MOTIVATING RELUCTANT LEARNERS
ENGAGING STUDENTS FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

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OVERVIEW

• Introduction
• Motivation
• Engagement
• Student Voice & Choice
INTRODUCTION
WHY MIGHT STUDENTS BE RELUCTANT TO LEARN?

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- Disengaged
- “Don’t care about learning”
- Defiant
- Oppositional
- Lazy
- Checked out
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Such labels have important implications for how educators and institutions view reluctant students, what opportunities are provided for them, and how such students learn to view themselves.
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Engagement is necessary for achievement.
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Student voice promotes motivation and engagement.
- Students test ideas and they connect with and distinguish themselves from others through what they say and choose.
MOTIVATION
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- What will others think of me when I do it? (social climate)
• Why should I try? The relationship between “care” and effort.
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- The **basic** belief structure:
  - I’m good/not good at that because of my innate talent or who I am.
  - I try/don’t try hard because I know what I’m good at and what I’m not.
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– The mediated belief structure (we try when we care):
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  • I don’t try, even though I know I can succeed, because I don’t care.
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  – The **relationally mediated** belief structure (we care when others care about us and our performance)
    • I’m interested and capable of learning because I know others care about me and my learning.
    • I’m not interested because I don’t believe others care about or believe in me.
• Expectancy-value theory & intrinsic motivators

  – Students **carry their history** of success, failure, and relational returns to each new academic challenge. Some are reluctant because they have few positive experiences to draw from.

  – Reluctance to engage can arise from a careful and rational **risk assessment** (i.e., Why try when I will likely fail or when the work doesn’t matter to me?).

  – To be motivated to participate in academic work, students must **value the activity** itself and believe that its result will be of some worth to them.

  – The **strongest motivators** are those that are internally derived.

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Pre-learning activities, “little wins” along the way, regular encouragement and recognition (not empty praise), and appeals to the students’ own interests and goals can help a lot.

ENGAGEMENT
Before engaging academic activities, learners often wrestle with internal questions such as:

- **Is the social context safe for me to take a risk?** (pathways, avoidance behaviors, resistance, relationships)
- Will this help me reach my goals? (sense of purpose, future aspirations)
- What will happen when I ask for assistance? (help-seeking)
- What skills should I use to sustain focus? (self-regulation)
- Wait, what are we doing again? (distractions, multitasking)
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For these reasons, engagement is as much about emotion and relationship as it is about cognition and attitude.
Do students move from motivation to engagement, or from engagement to motivation?

Students take various social, intellectual, cultural, and psychological pathways to learning. These diverse pathways influence how each individual student arrives at the task.

We misunderstand “reluctant learners” when we fail to account for their journey and their context, when we ignore “where they’re at.”
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Solution for the classroom: Get to know your students!
• Engagement and motivation are overlapping and integrated in the learner’s mind (and in the research)

• Self-Determination Theory
  – **Competence**: learners need to feel “up to the task,” capable, and skilled
  – **Relatedness**: learners need to feel positively connected to peers and adults
  – **Autonomy**: learners need opportunities for independent decision making and action

• When these three elements are present, a student’s reluctance to engage will likely diminish.

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Teachers can use this three-part theory as a quick formative assessment of the learner’s readiness to engage, and of the classroom’s capacity to support that engagement.

• All learners tend to be reluctant to apply themselves in alienating or marginalizing situations.

• “Oppositional identities” are a myth.
  — Students of color, students from low-income settings, and English learners value education at rates equal to or higher than White, middle class, native English speakers.
  — Marginalized students are rarely if ever afraid of “acting White” by being academically successful.
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If alienating school experiences can push students to reject what or who they feel has rejected them, teachers can reverse student reluctance simply by identifying and removing these alienating experiences.

Students may be the experts here!
• Reluctant learners often need to develop **specific skill sets** that help them to start an activity and stay on task despite inevitable distractions.

• Like intelligence, the ability to manage distraction is something students **develop over time**.

• Trying something new, attempting something difficult, confronting a challenge—these things require focus, and **focus requires practice**.
  — Multitasking can impede higher cognitive functioning.
  — Extending time and creating quiet can help a great deal.
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A learner’s focus comes from her/his ability to self-regulate, and because self-regulation is a skillset, it can—and should!—be taught.
THE CYCLICAL PROCESS OF SELF-REGULATION

- Self-evaluation
- Attribution
- Self-reactions
- Adaptivity

Forethought
- Goal setting
- Strategic planning
- Self-efficacy beliefs
- Intrinsic interest

Self-Reflection

Performance Control
- Attention focusing
- Self-instruction
- Self-monitoring
- Help requesting

NAÏVE ≠ DISENGAGED OR UNMOTIVATED

**Forethought**
- nonspecific distant goals, performance goal orientation, low self-efficacy, disinterested
- specific sequenced goals, learning goal orientation, high self-efficacy, intrinsically interested

**Performance Control**
- unfocused plan, self-handicapping strategies, outcome self-monitoring
- focused on performance, self-instruction/imagery, process self-monitoring

**Self-Reflection**
- avoid self-evaluation, ability attributions, negative self-reactions, non-adaptive
- seek self-evaluation, strategy/effort attributions, positive self-reactions, adaptive

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Sharing with students our own struggles and strategies to initiate and sustain attention can help them normalize their own difficulties and improve their skills.
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To reduce avoidance behaviors, educators should stress mastery more than performance as the primary goal of academic work.

