

Institute for Law Teaching and Learning Conference, June 1-3, 2011

Professor Tracy Turner, Southwestern Law School
Handout, "Motivating Students to Succeed"

In this workshop, I hope to convince participants that purposefully including motivation in lesson plans is critical to effective teaching. After briefly presenting my thoughts on the importance of motivation, I will focus the workshop on eliciting participants' ideas on how to incorporate motivation into our teaching. Because I want to spend the time at the workshop developing a dialogue, I am confining my own ideas to this handout.

I am going to assume that if you are taking the time to read this handout, you are already convinced of the importance of motivating students to succeed. Therefore, rather than reviewing my reasons for believing motivation is an essential element of effective teaching, I will focus the handout on some concrete examples of how to teach motivation.

Book Recommendation:

Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*

Techniques To Motivate Students:

If you can identify even just a few steps to take to incorporate motivation into your pedagogy, you will have taken your teaching to a new level of effectiveness. The suggestions below will not work for everyone, and it would be difficult to implement them all. Hopefully, however, this handout and the discussion during the workshop can generate some ideas that will work for you.

Step One – Establish the Importance of Your Course

- Invite a former student or a practitioner or judge to come to class to discuss how the subject matter you are teaching impacts students' legal careers or society in general
- Find at least one reading that establishes the importance of your course – a seminal case, a law review article, a newspaper article, etc. – and use it to generate small group or class-wide discussion
- For example, in my legal writing course, I invite a former student who has worked in an externship to discuss how she used the skills she learned in my class. I also show some video clips of prominent professionals discussing the importance of writing in the profession.

Step Two – Establish Your Commitment to Their Success

- Take a few minutes during your first class to introduce students to your style of teaching. Explain how you will help them learn. For example, I tell students that I view myself as their coach; they will have primary responsibility for their performance, but I will offer instruction and guidance. I also talk to them about my availability for student conferences and my approach to providing individualized feedback on assignments. I explain that I may call on students to answer questions because I want to help them engage with the material and not because I want to put them on the spot.
- Hand out note cards and have each student write down one thing she wants you to know about her. Then, write each piece of personal information on your seating chart next to the corresponding student's name. When you know a student will be coming to see you or you want to talk to the student about something, pull out the face chart and remind yourself of the student's personal information. If the opportunity presents itself, make a comment that shows you remember what she wrote.
- Make sure that students know exactly what they should be doing and when. You can discuss this in class or by e-mail or in your syllabus. For example, in my syllabus, I have a special column for "suggestions" where I note the stage at which they should be in their research and drafting of long-term assignments each week. I then repeat this information orally at the end of the last class of the week. The equivalent in a non-writing class would be stages of outlining, practice exams, review of practice exams, and other preparation for midterms or final exams.
- Take at least a couple of minutes at the end of each class to review what you hoped they would learn from the class. For example, I might say something like, "Today I wanted you to learn how to find the reasoning behind a court's decision and use that reasoning to predict how a new factual situation might be resolved." Or, if we were discussing legal concepts, I might say, "We identified these five factors that I have written on the board. These are factors that you will want to consider any time you have to analyze an issue of _____."
- Solicit feedback from students about areas of confusion. You could have them post anonymously to a course web site, hand out note cards at the end of class, or invite e-mails. If a large number of students are confused about an important concept, consider reviewing that concept again.
- Do not ignore quiet students but call on them or approach them and ask them why they are not participating.

- Keep copies of any early written assignments, practice tests, etc. so that you can refer to them if necessary when students come to talk to you about their performance in your class.

Step Three – Teach Them to Focus on Learning

- Preview the stages of their learning. This is especially important in first-year courses but is also helpful in upper-division courses. In first-year courses, you can acknowledge that students will struggle with legal terminology and offer suggestions about how to conquer the vocabulary (e.g., advise them to stop every time they see a word they do not recognize and look it up and emphasize how taking that time in the beginning can pay off quickly because it will increase their ability to understand the cases they are reading). In upper-division courses, you can explain the progression of your course. For example, perhaps your course will start with a minimal number of assigned cases to enable students to master basic concepts and then will gradually introduce more complex topics through a larger number of cases. Telling students that this is how the course will progress helps them understand that they are not just receiving information but are engaged in a gradual learning process.
- Give students as many tools as possible to gauge their progress: ungraded assignments, practice exams, peer review exercises, quizzes. Design these tools in a way that will emphasize what they have learned in addition to what they have not learned. For example, a later quiz might include a couple of review questions from earlier in the semester in addition to testing student knowledge of the new material.
- Give students a few minutes at the end of class to jot down some general notes about what they learned.
- Remind students that they cannot learn without taking chances and making mistakes.
- If you provide feedback on any assignments or practice exams, frame your feedback in terms of what the student can do to improve rather than what the student did wrong. For example, instead of merely stating, “You missed the main issue here,” you could write, “It was important to discuss ____ here. Go back to your notes and see if they included this issue. If they did, then try to figure out why you either did not remember the issue or did not think it was responsive to the question. If your notes did not include this issue, go back to the cases and try to figure out why this did not get into your notes. For example, did you highlight the relevant language from the cases but ultimately determine it was not important? Why? Or, did you not even highlight the relevant language? Perhaps you read the case too quickly or

need to go back over cases a few times to ensure you have identified all of the important information.”

Step Four – Instill Hope that They Can Succeed

- If a student seemed particularly flustered in class when you called on him, take a moment to talk to him about it after class. Emphasize that mistakes are part of learning and discuss his class preparation techniques.
- Share personal stories about your own struggles with the material when possible. The best stories demonstrate how you can learn from your mistakes. For example, I often tell students about a draft brief I once wrote that was completely panned by a senior attorney at my law firm. I tell them that I took his feedback very seriously and ended up producing a brief that was later complemented not only by the same senior attorney but also by the judge who decided the case.
- At appropriate times, talk to the class about how much they have learned. For example, as you move onto a more complex topic, you might take a moment to acknowledge the complexity of the new topic and note that they have now acquired the necessary understanding of more basic issues to enable them to take this on.
- Make sure they are well-equipped for any assignment, practice exam, quiz or other task you expect them to perform. This means discussing practical tips with them – e.g., what sort of information or skills you will emphasize in your grading, what materials they should review, what sort of discussions might be helpful in their study groups, etc.
- Have a former student come and discuss how she approached the course and what learning techniques worked for her.
- Comment on the improvement of specific students when possible.
- Change your own mindset: every student can learn and it is our job to make sure learning happens. That means reaching out to seemingly passive students and convincing them to engage. It also means strategizing with students to identify holes in their study techniques.