Increasing Student Motivation in the classroom
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How do I increase student motivation in my classroom? It is a question that I ask daily. Some students have a desire to "get a good grade", others have a desire to learn something new, and others….well um...just really don't seem to care. They are in class because they "have to be" or "it was better than the alternatives". Some of these students become engaged as they progress through the course because they find that there are some interesting things to learn. Some students just never get to that point. I believe in them, do all that I can to encourage them, set high expectations for them, and offer them the best instruction I can think of. The result? These students don't do the assignments, they goof around and disrupt those around them, and end up with a low grade in the class. These students have the ability and most are well-liked by their peers, so I am left thinking, "What could I have done differently?"

Recently, I was asked, "How might we use high-quality literacy instruction to increase student interest in our content area?" I immediately thought, "Yes! That's *exactly* what I want to know!" because I firmly believe that student interest, student motivation and student engagement are all very closely related. There are so many incredible ideas that support student engagement and increase interest and motivation, including student self-assessment and great teacher/student relationships, and I have already used many of these ideas. However, a good teacher is also a good student, so I have set out to discover more tools to add to my repertoire by searching for the answer to the probing question, "How might we use high-quality literacy instruction to increase student interest in our content area?"

Arguably, the biggest excuse given for lack of motivation boils down to the fact that the student does not believe that the content applies to his/her world. When a student reads disciplinary text, the problem becomes compounded because there is a language that is all its own within each content area. If a student does not connect well with the content-specific language, he/she may immediately skim the text, at best, or completely disregards the text, at worst. So, how can I, as a teacher, help all students realize that the material applies to them? Doug Buehl provides much information in Developing Readers in the Academic Disciplines, (2011).

1. Create a common starting place for students - When beginning a new unit, ask, "What common denominator can I find amongst my students?" In some instances, it may just be their ages or grade, but in others instances, we are building on a topic that we have already covered in a prior unit in class. This is a great time to say, "You guys already know..." or "You guys already know how to……" What a great motivator for a student to be able to already "know" something! Tying the new information into their personal lives is even better! This can be done by using student language, bringing in a topic that students are familiar with (maybe a school subject/event or a music artist), and humor (most often directed at my lack of student language like, "What's a bae?").

2. Provide high-quality vocabulary instruction - When students read a word that they don't know, how many actually say, "What does that word mean?" The word may "confirm" to some students that the text just isn't for them or that they just aren't good at the subject. Many will skip right over it. As a teacher then, I believe that it is my duty to look

at what the students will be reading and provide high quality vocabulary instruction, *prior* to the students' reading. Part of what this does is create prior knowledge. A student can then read the material and think, "I know that word!" which creates a more successful reading experience. These successes will accumulate and create student interest since they know they can read it. So, what does high-quality vocabulary instruction look like? The options are numerous and varied, and I'm sure that every teacher can find a few that he likes. Here's some of my favorites:

- Students create their own definition - Marzano, Pickering & Pollock (128-129) suggests a five-step process that can be used to teach new terms and phrases. The steps are:
    1. Give students a brief explanation or description.
    2. Provide students with a nonlinguistic representation.
    3. Ask students to generate their own definition/description.
    4. Ask students to create their own nonlinguistic representation
    5. Have students review the accuracy of their explanations and representations throughout the unit.

  In the classroom, I have found that having students generate their own definition after the word has been presented and used in context requires students to really think about their learning instead of just repeating back what they think I want to hear. I usually have students share their ideas of a "good 9th grade definition", for example, which allows for cooperative learning as students build on each other's ideas.
- Students create "concept of definition maps" and "semantic maps" - There are several popular nonlinguistic representations that students may use for vocabulary, but for my content area, I will be using a cross between a "concept of definition mapping" and "semantic map". This visual will provide a way to show the interrelation of the concepts and definitions and still provide some flexibility for categorization and properties (Alvermann, Phelps & Ridgeway Gillis 252-253).

3. Analyze the question, "How do I read content-specific text?" and share those ideas with students - Buehl offers suggestions throughout his book that indicate what we do - as readers - to read a disciplinary text. Modeling the appropriate reading strategies for our students helps them become successful in reading disciplinary text. As teachers, I believe that teaching students that there are different ways to read for comprehension depending on which class they are in gives our students a life skill that will help them become successful readers in many content areas.

4. Teach and model rehearsing strategies - "A rehearsing strategy emphasizes the comprehension process of determining importance…..require judgment and decision making: readers must determine what is background information and what is essential for understanding." (Buehl 228) Rehearsing strategies include highlighting, marking text, and note-taking. This is, honestly, the one that I feel the least comfortable commenting on because there is probably a life's work of study to be done on this topic, and I believe I've only scratched the surface. I don't remember being taught how to take notes and highlight text myself, but I do both diligently, and it has served me well. Buehl references the work

of Karpicke & Blunt which highlights the effectiveness of "reciting through free-recall note-taking (i.e., not looking at the text while listing what is important), repeated over multiple sessions" (Buehl 231). Therefore, this is a strategy that I will incorporate into the classroom.

Over the course of the next year, I intend to regularly and purposefully incorporate these four strategies into the classroom. I look forward to the reflection process at the end of the year where I will ask myself, "Did these instructional strategies increase student interest and motivation?"

References:

Alvermann, Donna E., Stephen F. Phelps, and Victoria Ridgeway Gillis. *Content Area Reading and Literacy: Succeeding in Today's Diverse Classroom*. 6th ed. Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 2010. Print.

Buehl, Doug. *Developing Readers in the Academic Disciplines*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2011. Print.

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