How to Use and Preserve Intrinsic Motivators

In a famous series of experiments conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, investigators asked two groups of students to play with a block-construction puzzle. One group of students played with the game without ever losing interest. Another was compensated for playing with the puzzle, but members of that group lost interest once investigators stopped paying them.

In this experiment, the fun of playing with the puzzle was an intrinsic motivator and the financial compensation was an extrinsic motivator.

Researchers found that not only are extrinsic motivators less effective than intrinsic motivators, extrinsic motivators can actually damage intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, studies have shown that performance as well as motivation can decline when people believe that they are being manipulated by extrinsic motivators or feel that they lack self-determination.

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<th>Intrinsic Motivators</th>
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<td>Interest in the subject</td>
<td>Grades (rewards or punishments)</td>
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<td>Learning goals</td>
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<td>Encouragement or praise that focuses on the task</td>
<td>Encouragement or praise that focuses on the person</td>
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<td>Understanding something difficult</td>
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1. **Highlight the ways that the course will provide insight into specific questions or help students to develop particular skills.**
   - Set the tone on the first day by highlighting the content of the course, not the list of requirements that students must fulfill by the end of the semester.
   - When drafting the syllabus, emphasize ways that students might benefit from the course rather than listing tasks they must perform in order to pass.

2. **Give students as much control over their own education as possible.**
   - Encourage students to make connections between “the questions of the course and the questions that students might bring to the course.” [Consider using the “Four Questions” assignment to find out what questions students are thinking about.]
   - Some teachers challenge students to ask “who cares” at any time in the course so that students – and the instructor – will always be aware of how course content relates to the large concerns of the course.
   - Consider revising the syllabus to accommodate student interests whether that means reimagining a particular assignment or changing the discussion topic for a day.
3. **Structure assignments to encourage applied learning.**
   - In a study, students who expected to teach material tended to do equally well on rote-memory testing and *better* on conceptual learning than students who expected to only take an exam.

4. **Offer nonjudgmental feedback on students’ work, stressing opportunities to improve and looking for ways to stimulate advancement.**
   - Avoid using grades to reinforce the power hierarchy of the class.
   - A 1990 study of Harvard courses found that the most intellectually-satisfying courses gave students opportunities to revise and improve their work and to learn from their mistakes before assigning it a grade.
   - Consider grading students on the knowledge and abilities they have developed by the end of the class rather than averaging individual assignments and exams done throughout the term. By making all exams comprehensive, students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate improvement.

5 **Avoid grading on the curve or using other strategies that might pit students against one another.**
   - Discourage the extrinsic motivator of “being the best student.”
   - Stress learning, not winning, as the goal.

6. **Use “task” praise versus “person” praise to encourage intrinsic motivation. For example, say, “You did that task well.” NOT “You are so smart to do this well.”**
   - Studies find that young children who are used to hearing “person praise” learn to regard intelligence as immutable and inherent. When they fail, they may develop a sense of helplessness and feel that they are no longer smart. They tend to feel smart when performing tasks that they find easy and that could be done with little effort and without making mistakes.
   - Young children who are used to hearing “task” praise regard intelligence as expandable, especially with hard work. They tend to feel smartest when they encounter challenges and manage to figure them out, even if this process required making mistakes.
