



## Show Can Teachers Cultivate Intrinsic Motivation in Traditional Classrooms that are Set Up for Extrinsic Motivation?

**Darci Vogel**

Department of Education, Lake Forest College

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### Overview

Research has shown that intrinsic motivation leads to higher quality learning than extrinsic motivation, but the traditional education system is set up for extrinsic motivation. Teachers are usually drawn to education by the desire to help students learn and grow academically, socially, and emotionally, but the perverse incentives that they encounter in the educational system encourage them to instead focus on standardized test scores and to motivate their students extrinsically. For a teacher to successfully make the switch to intrinsic motivation in their classroom, they must fight against a system that is designed to limit their autonomy and to force them to rely on extrinsic motivation. This paper attempts to support teachers who are attempting this difficult task by summarizing some of the research on how teachers can cultivate intrinsic motivation in their classrooms.

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### Introduction

While research shows that students learn better when they are internally motivated to learn, traditional classrooms are structured to focus on using external motivators like grades and rewards to encourage students to learn. Intrinsically motivated students want to learn for the sake of learning while extrinsically motivated students need external motivators like grades, rewards, and praise from their teacher to be willing to learn. An extensive body of research has shown that intrinsic motivation is associated with better learning outcomes for students and that extrinsic motivation decreases students' intrinsic motivation to learn (Martin and Pickett, 2013,

p. 49). Despite this, schools focus on using extrinsic motivators to motivate students to learn. If teachers want to successfully implement Illinois's Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading (CRTL) standards, intrinsic motivation is a vital tool that can help them do so. One CRTL standard that makes this clear is CRTL standard A9, which focuses on teachers' responsibility to reform the institutions they work in as needed (Illinois State Board of Education 2021 p. 2).

Teachers who understand the research on intrinsic motivation will want to make the transition from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation in their classrooms to promote the deeper and more culturally meaningful learning that the CRTL standards prioritize. Any teacher who tries to do so has to work against a system that is designed to incentivize extrinsic motivation and teaching to the test over intrinsic motivation and deeper, thoughtful learning. The research on how to cultivate intrinsic motivation can help them succeed at this complex and challenging task. For this reason, this paper explores strategies that have been found to boost students' intrinsic motivation to learn. Researchers have found that teachers can support their students' intrinsic motivation by modeling intrinsic motivation and by focusing on offering students choices, creating a supportive environment, and making learning feel relevant and meaningful. Teachers who want to implement these strategies often have to do so in an environment that limits teacher autonomy, incentivizes teaching to the test, and prioritizes test scores over the quality of students' learning.

Teachers tend to use extrinsic motivation in their classrooms not because they do not recognize the importance of intrinsic motivation, but because of the perverse incentives they encounter in the current education system. Most teachers are drawn to the field of education out of a desire to help students learn deeply and grow academically, socially, and emotionally. Once they start teaching and learn the rules of the system they must work within, they are often pressured to adopt practices that directly conflict with their values. They are encouraged to use rewards and punishments to control their students and manage their behavior and to use rote learning methods that teach to standardized tests instead of methods that promote deeper learning. They discover that they are held accountable for their students' test scores but not for the depth of their students' learning, and they learn that they have far less autonomy as teachers than they expected to. The harsh realities that they are confronted with incentivize a focus on extrinsic motivation and make it seem effective. The short-term benefits of extrinsic motivation loom large, and the long-term costs are hidden.

## Literature Review

Research on motivation has shown that intrinsic motivation creates better learning outcomes than extrinsic motivation (Martin and Pickett, 2013, p. 49), but classrooms are set up to encourage teachers to focus on extrinsic motivation. Teachers regularly use rewards, behavior charts, grades, and praise to motivate their students. Extrinsic motivation can destroy students' pre-existing intrinsic motivation for a task, making them rely on rewards to feel motivated to do something they previously would have done out of interest (Martin and Pickett, 2013). Intrinsic motivation is a more powerful tool for learning because, as Martin and Pickett (2013) underscores, citing the work of Mart (2011) intrinsic motivation is "longer lasting and

more self-directive than external motivation, which must be repeatedly reinforced by praise or concrete rewards” (Mart 2011 as cited in Martin and Pickett, 2013, p. 45).

