

Motivation: More Than Carrots and Sticks

"People often say that motivation doesn't last. Well, neither does bathing--that's why we recommend it daily." --Zig Ziglar

The beginning of the semester is a good time to think about motivation, and for many of us, the term first brings to mind notions from behaviorism; for instance, we might wonder, "I give grades to reward good performance, so what else can I do to motivate students?" But a different take on the topic is also useful. Expectancy-value theory suggests that motivation involves two factors: our expectancy of success ("Can I do this?") and the value we place on the task ("Do I care about this?") Both factors are needed for motivation. Personally, I am confident that I could count out one thousand pennies, but I don't care at all about doing that, so I'm not motivated to try. Let's explore a few ways to use expectancy-value theory in teaching.

Introduce **choice and emphasize personal relevance.**

- Students might show mastery of a course outcome in one of several ways, tailor an assignment to their own interests, or select from several deadlines.
- Some course material has an intrinsic practicality that's easy to highlight with a guest speaker, service project, or activity emphasizing real world connections.
- Students might seek a personal connection to material with double-entry journal, noting in one column an interesting passage from a reading, and discussing their choice in the other column.
- Teams of students might follow the media for a few weeks, seeking items to connect to course material.

Provide opportunities for **early success.**

- Students are most likely to tackle assignments that are appropriately challenging, but the spot between trivial and overwhelming changes throughout a program.
- It can be helpful to place a few low-stakes assignments early in the semester.
- Similarly, we can break a complex assignment into parts.
- Feedback can build confidence when it suggests specific ways to improve and students have an opportunity to use that feedback.
- Team testing can build students' expectation of success. Students take a test on their own. Before they see their scores, they take the test again with a partner or small group. Students' final scores are a combination of their individual and group scores.

Want to read more?

Here are short essays on motivating students from the teaching centers at Vanderbilt University and Carleton College: <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/motivating-students/> and <https://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/affective/motivation.html>