How to Choose Words That Motivate Students During Online Learning

Online Learning

Framing assignments in student-centric rather than teacher-centric ways can encourage engagement and persistence in learning.

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September 15, 2020

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Self-motivation. Ownership. Engagement. We have always wanted students to feel passion for learning and to be intrinsically motivated—to be driven from within. With much learning moving to an at-home environment, these student characteristics are more important than ever, and the way that we, as educators, frame at-home learning experiences can have a profound impact on how students feel about them.

This will be especially important for some students. Consider the barriers that may impact student learning at home: lack of internet, devices, and support. Add to the mix competing priorities like supporting siblings, having essential jobs, and coping with stress and trauma, and it's clear that motivation, resourcefulness, and self-regulation are critical.

This isn't to say that student engagement is everything. Districts and schools have to consider barriers through an equity lens and ensure that all students have the essential supplies to access learning, but access alone will not equate to equal opportunities to learn if we don't also help students become engaged, innovative, and empowered.

Yet if we learned anything last spring when schools shut down and kids stayed home, it was that many students struggled to stay engaged. What if part of the problem has been how we have framed the work? What if, without meaning to, we have taken engaging, inspiring, and awesome work and made doing it acts of compliance instead of engagement, simply by the way we framed it?

For example, let's say a teacher has incorporated elements of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as students build an understanding about how geography affects human settlement and resource use. Students are offered multiple means of representation to learn (attend a live Zoom or watch the recording, read or listen to an online article, view a documentary, read the textbook, etc.) and several choices of assessments to express their understanding (journaling or writing a paper, producing a video reflection, recording a podcast, etc.). Sounds awesome, right? Kids should be excited, shouldn't they?

What This Looks Like in Practice

Let's consider how teacher messaging might impact students' enthusiasm.

Teacher 1: "OK, everyone. I've got several choices for you to learn about how geography affects where people decide to live and the way they live. I expect you to choose at least two different resources to explore for me, and I want you to also pick one activity to try. To get full credit on the assessment, you will need to cite the resources you used."

Teacher 2: "OK, everyone. You have several choices for how you get to learn about how geography affects where people decide to live and the way they live. Don't forget to use at least two different resources, and then pick an activity to try. You can do more than one if you want! Remember to cite resources to give credit to other authors and organizations and boost the credibility of your work."

Notice that the first teacher emphasizes compliance through the use of teacher-centric language ("I want," "I expect," "I've got") and extrinsic motivation by emphasizing getting "full credit." The belief behind this message is, "Kids probably won't want to do the work, so I need to tell them what to do and motivate them to do it." The second teacher uses more student-centric language, offering invitations and suggestions, while speaking primarily in the second person instead of the first. Their assumption and expectation is that students are motivated to learn, and their role is to guide and support students' learning.

The suggestions below may help you to reflect on the power of language as you design and deliver learning that embraces variability; eliminates barriers; and helps students to build intrinsic motivation, sustain effort and persistence, and self-regulate during Covid-19 and beyond.

Moving From Compliance to Engagement

- Instead of "I expect you all to…," try "Your next challenge is…"
- Instead of "I want you to…," try "What's a goal you have…"

Move From Teacher Ownership to Student Ownership

- Instead of "Here are three things you need to do…," try "Here are three things to try as you…"
- Instead of "I've created some choices for you…," try "You have several choices to consider…"

Shifting From Extrinsic to Intrinsic Motivation

Rather than tell students what they need to do to get a good grade, consider explaining what they should keep in mind as they aim for high-quality work. When it comes to things like the importance of citing sources, don't frame it as something that's necessary for a good grade. Instead, show how this improves the work. Suggest to students that it boosts the credibility of their work and gives credit to other authors. Offering rewards for completed assignments also can backfire. Instead, you can ask students about their goals for the work.

Changing language habits is really hard. So here's something to try. As you're teaching and talking with students, record yourself using the voice-memo app on your phone; or, if you're teaching remotely, record the session. You may also want to review directions within your learning management system, rubrics, and letters home. Which phrases do you use that emphasize student ownership, engagement, and intrinsic motivation, and which ones may unintentionally indicate the reverse? Pick one phrase or habit to work on so that you don't feel overwhelmed.

There is so much to adapt to support students' at-home learning that it can feel overwhelming, and there's so much that feels out of our control. Language is a simple and powerful thing we can control.

This work isn't about us. We don't have power over our students, but we provide them with the support so they can find the power within themselves. And when we talk about learning as though it is the reward, and provide students with the scaffolds and support to pave their journey, we will be closer to our intent: students finding the resources they need and using their voices to share what they know in ways that are relevant, authentic, and meaningful to them.