Pulfrey et. al. (2011) illustrates how the harmful effects of extrinsic motivation play out in the classroom. The authors found that grades cause performance avoidance goals, where students focus on not doing badly, instead of performance approach goals, where students focus on doing well (Pulfrey et al., 2011). Performance avoidance goals are linked to anxiety and low self-esteem and lead to surface level learning (Pulfrey et al., 2011). Extrinsic motivators undermine students’ desire to learn, making them focus on avoiding embarrassment instead of engaging with the material they are learning about. Despite all the ways extrinsic motivation is harmful, it can often seem beneficial in the short term, which explains why it is a common tool that teachers rely on. Extrinsic motivation relies on operant conditioning, a form of behavior control where rewards and punishments are used to increase the frequency of desired behaviors and decrease the frequency of undesirable behaviors (Ozmon, 2012). Motivating students through rewards and punishments effectively regulates and controls their behavior. It also gets students to pay attention in class and to care about their grades and about pleasing their teacher. Extrinsic motivation provides teachers with a way to keep their students focused and behaving appropriately during rote learning that prepares them for standardized tests. It is an effective way to keep students from acting out when boring lessons dampen their enthusiasm for learning.

Teachers do not intentionally use extrinsic motivation merely to manipulate their students. Instead, effective extrinsic motivation makes students seem excited about learning when they are just excited about the rewards they will get if they behave. Teachers who are under pressure and feel like they don’t have enough instructional time can easily misinterpret this surface level appearance of learning as true learning. Teachers end up focusing on controlling standardized outcomes for behavior and student test scores and lose sight of the deeper cognitive and personal outcomes, such as skills for lifelong learning, that they want for their students.

## Data Sources

This paper analyzes two types of sources in the hopes of providing teachers who are struggling to switch to intrinsic motivation in a system that is built for extrinsic motivation with a summary of existing research of how to cultivate intrinsic motivation in a traditional school setting. The data in this paper comes from a review of relevant research literature and from classroom observations conducted in fulfilment of requirements for an undergraduate introductory Education course on the schooling process. The reviewed literature explores motivation broadly and in specific disciplinary contexts. The review analyzes the effectiveness of the motivational strategies employed and the value of target [outcomes](#).

The four classroom observations that this paper draws from were conducted in a 7th grade English language arts classroom, a 4th grade math classroom, a 9th grade geometry honors classroom, and a 9th grade English classroom. Two of the classrooms observed consisted of students who were primarily white and from wealthy families while another consisted mostly of Hispanic students from families with lower socioeconomic statuses, and another was conducted

in a diverse classroom where students came from a variety of cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. During all these observations, I took notes on how the teachers motivated their students, but each observation had a different focus. These observation focuses were identifying the teachers' philosophy and how it shaped their instruction, analyzing student motivation, and observing a multicultural classroom. The two observations that were supposed to focus on analyzing student motivation best aligned with the focus of this paper, but all the observations provided insight into how teachers use intrinsic motivation in the classroom.

## Findings From the Research Literature

The first step that a teacher who wants to cultivate their students' intrinsic motivation must take is ensuring that they are intrinsically motivated themselves. Zou et. al. found that the strength of a teachers' intrinsic motivation strongly predicts the strength of their students' intrinsic motivation (Zou et. al. 2024). Having an intrinsically motivated teacher is intrinsically motivating for students because teacher-student relationships have a powerful impact on the quality of student learning. This finding aligns with CRTL standard C3, which emphasizes the power of positive teacher-student relationships (Illinois State Board of Education 2021, p. 2).

Intrinsically motivated teachers love learning for its own sake and believe that teaching is a meaningful and rewarding experience. Their motivation to teach comes from the value they see in the practice of teaching itself, and they value the positive impact they can have on their students. While most teachers are initially drawn to the field of education because they have this attitude towards learning, the current structure of the education system often destroys teachers' intrinsic motivation. Perverse incentives like merit-based pay and teacher evaluations that depend on standardized testing scores often force teachers to teach to the test instead of providing in depth, thoughtful learning experiences to their students. Teachers are also largely denied autonomy and forced to follow curriculum that they had no voice in creating. All these factors can combine to make a teacher feel discouraged and alienated from their original optimistic vision of what kind of teacher they would be, causing them to lose their intrinsic motivation and to instead focus on the extrinsic rewards that their school district provides them with for following the current system's rules. Zou et. al.'s findings suggest that, if teachers can reconnect with their original intrinsic motivation that drew them to teaching, they will already have taken a powerful step toward cultivating their students' intrinsic motivation. Their findings also highlight how, when students know their teacher cares about learning and thinks the material, they are teaching is valuable; they are more willing to also care about learning and value the material.

