

Employability, Transferable Skills and Student Motivation

M. F. McMahon

London School of Economics and Political Science, and NYU in London

November 23, 2007

This piece is not meant to challenge what has already been written on this website by (now Dr) Dimitra Petropoulou¹. In fact Dimitra and I share very similar views on both the importance of classroom teaching and some of the main ways to ensure that students remain motivated in the class. These include the importance of providing a very clear structure for the class, providing students with the big picture of why we are doing problem sets and how they fit into the overall course, and of course the clarity in delivery of each step of the answers. However, while all of these remain important elements of student motivation, this article focuses on ensuring student motivation by highlighting and emphasising transferable skill sets and the impact of what is taught on the employability of the student.

The basic premise of this piece is simple; motivated students make the teaching experience more enjoyable for the teacher, and this generates more teaching enthusiasm which rubs off on student motivation. It is achieving this positive cycle that I believe all teachers hope for when they begin teaching. Noone wants to be a poor teacher; unfortunately, many do not start well, they lose the students interest which forces the teacher to adopt a more defensive "give them the answer and get out" approach. This then reduces student involvement and motivation even further and so begins a more common negative cycle. The end result is teachers who dislike teaching and students who not only dislike their teachers, most may additionally lose interest in the subject being taught.

Student Motives For Coming to Class

So how do we, as teachers, keep students motivated? The answer to this question lies in truly understanding why students are in your classroom in the first place. The most basic answer is sometimes that they have to be (course regulations), but then the question is why are they in the degree or what are they hoping to get out of it. The following are the most common answers:

- they want to pass the course...
- ...so that they can graduate and get a job or a postgraduate position; and
- they want to do it well so that they get a good job or postgraduate course.

Asking most students, you will discover that your class is just a stepping stone to some bigger goal of employment or further study. Therefore by getting them through the course well, you have done all that you have to do, and this is enough to keep students motivated. But is this the full answer? Is there anything more that they can get from the classes? Something that may make getting a good job more attainable? The answer is of course yes - there are many transferable skills which the students can use both in the class and in the workplace such as²:

¹Dimitra Petropoulou (2001), "Case Study: Motivating Students in Small Classes". http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/showcase/petropoulou_classes.htm

²Of course this list is not exhaustive, nor will it apply to all students. But all students can get something out of their courses and what they are getting out will determine how much they are willing to put in - effort and enthusiasm.

- interview skills and the ability to think well "on your feet";
- how to write well;
- confidence with presentations;
- critical analysis; and
- working in groups and arguing your points with others who might disagree.

Students should have a clear understanding of what it takes to succeed in the course, but they should also be made very aware of these other things that they will get from the course. At LSE, motivating students and ensuring a captive audience is sometimes as simple as saying "When you are in a job interview at Goldman Sachs/PWC/[insert top global company name here], they will be interested in this because...". Students must also realise that to reap these rewards, they must put in the effort. When they do put in the effort, it must be rewarded. Students are motivated by positive feedback and success; even if a student does not get the correct answer, I will tell them that they are wrong, but make sure that they get the positive credit for having a go or trying to get to the correct answer. This helps to build a risk-free environment where failure is refusing to try, rather than getting a less than perfect answer.

Encouraging Student Participation In Class

The one answer I never accept in class is - "I don't know". If offered, I say - "OK, well lets work it out together." I then proceed to try and tease the answer out of a student by asking them the questions that they should be asking themselves while they "think on their feet". I emphasise that this is a great skill for interview situations while at the same time making sure that people who have done the work in advance are rewarded for not having to "suffer" through my minutes of cross-examination. Very quickly, students begin to naturally think on their feet during my classes and so I can continually make the questions I ask them harder, deeper and more difficult to think through so that they develop the skills even further. This approach will also keep others awake if you constantly jump from one to the other in building the logic - noone likes being the one who breaks the chain in the logic just because they weren't paying attention.

It is also important to ensure participation of *all* students; it is too easy for teachers to fall into the trap of always taking answers from the best student. This simply encourages the other students to free-ride which is really to noone's benefit. Often the better, more able students are motivated whether they are regularly asked questions or not - they are naturally driven and motivated to do well. It has the added advantage of making students feel like they have an equal chance of being asked and noone can then feel picked on in the class. I often find it more useful to get those less able students to answer the easier questions and build them up to answering the more difficult bits when they get more confident. It also means that, because I have always asked the best students to answer, when I ask those students a tough question they get the chance to shine, and other students get to see the level they should strive to achieve.

Communication Skills

Helping students to develop communication skills, either written, oral or presentational, is another important element of the teaching experience. For written work, the key thing is to provide feedback that properly addresses essay weaknesses and lets the student see what changes they must make in order to improve their grade. This, I believe, is especially important where student essays are coursework which carry no weight in the overall assessment of the course as it is with these essays that student motivation is usually lowest.

After class presentations, I encourage students to reflect on their own work, and that of any groups that worked together, by submitting a 1-page post-mortem. Where possible, and if necessary, I also discuss specific areas for improvement with individuals outside of class by telling them to come to my office hour.

The most challenging element in helping students with oral communication, is teaching students for whom English is not their first language. I have sometimes (though not often) come across students who believe that it is unfair that they get lower marks as a result of poor use of language. I have always felt it is important that students, who by taking a degree or course at an English language institution will be assumed to have a very good command of the English language, should be judged on their use of language in the exact same way as English-speaking students. I have always make sure that I emphasise this view to my students and try to convince them that it is in the interests of the academic credibility of their degree when they go for jobs - employers must believe that those who get a good result from the course are good students who will make good employees.

Final Tips

However, even following some of this advice, the reality is that students will not always focus 100% in your classes and sometimes will drift off. Breaks in the teaching - either by changing the style of teaching and approach (pair work, group work, etc...), or even just a pause to retrace the main points so far and then restart where you left off - allow students the opportunity to rejoin the class and not miss too much by drifting off.

Further I think it is important to emphasise (as Dimitra did) personal interaction. Getting to know your students and showing an interest in them certainly makes them more interested in your teaching and allows them to feel a really important part of the class. For example, I always get to know my students names and try to address them using their names when asking questions. Use of names also allows a very simply positive feedback mechanism; by referring back to correct answers students have earlier provided using phrases like "As Jennifer said earlier,..." or "John's point was really important for what we are talking about now because...". Moreover, finding out why they are in the class and what they are interested in allows you to make the course personally relevant to them.

My final comment concerns the balance between "carrot and stick"; they should know the stick is there in the form of exclusion from the class (or even the exam), but you should ideally never use it. In perfect world the students will be enthusiastic about coming to your classes. If they stop coming, you cannot teach them, and so unless they are disrupting your class, you should continue to try to include even the least enthusiastic and motivated students.