

Intrinsic Motivation: What the heck is it?

Between the sixth grade and my senior year of high school, my mom and dad tried everything possible to get me interested in school. They tried rewarding efforts and grades, punishing poor behavior, reasoning with me to see how it would affect my future, and nothing worked. Despite all their efforts I did not apply myself. As soon as I was old enough I skipped classes (and sometimes when I was still too young). Skipping school is tricky because once I missed one day of class I'd think to myself "Self, if you just study you can catch up and then you won't be behind, but you need today," and then I wouldn't go to class the second day. The same thing would happen on the third day. I got so good at playing this game that by my last semester of high school I ended up failing and had to go to summer school.

Fast forward almost a decade later and I have become a perfectionist. It is now the opposite extreme where I get upset if I don't get straight As. What changed? What does this have to do with tutoring?

There are a lot of different types of students who come to see a tutor. Some simply lack confidence in their abilities, some are ESL students; others are obligated to see us. Three of my tutees this quarter were on the girls' softball team and were required to see an English and Math tutor once a week. Because rebellion is part of human nature, we tend to be resentful and noncompliant when we are forced into a situation we haven't chosen for ourselves. As tutors, we are not choosing the types of tutees that are assigned to us and end having to make the most of situations.

Given that three of my five tutees hadn't elected to get tutored, how was I to motivate them? Unfortunately, throughout most of the quarter it did not occur to me to come up with any specific plan to motivate. I suppose one might say I wasn't motivated. As the quarter progressed and I faced more and more cancellations and no shows I did begin to lose interest. I'm sure that at one time or another almost all of the tutors felt discouraged by the lack of enthusiasm or commitment displayed by one or more of their tutees.

On one of my resource treasure hunts I came across a website for motivating employees. The author of the book "Happy Hour is 9 to 5", Alexander Kjerulf, is also a business owner and has some interesting theories about motivation. He explains that there are four types of motivation: Positive and Negative Intrinsic, and Positive and Negative Extrinsic. Of the four types of motivation the only ongoing manifestation is Positive Intrinsic. Basically, real motivation comes from within, from a real desire to be tackling the task that has been set before us.

It's pretty obvious why Negative Extrinsic motivation would not be effective for long periods. If I were to attempt to inspire my tutees with a negative extrinsic motivation I would say, "Get this work done or I'm going to tell your teacher and she's going to fail you." This type is truly the antithesis of motivation because it teaches the tutee 1. not to trust the tutor 2. to be fearful and 3. to resent being put in an unpleasant situation thus preventing the student from wanting to return to ask for additional help in the future.

Negative intrinsic motivation is what I usually suffer from at the end of a quarter, "I don't want to write my biology paper, but I have to." For this student there is no joy in the process. Instead the task is done to avoid reprimand or failing and takes on a "going through the motions" attitude. One could say that both negative forms of motivation suck all the joy and excitement out of the assignment. Instead passion is replaced by rules, threats and feelings of insecurity.

It was odd hearing that Positive Extrinsic motivation wasn't very effective. Usually Positive Extrinsic takes the form of rewards. "If I do all of my homework I can play Mario Kart." The explanation that Kjerulf gives as to why Positive Extrinsic motivation is not effective is that the motivation is attached to the reward and not to the actual activity. In the above example, I am not interested in the homework but in getting it over with so that I can play on the Wii and beat my high scores.

How do tutors encourage students to want to write their essays on The Grapes of Wrath, the history of impressionism or the microbiology of an ant? The Purdue website suggests a few commonalities to inspire Intrinsic Motivation: Challenge (set meaningful goals), Curiosity (make it interesting), Control

(important to believe that their actions will have an effect), Fantasy (games and imagination that is relevant to the individual), Competition (natural to compare one's work with others'), Cooperation (let them help you, there is satisfaction in teaching), Recognition (visible acknowledgment of success).

A lot of these characteristics seem as though they are not within a tutors control. However, there are a few things that I have learned from my own and other tutors' experiences.

My first piece of advice comes from my own experience working with tutees: Make it fun. It is true that the tutee has come for a specific purpose; he or she needs help with English assignments. But for the tutee to get the most out of the experience it needs to be stimulating and comfortable. Make sure to be relaxed, have open body postures, make eye contact and smile. Smile a lot. I also try to connect with my tutees on a personal level. I ask them how a test went, what they did over the weekend etc so that they understood that I was interested in seeing her as a person and helping her, not simply doing my job.

Umaysha had trouble motivating one of her tutees. Elle was quiet and reserved but had very creative writing style. She got frustrated with contradictory essay formats from different teachers. On the one hand, her English teacher wanted her to follow a strict format and on the other, her Art History teacher wanted her to make sure that her papers were creative, not boring. Umaysha and Elle made a plan to meet and go over Elle's first draft. On the day of their meeting Elle phoned Umaysha to cancel; she'd only finished the introduction. Umaysha sensed that something was wrong and encouraged Elle to bring what she had and they'd work together. Instead of talking, guiding, or lecturing Elle, Umaysha took a piece of paper, asked Elle to describe the individual art pieces and wrote her words down. At the end of the session Elle realized that she had a paper! Umaysha says "she started talking to me more, and really opened up and trusted me. I guess I was there when she was ready to give up." Umaysha's experience involves the principles of Curiosity and Cooperation listed above.

Chelsea had an experience with a tutee who was highly motivated but had unrealistic expectations from Chelsea. Freda would push Chelsea to act as an editor. Every week there would be an urgency

to Freda's sessions. Finally, during one appointment, Freda pushed her paper over to Chelsea to correct it. Chelsea asked Freda to define a word in her paper, which Freda couldn't do. Chelsea got out a dictionary and gave it to Freda to look up the word. Freda got angry with Chelsea and said, "I don't have time to look in the dictionary. Just do your job and correct my paper!" Chelsea paused the session right then. She explained again the roles of the partnership and then opened up the dictionary and gave it to Freda. Chelsea says that after that day Freda was more motivated to take control and to do her own work. Chelsea made sure that her tutee was challenged.

I've asked a few other tutors if they have any advice to give. Voltaire says that he tells his tutees to focus on their ultimate goal. Do they want to go to San Jose State for nursing? In order to succeed they need to be able to read and communicate affectively. He then explains that these assignments are an exercise to prepare for that end.

Shane iterates that it's important to be tough, to be clear but then to encourage and recognize when the tutee succeeds and does well.

There is no guarantee that this advice will work at motivating all students, but whether these practices motivate all students or not, the steps are still positive. Throughout the quarter I've observed other tutors as well as myself getting more and more frustrated with tutees who don't show up or are not prepared. The best way to stay motivated is to work with motivated people.

<http://positivesharing.com/>

http://education.calumet.purdue.edu/vockell/edpsybook/Edpsy5/edpsy5_intrinsic.htm

Interviews with:

Voltaire Mamaril

Shane Mason

Umaysha Rahman

Chelsea Strangman

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