

Engaging and Motivating Students: Five research based models/approaches for engaging students to be productive!

Sam A. Marandos
Ida Randall
 National University

ABSTRACT

This paper examines five research based models for engaging students in learning in meaningful, constructive, and positive ways. Various models present ideas about actions teachers and administrators can take in helping students to adjust to their learning environments with positive attitudes, increased motivation, high academic performance, excellent attendance record, being able to successfully meet the State and Federal requirements for standardized testing, and successfully passing on to the next level of their education.

The five models discussed include: 1) School Connectedness, 2) Task Choice and Goal Setting, 3) Guided Inquiry, 4) productive and Inclusive Climate, and 5) Attribution Theory. All five of these models have relevant and important ideas to strengthening, motivating, supporting and engaging students in ways that will allow them to feel connected to their schools in more dynamic and realistic ways which may result in better learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Engaging and motivating students to want to learn are major concerns for teachers, parents, and administrators. Motivation is an internal process that needs to be activated if the students are to become seriously engaged in the learning process. Teachers are always looking for good practices to help them convince their students that what they are presented is good for them to learn and apply in their lives. There are, of course, countless theories and practices to choose from but teachers do not have the time to try them all while undergoing their training or when they get in the classroom. That's why it's important that research, such as this one, can focus in on those models that are well researched and have great promise of success in helping teachers to help their students to become motivated and engaged on a daily basis.

THE FIVE MODELS

The first of the five models under scrutiny in this paper is the **School Connectedness Model**. This approach is the result of a study funded by the U. S. department of defense as a way of helping students "who have one or both parents in the armed forces" (Blum, 2004, Introduction). The philosophy espoused in this model is the "belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals" (p. 1). The premise is that if students feel connected, they will be in a better position to want to succeed. Seven qualities distinguish this model (p.1):

- *having a sense of belonging and being part of a school
- *Liking school
- *Perceiving that teachers are supportive and caring
- *Having good friends within the school
- *Being engaged in their own current and future academic progress
- *believing that discipline is fair and effective
- *Participating in extracurricular activities

These seven qualities or guiding principles are supported by a variety of research findings and represent what ideally students should expect of their schools and of themselves. These qualities set forth a positive climate for personal growth and supports students' efforts to get the best education possible.

A further undercurrent to this model are "three dynamic concepts and relationships" (p. 2) which help to strengthen and support a positive learning experience by all involved:

- *Good relationships between students and school staff
- *A supportive learning environment that allows for bonding
- *A school culture that provides for students' social needs and good school learning

Priorities

Combining the seven qualities of the schools with the three dynamic concepts and relationships, the end result is an education where teachers and students respect one another, there exist evidence based strategies that enhance connectedness, and a learning environment that provides the nurturing needed for students to be successful (p. 7).

The **Task Choice and Goal Setting Theory** has as its premise the creation of a learning community in each classroom based on individual and collaborative learning goals. This model is inclusive of proper classroom management, appropriate level curricula, carefully crafted instruction and positive teacher and student interactions and relationships. In order to build a successful learning community, the teacher will need to make sure that the learning environment is conducive to learning and personal growth. The learning environment should revolve around the needs of the students and take into consideration the feelings and perceptions that students have of themselves and of others. The learning community must suit the need of the diverse population of students so that collaboration and cooperation in the use of space and resources provide equity and equal opportunity for all.

Well known researchers and theorists like Maslow, Piaget, Glasser, Comer, Goodlad, and many others have shared many “ideas about establishing caring and collaborative relationships with students and their families” (Brophy, p. 22). In creating a learning community, the teacher needs to be cognizant of the fact that continuous learning and growing is part of his or her experience and be willing to “model this role frequently” (Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008).

