Improving the motivation of students

You can view this item as a continuation on Motivatie bij studenten by Jan van Tartwijk, Christel Lutz, and Frans Prins which covers the definition of motivation, motivation in higher education in the Netherlands in comparison to other European countries and on theories on motivation. This item covers a selection of suggestions for interventions to improve students' motivation.

Motivation is a wide-ranging aspect of learning and can be approached from different angles. In education, motivation is often a subject lecturers consider when they feel that students are not motivated (enough). As a lecturer it is possible to adjust your education to increase the motivation of students. The suggestions described in this item can be categorised in four themes which are based on different theories.

Four themes with suggestions for improving motivation

In education, interventions are implemented to improve the motivation of students. The suggestions provided here are a selection of the possible options, which will likely need to be adapted for the specific context of the course. Each time case, we provide tips and suggestions for interventions and refer to literature or places to find information on more (elaborations of) interventions.

1. Stimulating intrinsic motivation

When you want to make the course more fun for students, i.e. improve their intrinsic motivation, you can use the Self Determination Theory (SDT) (see Motivatie bij studenten). This theory is known from the terms extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. The SDT poses that motivation can be of different qualities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The more motivation is intrinsic, the more positive its effects are on learning. Intrinsic motivation comes from within and, as such, is of higher quality then extrinsic motivation.

In education, we can stimulate intrinsic motivation in students by meeting their psychological basic needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This means that respectively students feel that they can provide input and can identify with the educational activities, that they feel that they are engaging in and finishing challenging educational activities, and that they experience a meaning full connection between themselves and others (Filak

& Sheldon, 2008). To support these basic needs and, as such, stimulate intrinsic motivation you can:

Supporting autonomy:

- Be open for the perspective and thoughts of students;
- Give students responsibility;
- Have students make meaningful choices;
- Demonstrate relevance by linking learning activities to students' values.

Supporting competence:

- Clear expectations, guidelines, rules, and criteria;
- Encourage students by appreciating effort;
- Provide feedback that indicates where the student currently is.

Supporting relatedness:

- Create a safe learning environment in which social behaviour is encouraged;
- Make contact with students by learning their names, making eye contact, etc.;
- Respect students by, for instance, really listening to them.

These suggestions are based on the work and observation table by Stroet, Opdenakker en Minnaert (2015).

A concrete example is:

1. Giving students more choices by having them pick a subject for an assignment or by having them decide how to report on an assignment.
2. Better connect to the students experience by relating course themes to the news, or other issues that are currently relevant to students.

This [article](#) (Kusurkar, Croiset & Ten Cate, 2012) provides an overview of twelve tips for stimulating intrinsic motivation in students.

2. Making the importance of learning activities clear to students
When students ask: "Why do I have to do this (course)?", you can use the Expectancy-Value Theory as a starting point (see Motivatie bij studenten). This theory describes motivation to perform as an addition of belief in their own ability and the appreciation of the activity (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). It is important that students appreciate the educational activity. As lecturer, you can spend more attention on the goals and relevance of the course by,

for example, discussing these with the students, or by showing how it relates to other courses or practice.

In Ambrose (2010) suggestions are given for showing students the relevance of the course, such as:

- Connecting your education to students' interests;
- Offer authentic real-world assignments;
- Showing the relevance to students' academic development;
- Showing the relevance to future careers of students;
- Indicating what you find useful or important, and why;
- Showing your own passion and enthusiasm for your discipline.

3. Giving students the feeling that they can do it

When you feel that students think that they cannot do it, or in other words, that they lack the confidence in their own ability, you can use the Expectancy-Value theory as a starting point. A different theory that you can use as a base is the Social-Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1989). The Social-Cognitive theory focuses on self-efficacy. This means the belief in someone's own ability. The stronger this belief, the larger someone's effort will be to deliver a good result.

Nilson (2010, p. 54) describes the core of this theme:
"Expectancy theory rests on a pragmatic premise: Why aspire to achieve something you know you can't get? Students won't even try to learn something that seems impossibly difficult."

In education, it is important that students do not feel that the course is far too difficult, and, as such, they will never be able to learn it. To avoid this feeling, you can explicate the expectations. In addition, it is important that the course and the assignments are at the correct level (in accordance with the goals and aligned with the students.

Expectations can be made clear by, for example (Ambrose et al., 2010):

- Ensuring alignment between learning goals, assessment and instruction;
- Determining the suitable challenge level for students;
- Designing assignments on this level;
- Creating moments for success experiences early on in the course;
- Explicitly stating your expectations;
- Using rubrics to make guidelines clear;
- Providing targeted feedback;
- Being honest about a student's performance;

- Teaching students what we mean when talking about success and failure;
- Discussing effective methods of studying with students.

The summary above is from this book which provides a good overview of the different strategies to support students' values and expectancies.

4. Shifting the focus of students to wanting to learn a lot

It sometimes appears that the focus of some students is more on achieving high marks (compared to other students) than on developing their own competency. In this case you can use the Achievement Goal Theory (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) as a starting point for stimulating motivation. This theory describes the goals that the student has to study and as such also the goals with which a student defines competency. A student can feel that they are competent when they perform better than other students (performance goal), or a student can feel that they are competent once they have mastered the subject matter (goal of mastery). Performance goals have a normative standard, whereas these are absolute in mastery goals. The latter is often connected to the most positive learning outcomes.

Svinicki and McKeachie (2014, p. 143) describe it as follows:
"In a class that is focused on mastery, instructors generally use criterion-referenced grading, rather than normative (grading on a curve), foster a supportive climate where students can take intellectual risks, and provide opportunities for students to demonstrate improvement."

As such, it is important that grading of tests is not done in comparison to other students, but that an absolute standard is maintained. You can also consider using a feedback moment when handing in concept assignments, before students hand in a final version. In this way, you create an extra learning moment for students. Competition between students is something to be avoided when you want to create a climate in which students focus mostly on mastery.

On this website By the College of Education (from Michigan State University) you will find information on creating mastery oriented educational environments. You will also find examples and videos of lecturers who participated in the project.

More information

Reference works with interventions for motivating students

- Nilson, L. (2010, pp. 55-58) provides an overview of strategies to stimulate motivation in a course. The overview is

categorised in things you can do as a person, in the course, in
your teaching, and in assignments and assessment.
- Svinicki, M. D. & McKeachie, W. J. (2014, pp. 139-149) offers an
overview of different theories on motivation and suggestions
for putting these theories into practice.

UU items on motivation (in Dutch)

- Blog op Teachter community TAUU: Hoe houd je je studenten
bij de les.
- Samenvatting van artikel in OnderwijsInnovatie: Co-creatie
en docent-studentpartnerschap

Websites

- https://education.msu.edu/research/projects/eteams/goal-
orientation/

Work on motivation in a structured manner?

Do you feel that you want to improve student motivation in your education
after reading this text? And would you like to approach this in a structured
manner, to prevent implementing a series of changes that do not achieve
anything? You can choose to take the blended training *"Educational
Scholarschip: je onderwijs onder de loep"* [Educate-it] (in Dutch). In this
blended training you will receive information on structured innovation in
you education using the "Utrecht Roadmap for Teaching Innovation and
Scholarship". In addition to this you will be able to have discussions with
other lecturers and experts who are also working on this topic.

Sources

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