Once teachers have reignited their own intrinsic motivation, they can focus on increasing their students' intrinsic motivation by supporting their students' sense of perceived competence and perceived autonomy. Researchers have found that classroom supports that increase students' sense of their perceived competence and perceived autonomy powerfully increase students' intrinsic motivation to learn (Guthrie & Klaua 2014 & Wu 2003). Teachers can

support students' perceived competence by helping them recognize their own growth (Guthrie & Klauda 2014 & Wu 2003). When teachers take the time to point out to each student how much they are learning and specific ways that their skills have improved, students feel more confident to learn. This makes them more eager to enthusiastically tackle new challenges. Teachers can support students' perceived autonomy by providing students with more choice and differentiated curriculum (Guthrie & Klauda 2014 & Wu 2003). Teachers can allow students to choose between a variety of equivalent activities to provide more variety and to let students choose activities that are the most interesting to them. This method helps students feel like they are seen and their right to shape their own learning is recognized.

At the same time, all the choices offered fulfill the same learning objective that their teacher has chosen for the students. However, this approach raises some concerns about efficiency. Teachers have limited prep time, and designing a variety of activities that all achieve the same goal is more time consuming than designing one activity. Teachers may also worry that, if they offer their students a variety of activities and allow them to choose the ones that they find most interesting, some students will always choose one type of activity in a way that they could not if the teacher assigned them a variety of activities. In this case, the students' intrinsic motivation could narrow the scope of their learning instead of expanding it. While it is true that some students would need to be pushed to try a variety of activities, students' increased intrinsic motivation to learn should overall make them more curious about a wider range of activities.

The goal of cultivating intrinsic motivation in the classroom is to make students curious about everything they are learning in a subject instead of having them only be curious about their preexisting interests within the subject. This increased passion and curiosity, which will lead to better learning, is worth the extra time it takes to create choices for students. Teachers can also use differentiated curriculum to individualize their instruction in a way that challenges each student. While this doesn't directly give students more choices, it does tailor the content to each individual student, which achieves a similar goal. Creating differentiated curriculum is time consuming, but, once again, the benefits for student motivation and learning outweigh the costs. Support for students' perceived competence and perceived autonomy are powerful tools for developing their intrinsic motivation to learn. Students find choices encouraging and see them as a sign that their teacher cares about their needs and desires. When students feel capable and confident that their hard work is helping them succeed, they are eager to learn as much as they can about the course content they are being taught.

Teachers can not only cultivate their students' intrinsic motivation by supporting their perceived competence and perceived autonomy but also by taking a thoughtful approach to learning and helping their students recognize why what they are learning is meaningful. Researchers have found that thoughtful analysis and activities that require deep, analytical thinking support intrinsic motivation (Guthrie & Klauda 2014 & Wu 2003). They have also found that students are more intrinsically motivated when their teachers take the time to directly explain the importance of the skills and content that they are learning (Guthrie & Klauda 2014 & Wu 2003). Teachers can show their students that what they are learning is meaningful by discussing the standards that a lesson satisfies and how those standards will increase their understanding of larger issues. They can also discuss how the skills students are learning

