
Developing Intrinsic Motivation for Students' Writing

Immaculate Kizza

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Immaculate Kizza received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Toledo and is associate professor of English at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Her research interests in rhetoric and composition include evaluation strategies, placement tests, basic writing, minority writers, grammar, and technology.

Introduction and Aims

This workshop integrates our discussion of grading with the entire writing process. Often, students ignore our very comprehensive comments on their papers and instead focus on the grades, thereby doing very little to improve their writing but succeeding in disheartening us. One reason for the focus on grades may be a failure of the writing process itself: For response to be meaningful, students have to find the writing task itself meaningful. You can minimize your students' concentration on grades and maximize their involvement in and enjoyment of their writing by employing the concept of *intrinsic motivation*—that is, by helping students find the writing assignment significant and therefore worthy of assessment. This workshop will help you to

- reexamine the concept of intrinsic motivation and assess its role in student writing;
- explore ways to foster intrinsic motivation in the writing classroom;
- design intrinsically motivating writing assignments;
- link good assignment design to criteria for student and teacher self-assessment.

Resources

In This Volume

Bencich, Carol Beeghly. Chapter 4: "Response: A Promising Beginning for Grading Student Writing."

Guthrow, Mary B. Chapter 9: "Writing at Reading: How a Junior Year in England Changes Student Writers."

Holaday, Lynn. Chapter 3: "Writing Students Need Coaches, Not Judges."

Other Resources

Ames, C. "Motivation: What Teachers Need to Know." *Teachers College Record* 91 (1990): 409–21.

Raffini, James P. *Winners without Losers: Structures and Strategies for Increasing Student Motivation to Learn*. Boston: Allyn, 1993. Chapters 4–10.

Reid, Stephen. *The Prentice-Hall Guide for College Writers*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1992.

Discussion Topics

- Talk over the concept of *intrinsic motivation*. What role can intrinsic motivation play in the composition classroom? How can we foster intrinsic motivation in writing assignments and activities? How is intrinsic motivation going to affect the way students perceive writing and the grades they get? How will intrinsic motivation affect the way we evaluate students' writing? How can intrinsic motivation be utilized to focus students' attention away from grades on their writing? (Raffini's Chapters 1 and 5 are particularly strong on this topic.)
- Share writing assignments that seem to have had the trait of intrinsic motivation, the ones where students took to the task eagerly instead of groaning or asking "How many words?" Once you have accumulated several of these assignments, analyze them and outline the basic elements of an intrinsically motivating writing assignment (see also Raffini 69–72).
- Consider how discussion of assessment criteria can be made a part of the assignment process. To what extent can students be made responsible for thinking of assessment criteria *before* they write? What effect will this have on the intrinsic motivation of the assignment?

Activities

- Working with fellow teachers, design what you consider to be several intrinsically motivating writing assignments. Compare these to the criteria you developed previously. Discuss the designed assignments as a group. (Also see Reid's writing assignments, especially his assignments for observing, remembering, investigating, explaining, evaluating, problem solving, and arguing. See also Raffini's "Family Biographer" 155–56 and "Headline News" 255–56.)
- Try out the designed assignments on your students, and ask them to comment anonymously after completing and getting back at least two of the assignments. Seek comments that will help you:
 1. assess whether your assignments were intrinsically motivating (basic elements as discussed above);
 2. evaluate the effectiveness of your intrinsically motivating assignments.
- Discuss the students' comments with your colleagues. Were you successful in engaging students in writing for the fun of it, as opposed to writing just for the grade? Did they pay more attention to your comments for improvement? Were their final products visibly better than their previous ones?
- Explore the effect of alternative grading systems on students' intrinsic motivation. Try portfolio grading or contracts; work with rubrics (teacher and student developed); try pass/fail or accept/revise and compare it with ABC grading. Cautiously evaluate student responses. Can the grading system itself influence how students perceive writing assignments and the quality of their work?

Follow-up

- Even if you do not get the results you are expecting with your first assignments, continue designing and assigning intrinsically motivating tasks for at least a term. Compile your experiences—the successes and tribulations—for an annual NCTE/CCCC Convention presentation (intrinsically motivating idea, wouldn't you say?). The resultant discussion might point you in new directions "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."
- Interview (or have your students interview) people who write regularly: journalists, freelance writers in your community. Ask these writers about their own intrinsic motivation strategies. Also, have these writers discuss how they self-assess their own writing.

- Donald Graves and Nancie Atwell have argued that the best writing assignments are those which are student—rather than teacher—generated. Develop a series of trials in which students develop their own writing topics and their own assessment strategies. How do both the assignments and the assessment strategies differ from what a teacher might employ? What are the implications for teaching?
- Use brainstorming with students to compile writing assignments, first as individuals, then in small groups, then to a class list. Students can then choose assignments from that list, and as Raffini points out, allowing students to experience choice is one of the most powerful ways to enhance their intrinsic motivation. Choice leads to commitment and commitment of responsibility. You can also involve students in the structuring of the assignments; make them feel they are in control.