I honestly keep harping on this, but I see a lot of junk in terms of presentations. We are doing more damage with our presentations than not having a presentation at all. As instructors, you should also regularly summarize and check progress to see that understanding has taken place lots of different ways lots of active learning methods that you can use. That lesson plan is key to make sure that you are providing clarity.

The last pillar deals with cultural responsiveness. This is creating a learning environment that's respectful of the opinions and experiences of others each individual's unique and brings diversity to a learning session. There has to be a safe environment to discuss diverse thoughts and opinions. If individuals are criticized for their opinions, then learning will suffer as a result. This doesn't mean abolish critical thinking. It means that the individuals must question opposing ideas in a respectful manner. The key to this is respect. A respectful sharing environment will facilitate learning. Those are things that as an instructor that you need to bring to the table.

Now let's dive into the last piece, strategies for engaging adult learners. If you've ever had an opportunity to teach anything to adults, you can understand that at times it can be a challenge. Wouldn't it be great if you could break the code and figure out what motivates adults to learn? Wlodkowski points out that one of the most powerful motivators for adults is responsibility.

Adults are responsible not only for themselves but they also have a responsibility to others, family, co-workers, organizations, lots of other different things. They learn to stay competent in their jobs. Adults are eager to learn about things that they believe are going to be relevant and practical. In the end, they want to be able to use or apply what they've learned to help solve problems or to perform better.

They also, and I talked about this in andragogy. They want their experiences to count. Over time, they've gained a lot of experience, and as Wlodkowski points out and same with Malcolm Knowles, adults not only want their input to be considered, but they also want to measure what they're learning against what they already know. They want to be able to test their experiences in a realistic and practical setting. It's

important to create successful learning opportunities for adults as soon as possible. Otherwise, their motivation to learn will diminish. Adults will continue to be motivated to learn if the learning activity meets four conditions. Success, volition, value, and enjoyment.

He sums this all up in this motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching. Within this framework, he incorporated four essential elements that will attend to the four conditions. One, establish inclusion. Two, developing attitude. Three, enhancing meaning, and four, engendering competence. If you focus on these four items, then you are going to tap into this learner motivation.

The first part is establishing inclusion. If you're not including adult learners in your instruction, then you're excluding them. As a result, their motivation to learn is diminished. By establishing a climate where everyone is welcome and their input is also welcome, you're establishing a climate conducive to learning. One of the things that I've taken away from Wlodkowski's book is the fact that he was really focused on being sensitive to other cultures.

Part of this is understanding the differences in issues in terms of immediacy, time, space, and other factors, how they relate to students participating in a class. One of these factors is understanding the relationship between individual work and collective work or group work. This can affect the interaction in the classroom because gender power and context can also impact the classroom. All of these variables may unintentionally favor one group over another. The increased diversity in a classroom enriches the classroom, but it also complicates communications and that's one of those balances that you've got to work out.

In his book, Wlodkowski shares 11 different strategies that focus on inclusion. The list begins with something that happens in virtually every class I've been in, especially, the first day. That's allowing for introduction. For me, I thought this was a waste of time. I would typically skip introductions and jump into my lesson, but I'm starting to rethink how I conduct my lessons. The reason introductions are important is they help to establish trust in the classroom. They understand why you as the instructor are there, and also what the rest of the learners are going to get out of the class.

Another thing that he stresses is the importance of sincerely indicating your desire to help the students and be available to assist when needed. This is something that I stress with the faculty I work with, that I am available to them all the time. They just simply need to reach out and I will work to assist them. Another thing that he stresses as far as developing this inclusion is identifying the learning objectives for your class. We've talked on a number of occasions, especially in this idea of backward design and the importance of learning objectives of writing clear measurable objectives for your class.

You can enhance these objectives by explaining how the objectives tied to the students' personal lives. This connection could be made easier if you asked your students why they're taking the course, what they hope to also gain from the course. You can work to focus on how the objectives will tie back to their motivations for

being in the class. Then it's important to acknowledge the differences in your students.

The next piece is developing attitude. If learners are bored, learning diminishes. We need to keep learning interesting and relevant if we want learners to participate and learn. Learners can pay attention if they want to, but it also takes work. Anything that you can do to help them pay attention. Well, reduce the workload on the learner and enhance learning. When we first pay attention to something, it's because of variation, novelty, or relevance as emotional weight or meaning.

The key is holding this attention because attention in a learning environment translates to engagement and engagement leads to successful learning. Well, Wlodkowski notes that gaining interest is key to engagement. This interest may start out as situational interest, which is usually short-lived but is gained when something is new, unusual, or keenly relevant. Situational interest may lead to individual interest. Individual interest is a topic as much stronger and can lead to true engagement in a learning situation. If you make a topic relevant to learners, there's a great chance that the learners will become individually interested. Gaining interest is part of Gagne's nine events of instruction, which you can find in ITC 79.

Wlodkowski discusses strategies for making learning interesting. He focuses on three areas. How to maintain learners' attention, how to evoke and sustain learners' interests, and how to deepen engagement and challenge adult learners. In order to maintain learners' attention, he presents five strategies. These strategies vary from ensuring that you ask learners questions on a regular basis. This is the Socratic method which we have discussed before. Ensuring that you solicit response with a state of equity, giving everybody an opportunity. If they want to pass, give them an opportunity pass, don't force somebody to a question. When soliciting responses, it's important to keep the learning atmosphere positive and respect the learners' input. He also recommends changing modes of instruction and the types of material you use.

