Reaching All Learners

Motivating Adolescents — Play to Their Strengths

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ON TARGET
DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Mike Muir

Before I joined the university faculty, I spent nearly a decade as a computer resource specialist at Skowhegan Area Middle School in Skowhegan, Maine. We had no separate computer class there; I worked directly with my colleagues to integrate technology into every discipline. Over time I realized that many adolescents — the ones we tend to call unmotivated, disengaged, or underachieving — are smart in ways that schools don't necessarily see.

Let me give you an example. A math teacher at school had two mixed-ability groups, one she considered the good group, the other more challenging and disruptive. She asked for my help with a project in which students were supposed to design pattern that, when printed out, could be folded into a box to hold an audiocassette. Using a computer graphics program, students could decorate their boxes with art and advertising, but the real focus was getting students to use spatial reasoning to figure out how to fold paper into a three-dimensional box. By the end of the unit, the students in the "challenging" group were debating the technical and artistic merits of their creative designs. Students in the "good" group were still scratching their heads.

You see, students in the latter group were good at mathematical calculations, but those in the challenging group had more sophisticated spatial skills. Unlike most math lessons, this project played to the strengths or the artistic learners. They dove into the project and came up with multiple solutions because they weren't limited to finding one right answer.

After that experience, I started searching for ways to bring the element of choice into assignments. Adolescents quite naturally gravitate to their strengths. Ask them to "do a report on" a topic and some will head to the library to do research while others will interview their neighbors. Some will turn in traditional written reports, and others will create a Web page, design a poster, or rehearse a play. By providing open, flexible structures in our classrooms, we let students meet the objectives in ways that help them learn best.

Through my research, I have listened closely to what young people say about schools and learning. Their stories take on a disheartening pattern:

- Schools focus on teaching students to obey rules, many of which seem unimportant or different from those outside of school (not chewing gum or wearing hats, for example).
- Kids learn what they have to do for grades, but without connections to their world or interests they quickly forget what they memorized for the test.
- Schools don't teach what students are interested in learning or believe is important.
- Schools don't try to make topics meaningful to students, or at least to show them why and how the topics will be important to them.

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Students say they need four key things to learn well:

Experiences — Many underachieving students prefer doing things with their hands or by observing others, but they will read textbooks and take notes if they have opportunities to connect the information to something in their lives. They need to use more of their senses, and sitting still doesn't do it for them.

Meaning — Students often fail to understand new material because they have no framework for it. When I taught math, I used to think that if I broke down the rules of algebra into small enough pieces, students get it. The trouble was, they had no mental context for how people use algebra to solve everyday problems, such as figuring out the number of tiles they'll need to replace the kitchen floor. Learning must connect with what they already know.

Environment — Students need strong relationships with teachers and their peers. They want teachers to encourage them and correct them in respectful ways. Less motivated students need patient, supportive, and nurturing mentors who will show them new possibilities and make it safe for them to take risks.

Motivation — Students need to know why lessons are important to *them*, not just to their teachers. College-bound students believe doing well in school will prepare them for their futures, but they are not always interested in what they are learning. For other students, teachers can connect content to their interests, find ways to make the content exciting, or give them choices about how they learn. When they have choices, students believe they have some autonomy and control over their learning

Meaningful, engaged learning happens when teachers stimulate curiosity, permit creativity, foster positive relationships, and provide experiences that enable students to be smart. One way to get started is to play off students' strengths. At right are some suggestions developed by some of my college students — special thanks to Erica Haywood — who contribute to my Web site as part of their teacher preparation courses (see Ways to Help Different Learners Excel).

For more information, go to www.hey.to/mikemuir, and click on "Mike's Education Pages."

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Ways to Help Different Learners Excel

Interpersonally Intelligent Students — Have a round table available for group discussions; ask them to serve as a peer role model for a misbehaving student; provide social outlets, such as leading groups or sharing research with e-mail pen pals.

Linguistically Intelligent Students — Create a book nook with comfortable chairs and good lighting; set up a listening language lab with cassette players, headphones, and books on tape; give them opportunities to publish their writing. For disruptive students, ask them to write a bibliography on the theme of anger. When helping withdrawn students, ask them to read a novel involving friendship as a theme.

Logical-Mathematically Intelligent Students — Set up a math and science center where students can solve puzzles and conduct experiments; pair them with linguistically intelligent students who can write about the equations they create; as a discipline method, ask these students to quantify or chart their negative and positive behaviors.

Spatially Intelligent Students — Use colors and shapes in the classroom, including concept maps and graphic symbols; provide an art area with drawing supplies, videotapes, and building materials; ask them to draw an object using paper and pencil then transfer the image through a computer graphics program.

Kinesthetically Intelligent Students — Give them opportunities to create classroom theaters, body maps, and physical answers to questions; encourage them to dramatize the lives of famous people and events they research; show them how to deal with stress by taking deep breaths, relaxing their muscles, and stretching.

Musically Intelligent Students — Help them commit difficult information to memory by putting it to music; create a music performance center with recording equipment and instruments; play mood music during tests or group projects; encourage angry students to "play" favorite songs in their heads to avoid making rash decisions.

Intrapersonally Intelligent Students — Provide study carrels for individual work; encourage them to write reflective essays about current events; help them set personal goals for the school year and future careers.

Mike Muir is an assistant professor of education at the University of Maine at Farmington.

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