According to Brophy (2010), three agendas need to be kept in mind when trying to create a learning community and provide your students with the impetus needed for good collaborative learning to take place. The following three agendas stipulate (p. 23):

*The teacher make himself/herself and the classroom attractive to students – The teacher’s individual behavior and attitude towards the profession, learning and students is of great importance in getting students to be motivated to learn. The classroom environment should also be set up in ways that allow students to thrive in literacy through collaborative and individual activities and experiences.

*The teacher should focus attention on individual and collaborative learning goals and help them to achieve those goals – Major goals should be formulated in order to choose ideas and skills that are worth knowing and learning. Students should be encouraged to set their own goals and objectives that are in tune to the curricula being studied at different grade levels. Skills and ideas should be developed in depth and not be glossed over. Teachers need to provide students with the time and the opportunities to cover learning materials more in depth rather than quantity. In other words, provide and emphasize quality learning that causes students to be reflective and creative thinkers.

*The teacher should teach knowledge and skills that are worth learning, in ways that help students to appreciate their value. Learning should be “a synthesis of principles for designing and implementing learning activities that include four primary criteria” (Brophy & Alleman, 1991, p. 31):

*Goal relevance – Make sure that each activity is essential and useful for enabling students to achieve the learning goals of the unit being studied.

*Difficulty level – The activities should be at an optimal level that allow for a level of difficulty that is challenging but doable.

*Feasibility – The activities should be accomplished within the confines of the resources that are available to students.

Cost effectiveness – The learning benefits derived from each activity in terms of time and trouble should fall within justifiable parameters.

The **Guided Inquiry Theory** deals with the use of questioning in order to motivate students to think creatively and reflectively. According to Kuhlthau, Maniotes, and Caspari (2007), “inquiry is an

approach to learning whereby students find and use a variety of sources of information and ideas to increase their understanding of a problem, topic, or issue” (Chapter One). This approach has been around for decades. It emphasizes the need for students to be involved in all stages of planning and being involved in the learning. Through viable and relevant questioning strategies and the availability of technological resources, students can be guided towards independence through innovative activities which motivate students to question, hypothesize, research, share and internalize information and skills while taking responsibility for their own behavior and personal growth.

The **Productive and Inclusive Climate theory** deals with creating a classroom environment which is all inclusive providing all students with the opportunity to be recognized, prized, respected, and valued. Both male and female students feel that they are part of this all inclusive learning environment and, as a result, they feel motivated to be involved and contributing members. Students in this environment learn social skills that allow them to interact with each other at a meaningful and productive level for all.

Since this inclusive classroom environment values all students and provides them with equal opportunities, students from diverse backgrounds will feel welcomed and appreciated. This will make it easier for teacher-student interactions and student-student collaboration. Productivity in terms of having an environment that is conducive to learning and personal growth will show significant growth. According to Kohl (1994), “the ultimate form of resistance for people who feel powerless in a hostile environment is the refusal to learn.” However, these same students who normally find themselves excited, empowered and dignified and will be willing to put forth their best effort in order to satisfy their needs in this inclusive climate classroom.

Attribution Theory is the final approach which embodies “the most influential contemporary theory” (Bempechat, 1999) with a significant degree of success for helping students to become academically excited and highly motivated to want to learn. This theory explores the idea that when students are able to accomplish something well in school, they tend to give themselves the credit for their success. However, when these same students are not successful, they blame others or other factors that are beyond their control. The conclusion then “is that a person’s own perceptions or attributions for success or failure determine the amount of effort the person will expend on that activity in the future” (Bempechet, 1999).

There are four factors, according to Bempechet (1999) involved in attribution theory that, once understood, will be able to be applied to students’ behaviors and attitudes which will motivate them to be successful. These factors include:

- *ability – which is an internal factor but which the learner does not have much control
- *Task difficulty - which is an external factor which is beyond the learner’s control
- *Effort – which is an internal factor over which a learner has lots of control
- *Luck – which is an external factor over which the learner has little control

Taking the above four factors into account, teachers can use them to empower students to become more active in their learning experiences in the classroom. How can that be done/ According to this theory, teachers can do some of the following:

*It's important that teachers positively recognize each student's ability to succeed. Students should be encouraged to look at themselves from a positive perspective as having the ability to be successful. When students think in that way about themselves, they are empowered to focus on what they are capable on accomplishing and feeling good about whatever their level of accomplishment is.