This is very much tied into a universal design for learning, which we have talked about in the past. Adding variety do instruction helps to maintain learner interests. Some things maybe texts. Some things may be images. Some things may be video or audio, but just change it up. Also, if you're presenting, change the pace of instruction. The gestures you use, the body movements. Just don't stand behind the podium and stare at them and read monotonously. Change things up.

Another strategy is making instruction points as clear as possible. If it's possible to misunderstand a set of instructions, it will happen. I know this from example. I just put out a set of instructions to the faculty I work with. I was absolutely amazed on the number of folks that didn't follow my instructions. I seriously thought they were extremely clear instructions, but that was the lesson to me.

Introduce your materials with clear objectives relating to previous instruction. All those different instructions, what is the learning objective that you're tying back to and tie those things together and make sure that you're using clear transitions as you move from one section to another. Then finally end with a summary or Q&A session

to tie things together. If you think back to Gagne's nine events of instruction, and you'll see all those weaved right in there. That is another point that you can attend to.

Wlodkowski also presents seven strategies for evoking and sustaining a learner's interests. One of those strategies that I believe is key is to tie a topic to the learners' personal interests. If we're tapping into what concerns a learner, the learner is going to be more interested in that topic. Storytelling is another powerful strategy for sustaining interests. We tend to enjoy and remember stories a lot more than just hearing fact after fact after fact. With the stories, if they're humorous or dramatic, they tend to get more attention but if there's a lesson attached to definitely want to use that type of story.

Concept maps. Talked about this in ITC 43. Concept maps or mind maps are diagrams that show a relationship between concepts. That will help sustain a learner's interests. He also shares strategies for deepening engagement in challenging learners. You want to get them into what's called the flow. The state of flow for their experience. When I play World of Warcraft, I can definitely get into the flow because hours pass by and I am just totally engrossed in what's going on there.

To keep tying back to sustaining this interest, if you give challenging problems that require learners to think this will all this will help? They have to be relevant, try to make them realistic as possible. You don't want them to be too easy. You want them to just be challenging enough. They like good puzzles. Case studies are also great tools for challenging learners because good case studies are open-ended, learners must use all their experience to come to a conclusion. The learners also get to explore areas where they do not have the experiencing, therefore they're scaffolding, their learning.

Another strategy for sustaining interest is games and simulations. I've talked about this in a previous episode. These are tools that help learners increase their experience and they're also learning tools. Simulations are great because they allow learners to participate in activities that may be too risky. For example, setting down a nuclear power plant, probably not a good thing to do in real life, but something that you can do through a simulation.

The very last section deals with engendering competence, learners want to become competent in their experiences, but they're not really keen on the idea of tests. They liked the idea of having their competence assessed, but they don't want to be tested. What do you do? I found this observation when I first read about it interesting. At the time, I was taking some grad-level courses, and we would be assigned papers and reports and all stuff. I loved just working on them and knocking those things out but there would be those occasions when we would get a final exam, it would drive me crazy. I did not like exams. I don't like exams. I'll take quizzes just to help me work on knowledge but those formative exams-- not formative but summative exams, I'm not a fan. In some cases, all they were doing is asking us to write a report and had they reframed it in that context, I would have been good with it. The necessity of exams, I'm not necessarily a fan.

He also talks about as he pointed out, and I agree, grades tend to be meaningless. For adults, the threat of receiving a low grade can be a demotivator to learning. I know a number of students who have dropped a class because they were worried about the grade rather than focusing on the learning. There's other ways that you can do this. Learning contracts, portfolios, rubrics. This can all strengthen those as far as assessments go.

Wlodkowski kindly has provided a number of different strategies for authentic and realistic assessment in the class. It will let us know when they are not meeting a standard but also when they're exceeding it. Feedback must not only be informative but also be specific, constructive, prompt positive, personal, and frequent enough to aid learning. Use authentic performance tasks to deepen new learning and help learners proficiently apply this learning to their real lives.

Basically, this is referring to performance tasks. The key is the tasks resemble the actual real-life task as much as possible. In my opinion, the Air Force did a good job in their training because they would build simulators where you could practice a task. The assessments were often conducted in the actual workplace, thus adding to the realism. Provide opportunities for adults to demonstrate their learning in ways that reflect their strengths and multiple sources of knowing. This is basic universal design for learning. When applying this strategy, it's important to use different types of projects, papers, reports, presentations, what have you to assess learning. These assessment types can be spread across the entire curriculum, so they won't overwhelm you as the educator and portfolios are a great way to collect and assess those different projects.

Wlodkowski presents a framework that helps to build a motivating lesson. Ever since reading that book, I have used these strategies and incorporated them into my lessons and I personally believe they have already helped me become a more successful educator, but I'm only scratching the surface. I consider this book one of the most practical books I found on the subject. He has 60 different strategies that can be used to improve your instruction. I encourage you to check out his book so you can also weave these strategies into your instruction. Speaking of books, here's a quick plug for my book.