

Unmotivated Students... or Unmotivating Teachers?

JENNIFER DENG

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS that a teacher told me about the students who lived on the Onondaga Nation Reservation, in Nedrow, New York, was that "they are lazy and unmotivated." What exactly did this mean? As I pondered the statement, I realized that maybe the students were not unmotivated; maybe the teaching needed to change. Challenging the concept of "unmotivated students," I decided then and there to become a motivating teacher.

A Bright Beginning

Who am I? Currently, I am a new first grade teacher, but while on the reservation, I was doing my practicum from Syracuse University. I was an educator who needed to figure out a way to make my four weeks on the reservation a memorable experience—for me, but more important, for my sixth graders. I needed to reach my students and teach them in a way that would inspire them to learn. Through my experiences in the classroom, as well as my methods courses at Syracuse, I discovered several ways to motivate students.

The students on the reservation were a part of the Onondaga tribe. Most of the children lived right on the reservation and walked to school. They lived in trailer homes or small, run-down dwellings. Only Native Americans could attend the school and could live on the reservation. The children were interested in typical things—sports, television, video games—but were not particularly interested in school. Therefore, they did not care about staying after

school to do unfinished assignments or getting to school on time. Many of their parents were uneducated, young, and unemployed. They did not know any other way of life besides the reservation.

The students in my classroom had experienced social studies in traditional ways. They would normally read from a textbook and answer chapter questions. After observing them, I found that they really did not know the material and that the failure rate on their unit tests was extremely high. Were the stu-



dents bored? Did they just not like social studies? How come they were failing their tests? I decided to try something different for their unit on Ancient Egypt. The students needed to experience

Egypt beyond the pages of a textbook, so I set out to provide that experience in the classroom.

Four Principles

I am by no means an expert, but I did manage to change my students' work habits and engagement levels. Here is a brief list of principles that I adopted that both motivate students and create motivating teachers.

1. **Change the environment of the classroom.** Moos reminds us, "The importance of the physical environment and social climate of a classroom on the behavior and interactions of its members has long been emphasized in the field of social ecology."¹ Environment is a key component to engage students' learning. My students were learning about Egypt, so why not transform the classroom into Egypt? I first simulated a trip to Egypt, and the students guessed where we were going. The Nile River (made out of blue construction paper) was spread out in the middle of the room, which immediately sparked the students' interest. Each day, I began the lesson by labeling a different location around the Nile, so that the students could understand where the Nile River and Egypt were located in relation to other parts of the world. Geography is such a key part of social studies, and, sadly, many schools do not focus on it. Transforming the classroom into the country, state, or even time period of your subject makes that subject more real and interesting. The students will even anticipate what comes next.

2. Use culturally relevant instruction. Ladson-Billings defines culturally relevant teaching as "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes."² Most students need to connect with the material in order to find it interesting. I wanted the material to relate to the way my students lived. I found out how children in Ancient Egypt lived, and, in one lesson, we made a chart comparing and contrasting a day in my students' life to a day in the life of a child from Ancient Egypt. For example, the children of Ancient Egypt worked on farms and started working as young as age five. For fun, the children made dolls, played games, and spun tops. Children on the reservation went to school all day. They did not get jobs until the age of sixteen. They had dogs, cats, snakes, and birds for pets. For fun, they played sports, like lacrosse and hockey, and Playstation and video games. As a follow-up exercise, I asked the students to write a response to the question, "Where would you rather live—Ancient Egypt or the reservation?"

In addition, I discussed current events in the Middle East and how Egypt is involved in the crisis. We made a chart comparing Egypt today and Ancient Egypt. The situation in the Middle East is culturally relevant to the students' lives because they relate to the struggle over land. The people in the Middle East are fighting over who owns the Holy Land. Both sides claim it is theirs and that they are right. The ancestors of the Native Americans had to struggle with the same problem when the Europeans came over and took their land. The Native Americans fought to keep it, but they lost it. Thus, the students know how important land is and see how the war in the Middle East compares to the violence and struggle over their homeland.

3. Use a variety of lesson formats. According to Udvari-Solner, "Lesson format is the infrastructure or the architecture upon which the learning experience is built. The organizational frame-

work, methods to impart information to the students, and ways in which students interact with that information are all elements of lesson format."³ A teacher does not want to use the same format all the time; the class becomes boring, and students need different ways of learning and contributing. A key component of my unit was learning centers. The students were not familiar with hands-on learning—in the past, they learned mainly by reading right out of the textbook—so I took information from the textbook and made three centers. In one center, students made cartouches out of wet set clay and then carved their names in hieroglyphics onto the cartouches. Center two was a writing center, where I gave the students a paragraph about pyramids; the students then wrote poems about pyramids using that information. The last center focused on the mummification process. The students put pictures of the process in order and matched each picture with a corresponding description. The students spent twenty-five minutes at each center and then rotated. They loved the different activities, which I targeted toward different learning styles—the artsy students, the poetic students, and the students who like to order.

Another kind of lesson format that I used was *Jeopardy*, based on the TV show. I had four categories: People, Places, Vocabulary, and Miscellaneous. A sample "answer" was, "For 200 points, he was the pharaoh who united Upper and Lower Egypt," and the students had to supply the question. The game provided a great review for the students, and it was more interactive than a review sheet from a textbook. Students worked in groups, talked, shared, and collaborated with their peers.

4. Use a range of materials in every lesson. Some students did not like to read the textbook because they could not read it. A few sixth graders read on a second grade level. Of course, they were not motivated to do their work—they could not always understand it. Teachers always need to adapt all materials, whether the lesson plan or the textbook, to the students' abilities. No two

children learn or are exactly the same, even though they all have to use the same textbooks. I adapted chapters in the textbook for the students to use as a reference. I simply enlarged the text and deleted some unnecessary words. In addition, one student had trouble writing by hand, so she used the computer to write her assignments. Computers can also be used for Internet research, communication, graphics, and spelling—and for students who are perfectionists.

Motivated—and Successful—Students

My host teacher loved what I did with the students, and she adapted some of my ideas for her social studies unit. More important, not one student failed the social studies test; in fact, all the students passed with a *B* or better. Not only did the students become more motivated, but I also felt that I had become more motivating, and that benefited my students. ☐

Notes

1. Rudolf Moos, *Evaluating Educational Innovations* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1979), 167.
2. Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 18.
3. Alice Udvari-Solner, "Examining Teacher Thinking: Constructing a Process to Design Curricular Adaptations," *Remedial and Special Education* 17, no. 4 (July 1996): 24.

Jennifer Deng is a first grade teacher at Stillmeadow School in Stamford, Connecticut.