RELUCTANT LEARNERS MAY BE SELF-HANDICAPPING

- Students try to **manage how they are perceived** by others.
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  – getting involved in too many activities or becoming over-involved with friends or romantic partners
  – illness, shyness, or moodiness
  – drug or alcohol use
  – lack of sleep

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Explicitly teaching students about these tendencies can help them identify problems and choose different behaviors for themselves.

VOICE & CHOICE
Learners need venues for voice and opportunities for choice to fully invest in academic activity.

To generate motivation and make the decision to engage, students want to know:

— Do I get to say what I think? Will others listen?
— Will I be allowed to choose what I do? Will that choice matter?
— Are my contributions and critiques invited here? Will my ideas be integrated into what we study and how we study it?
— How much of what we do will I get to control?
— Will I be able to influence what happens to me and to others?
— Will I be able to claim a sense of ownership over the final product? Will it be “mine”? 

THE SPECTRUM OF STUDENT VOICE ORIENTED ACTIVITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Consultation</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Partnership</th>
<th>Activism</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering opinions,</td>
<td>Being asked for their opinion, providing feedback, serving on a focus group,</td>
<td>Attending meetings or events in which decisions are</td>
<td>Formalized role in decision making, standard operations require (not just</td>
<td>Identifying problems, generating solutions, organizing responses, agitating and/or educating for change both in and outside</td>
<td>(Co-)Planning, making decisions and accepting significant responsibility for outcomes, (co-) guiding group processes, (co-) conducting activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creating art, celebrating,</td>
<td>completing a survey</td>
<td>made, frequent inclusion when issues are framed and actions planned</td>
<td>invite) student involvement, adults are trained in how to work collaboratively with youth partners</td>
<td>and outside of school contexts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complaining, praising,</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>objecting</td>
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</tbody>
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Most student voice activity in schools/classrooms resides at this end of the spectrum.

The need for adults to share authority, demonstrate trust, protect against co-optation, learn from students, and handle disagreement increases from left to right.

Students' influence, responsibility, and decision-making roles increase from left to right.

• Place-based learning
• Project-based learning
• Expeditionary learning
• Inquiry-based instruction
• Problem-posing pedagogies
• Student-led parent-teacher conferences
• Student-led class meetings
• Participatory-action research
• Student activism
• “Solve two of the following five problems.”
• “Select one of these three essay test questions that you want to answer.”
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• “Decide which role you want to play in today’s group activity.”
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• “Select which assignments of yours most demonstrate your growth as a learner in this class and prepare to share them with your parent(s) and me.”
• “For our next ‘free Friday,’ which topic do you most want to investigate as a group, and how would you like to investigate it?”
• “Looking at the clock, there are many good options here, each with its pros and cons. How do you think we should spend the next 20 minutes of class?”
KEY FACTORS IN POWERFUL LEARNING

Motivation

Desire
Attitude

Engagement

Action
Focus

Agency

Independence
Influence

Voice

Expression
Identity

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• **Co-construct safe(r) academic spaces** that encourage inquiry, exploration, curiosity, creativity, connection, and risk-taking.

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• **Emphasize effort**, not intelligence.

• **Treat mistakes and stumbles** as necessary and hopeful signs of progress.

• **Make your praise** specific, sincere, and spare. You don’t have to evaluate to encourage.
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• Make your **praise** specific, sincere, and spare. You don’t have to evaluate to encourage.

• **Group students** heterogeneously and practice differentiation.

• **Demonstrate** what they’ll get out of it, where it will take them, why it’s important, why they should care.

• **Don’t spoon-feed**—show students *they* can do it.
• When in doubt, provide rigor over remediation.

• First challenge, then support/scaffold, then check progress, then fade and observe, then celebrate (then repeat).
• When in doubt, **provide rigor** over remediation.

• **First challenge**, then support/scaffold, then check progress, then fade and observe, then celebrate (then repeat).

• **Assess formatively and authentically**—think outside the worksheet.

• **Give students plenty of opportunities to express their voice** and make a choice—they’ll start to care if they feel it’s theirs.
• When in doubt, **provide rigor** over remediation.

• **First challenge**, then support/scaffold, then check progress, then fade and observe, then celebrate (then repeat).

• **Assess formatively and authentically**—think outside the worksheet.

• **Give students plenty of opportunities to express their voice** and make a choice—they’ll start to care if they feel it’s theirs.

• **Recognize avoidance and withdrawal behaviors** as reactions to an environment rather than rejections of learning.

• **Build, repair, and sustain** relationships. Stay connected!

• Be enthusiastic!
• Type your questions in the chat pod on the lower left-hand side of the webinar platform.
• Make sure “Q&A Session” is selected in the “To” field.


• [Understanding-Youth.com](http://www.understanding-youth.com)

• [Eric’s faculty page](http://www.eric'sfaculty.com) at Lewis & Clark

• [Mike's faculty page](http://www.mikesfaculty.com) at the University of Pennsylvania
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• Keep an eye out for the upcoming collaborative discussion on today’s topic!

• The recording of today’s webinar will be posted on ED’s online learning community: http://www.schoolturnaroundsupport.org/

• You do not need to be a member to download the recording, but membership is free and joining the Secondary Schools Group gives you access to a wealth of helpful resources, including those mentioned during today’s webinar.