Motivating Students to Do Class Work

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Teaching and Learning Services

10 Motivational Strategies

We're used to assigning grades to motivate students to do class work, but there are many times when grades may not be the most desirable strategy for motivating students, either because we don't want to increase our marking load, wish to avoid certain types of marks (e.g., completion marks, participation marks, etc…), or many other reasons. Listed below are some concrete strategies that may help you to motivate your students to do class work without marking individual activities.

Strategy 1: Compile activities into a journal or portfolio assignment to be marked less frequently.

Small classroom activities can be collected and handed in as an assignment (either digitally or in hard copy) at one or multiple points throughout the term. There's no need to mark each activity they do individually, even if you are only marking for completion.

Strategy 2: Completing activities reduces or shifts weightings.

Give students an incentive to complete an activity by reducing or changing activity weightings if it is completed. For example, if students complete a peer review of another student's paper and hand it in, the review is worth 5% and their final paper is worth 15%, whereas if they don't turn in a peer review, their entire paper is worth 20%. Make sure these types of weighting shifts are clearly described in your course outline.

Strategy 3: Completing activities gives students some degree of choice or autonomy that they wouldn't otherwise have.

This strategy might include things like allowing students to select their own groups for a project, pick a topic for an optional activity, or allowing them to choose between activities for another assignment.

Are you struggling with motivating your students to do their readings before class? We can help! Email us at teaching@macewan.ca to book an appointment.

Types of Motivation

There are many things that motivate students to do their work. When we consider motivation from an incentive perspective, it can be broadly broken down into two categories: Intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation.

- Things that are intrinsically motivating are motivating because of internal drivers, such as personal satisfaction, interest, or enjoyment.
- Things that are extrinsically motivating are motivating because of external drivers, such as grades, financial compensation, or a reward.

People are often motivated to do things by a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic factors. There are also many other ways to think about motivation that have nothing to do with incentives. That said, it is still useful to think about motivating students through this lens.

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Strategy 4: Offer different due dates based on completion or passing.

Give students an incentive to do certain tasks by giving them additional time to complete other activities. For example, if students pass 6 optional quizzes during the term, they get a day extension on their final paper for each quiz completed, and a whole extra week if they complete all 6.

Strategy 5: Completing certain online activities unlocks other content in the online learning management system (LMS), Blackboard.

Many people don't know this, but you can set things up in Blackboard so that completing one activity "unlocks" another element of the course. You can often even dictate what it means to "complete" something. For example, you can set up an assignment drop box so that it is only accessible when students have passed a reading quiz, or you can set it up so that students only have to do the quiz (whether they pass or not) to unlock the content.

Strategy 6: Design activities so that students can choose how they represent their knowledge.

Consider how you might modify activities so that students can represent their knowledge in a way that motivates them. For example, consider giving students the option of writing a research paper, or recording a 5-minute mock conference presentation that articulates the same research, only verbally.

Strategy 7: Design activities that students can personalize to their own interests.

This doesn't necessarily mean that students do different assignments; it can be as easy as allowing students to pick a topic, subject (participant) for an activity, or a unique perspective for an activity.

Strategy 8: Design activities with a high degree of authenticity.

Students are often more motivated to complete work that they see as highly relevant. Consider whether you could increase the authenticity of your activities so that they reflect real-life as much as possible. For example, could you convert a paper to something that is done by practitioners in your field? Instead of a fictional scenario, could you present students with a real-life problem that still needs solving?

Strategy 9: Develop activities and assignments that build (scaffold) on one another.

Students are more likely to complete activities that are required for future activities. Consider scaffolding activities so that students complete smaller pieces that contribute towards a larger overarching project.

Strategy 10: Reflect on your own teaching.

Students tend to be more motivated when they feel a higher sense of belonging in a classroom and with instructors who give frequent feedback, vary their teaching methods, and show certain characteristics such as enthusiasm and responsiveness (Cashin, 1979; Forsyth and McMillan, 1991; Lowman, 1984; Lucas, 1990; Sass, 1989).

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