will prepare them to learn at a higher level, more interesting skills later, and how the content they are learning has real world relevance. They can provide opportunities for deep, thoughtful learning by leading thoughtful discussions on complex issues that develop their students' critical thinking skills. They can also help students build connections between the concepts that they are learning and help them connect these concepts to real world issues. This approach to learning aligns with CRTL standards C1 and D5, which focus on helping students connect their learning to their personal experiences and on creating opportunities for student leadership in the classroom (Illinois State Board of Education 2021 p. 3 & p. 5). It also aligns with CRTL standard E7, which focuses on helping students thrive through high expectations (Illinois State Board of Education 2021 p. 5). Thoughtful learning not only boosts intrinsic motivation but also deepens the quality of student learning. However, it is more time consuming than traditional instruction, and instructional time is always a limited commodity. Even in the most idealized situation, teachers will most likely always feel that they have limited time to teach everything they want to. In the current system where teachers are pressured to quickly teach all the facts that students need to know at a surface level to score well on standardized tests, time becomes even more limited and there is intense pressure to move through content quickly. This makes traditional instruction methods like lecture only teaching and using extrinsic motivation to regulate students' behavior and focus very tempting. However, this type of instruction will always be of a much lower quality than the deeper learning that is the true goal of educating students. Teachers must find a way to balance efficiency with deeper, more thoughtful learning if they want their students to become curious people with a well-rounded knowledge base and developed critical thinking skills. Intrinsic motivation is the only route to deep cognitive engagement and personally meaningful learning. Thoughtful approach to learning and meaningful work are essential to cultivating students' intrinsic motivation because they make schoolwork rewarding and enjoyable. They are also essential to creating real, valuable learning and knowledge instead of only creating the appearance of learning and knowledge.

## Findings From the Classroom Observations

My classroom observations provide examples of what strategies for cultivating intrinsic motivation look like in action in everyday school instruction. The high school English teacher and the middle school English teacher both used the power of positive teacher-student relationships to motivate their students to learn. The high school English teacher reengaged students by pulling them back into the vibrant class discussion that she had created, and the middle school English teacher said she helped students connect with the stories they were reading by passionately reading chapters of their books out loud to them. The high school English teacher also showed the power of giving students more choice when she gave a student more choice about his behavior instead of trying to teach in a controlling way. She was able to re-engage the student in note taking by reminding him why taking notes was important but acknowledging that he ultimately got to choose whether he listened to her advice or not. She said, "I need you to stop fighting and go with us. They're your notes. It's your choice at the end." The elementary school math teacher and the high school geometry teacher both showed how a more thoughtful

approach to learning boosts students' interest and motivation to learn. They both used the logic of math to build student engagement in the math skills they were learning. The elementary math teacher also introduced a new math game with a sales pitch that emphasized why the game was meaningful, which made her students more engaged and excited to learn the game. These examples show that the principles the researchers uncovered about intrinsic motivation can be effectively used by teachers in their own classrooms. However, it is important to note that only two of the teachers from these observations seemed to consistently use intrinsic motivation with their students. The other two often used extrinsic motivation, and their students also seemed less engaged. They also seemed like the traditional system had dampened their own intrinsic motivation for teaching. This shows that, while it is easy for teachers to sometimes use strategies that cultivate their students' intrinsic motivation, consistently using strategies that prioritize intrinsic motivation is a much more difficult task. Teachers must deliberately decide to embrace this goal and then actively and consistently fight against the perverse incentives of the educational system if they want to create a classroom where intrinsic motivation and deep learning are the norm. If they manage to do so, the learning that happens in their classrooms will be of a much higher quality than the learning that can be achieved in a classroom where intrinsic motivation is only sometimes encouraged.

## Conclusion

Intrinsically motivated teachers make their students more intrinsically motivated, and classroom practices that encourage thoughtful learning, give students choices, and help them see the value in what they are learning and the way their effort pays off boost intrinsic motivation. If teachers want to help their students feel intrinsically motivated, they must first find their own intrinsic motivation. Doing so will have an immediate effect on their students' levels of intrinsic motivation that they can further support by honoring their students' needs for meaningful work, opportunities to shape their learning and understanding of their own growth. While these practices all have positive effects; they can be difficult to implement in the current education system that encourages teachers to control their students through extrinsic motivation and to teach a large amount of content at a surface level. Teachers who recognize that intrinsic motivation is essential to deeper, meaningful learning and choose to take on this challenge, should consistently remind themselves that what they are doing is essential to fixing a broken system and that it will have tangible, powerful positive impacts on their students. Connecting to the purpose behind the challenging thing they are attempting to do will help them maintain their intrinsic motivation to cultivate their students' intrinsic motivation. They can also focus on creating lessons where the choices offered and the thoughtful learning involved help their students deeply understand a variety of concepts that will appear on the standardized tests they have to take. In this way, deep learning can be used to help students remember the information they will be tested on and to create information-dense learning experiences that do not sacrifice the quality of learning involved.

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