*Much has been said about teaching to students' needs and to their level of understanding. It is then fair to say that students should be provided with experiences that are at the right level of task difficulty so that students will feel their successes and be motivated to continue to more complex tasks.

*Many students have been viewed as not putting forth the effort needed to be successful in their learning endeavors. It is, therefore, important that students be shown the most effective ways to accomplish their learning tasks without wasting too much time but using appropriate effort to learn the skills being taught. The central point here is that students need to be trained on how to use effort correctly so that they do not give up on themselves.

*Finally, students need to be guided into feeling that their successes are not based purely on luck but on good thinking and effort. In other words, get students to think more positively about themselves and accentuate the effort factor as the main contributing factor to their successful learning.

Teachers should use their students' strengths rather than weaknesses in designing learning experiences for all students. The key is to personalize each student's learning so that success is part of the package. Each student should stand on his or her merits and not on a competitive basis as practiced today in education. Teachers should be trained to value each student's individual strengths and learn how to tailor the curriculum for success for all.

CONCLUSIONS

The premise of all five theories is that all students are capable of being successful in their classroom learning provided that the learning environment is well organized, instruction well planned, students are empowered to think critically, students are provided with opportunities to collaborate, resources are available for all to use, and all students are respected and recognized in their journey to learn and grow.

All five of these theories have something to highlight as part of their distinction to contribute to a better learning approach. They also overlap in what they are offering showing that they must work in harmony with other factors supported by researchers, theorists, teachers, and parents. It's this feature that can make the combination of the different components of each theory a powerful force in helping the educational environment and teachers to design a special place where all students will be treated with respect.

The School Connectedness Theory provides the impetus for students to connect with the school and their teachers, as well as empowering parents to be involved in the education of their children. The Task Choice and Goal Setting Theory provides students with the responsibility to set goals, objectives and undertake realistic and meaningful tasks for themselves. Guided Inquiry allows for the use of opportunities to inquire, search and learn about knowledge that is meaningful for each and every student. The Productive and Inclusive Climate Theory helps to create a classroom environment where students learn social skills that will help them work together for a smooth running learning environment. Finally, Attribution Theory highlights the four factors which can affect student success or failure.

In highlighting these five theories, it is hoped that seeing the benefits of each may allow teachers to synthesize and integrate most of the ideas from each in order to create a classroom of learners who are willing to come to school ready to undertake serious study and help them to garner greater benefits for themselves and our society.

REFERENCES

- Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, Structures, and Student Motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 84(3), 261-271.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.
- Bempechet, Janine. (1999). Learning from poor and minority students who succeed in school. Retrieved from <http://www.edletter.org/past/issues/1999-mj/abstracts.shtml#a1>
- Blum, Robert. (2004, September). *School Connectedness: Improving students' Lives*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.
- Brophy, Jere. (2010). *Motivating students to learn*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.
- Carnegie Mellon University. Create an Inclusive Learning Environment. Retrieved from <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/learningenvironment.html>
- Kohl, H. (1994). "I won't learn from you" and other thoughts on creative maladjustment. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kuhlthau, Carol C., Maniotes, Leslie K. & Caspari, Ann K. (2007). Guided Inquiry: Learning in the 21st century. Retrieved from http://cissl.rutgers.edu/guided_inquiry/introduction.html
- Maslow, A.E. (1970). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Carnegie Mellon University. Create an Inclusive Learning Environment. Retrieved from <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/learningenvironment.html>
- Weiner, B. (1979). A theory of motivation for some classroom experiences. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71(1), 3-25.