

How to Make Any Class a Better Class

You are in charge of your motivation

Why do psychologists say that you are in charge of your motivation? Believe it or not, how you act can make a big difference in how you feel.

How does this work?

A common (but too simplistic) understanding of motivation in the classroom

Many people think the way motivation in class works is like this: Some teachers are good at making learning fun, interesting, and meaningful, and some are not. When teachers are good at this, students feel motivated and learn more. That's true, but it's not quite that simple.

A more complicated (and more correct) version of motivation in the classroom

Teachers can help motivate students. However, students also influence what their teachers do in class and the lab. Sometimes, teachers don't even realize that their students' behavior changes instruction. But it does.

When students engage with their teachers to contribute to making the class better, teachers change how they prepare for class and what they do during class. Teachers become more likely to support their students and help students learn. When students are excited to learn, teachers are excited to teach.

Students who contribute to improving the class also change. They feel more supported by their teacher. They feel like the class requirements fit their goals better. They feel like they can do what the class requires. The class feels more like a community to them.

Teachers play a big role in the classroom. However, students also play a substantial role, whether they know it or not.

What do the experts say?

This is what Johnmarshall Reeve, an educational psychologist who studies students' engagement, says: "To the extent that students act agentically, they initiate a process in which they generate for themselves a wider array of options that expand their freedom of action and increase their chances of experiencing both strong motivation and meaningful learning."

What he means is that when students act as agents who take a role in what happens in class, they open up more possible experiences in their classroom and are more likely to increase their motivation *and* their learning.

Similarly, Erika Patall and her research team say: “When students engage agentically, they deliberately try to enrich and transform their learning opportunities in the classroom by offering input and collaborating with instructors to make those experiences more valuable... Agentically engaged students imagine an improved set of circumstances and act to make learning more interesting, valuable, or personally relevant.”

This helps us understand what it means to act *agentically*—it means thinking about how your questions, suggestions, examples, responses, and recommendations can make the class better for everyone: yourself, your classmates, and your teacher. Students act as agents when they don’t just wait for the class to get better, but *are motivated* to make choices in class to help their teacher and classmates.

What did other students say when they found out that you have control over your motivation in class?

Angela C., college student

“I used to think that there was really nothing I could do to increase my motivation in my physics class and lab. I thought that some classes were just too boring and there is really nothing I could do to increase my motivation. Sometimes I felt like there was really no way I could do well. After this program, *I realized the truth—I can actually change my motivation. I can play an active role in making a class and lab better.* Now I feel excited about everything I can learn in school. I don’t depend only on the teacher to inspire me or just let motivation happen to me, I try to make it happen in my classes with my questions, suggestions, and participation.”

Saying is Believing

Think of a class you are taking where your agency and motivation can make a difference. Imagine you know a student struggling with motivation in that class. You want to give that student (and others struggling with motivation) some tips about how to use their agency to improve their motivation in class.

To ensure students understand how to use your suggestions, write a letter encouraging this new student by explaining what you learned and your plan for how you will apply what you learned today to your class.