

The Wrong Lesson That Almost All Schools Are Teaching

Jennifer Hurley

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<https://professorhurley.com>

We must stop using rewards and punishments in order to motivate our students.

I have believed this for years, but I have never felt it so strongly as last week, when I discussed intrinsic motivation with my community college English composition students.

My Zoom class of 27 understood and could vocalize the concept of intrinsic motivation, but when I asked for a specific example, the previously talkative class went quiet. In the chat, someone typed, "Professor, it's too hard." Someone else suggested that perhaps sleeping was an example of intrinsic motivation.

"No," I replied. "It's something that is hard work, but you love doing it. The hard work actually makes you happy and satisfied."

They stared at me across miles of wireless connection with furrowed brows.

Finally, we made some progress by tying the concept to sports. But imagine: Not a single student could even conceive of intrinsic motivation as something that one might experience in school. And these are college students.

Allow that to sink in for a moment.

In my more advanced class, a student confessed to the class in a video comment that it had never occurred to him that the point of working hard in school was to learn. He seemed a little embarrassed admitting it, but he said he was always so focused on passing his classes and earning the grade he wanted that he rarely ever considered what he had learned.

Another student, almost in tears, said over Zoom, "I hate grades." All summer she worked hard at her online classes, stressing out over her grades, and in the end, "I learned nothing."

These are the sorts of things I hear when I talk to students about their experience of school, and specifically of grades.

We are failing our students profoundly, enormously, shamefully. If there is any one thing that school should teach, it's that learning is interesting for its own sake. And

we are teaching the opposite. We are teaching that learning, or shall I say “learning,” is only done to earn rewards or avoid punishment.

We teach this lesson every time we assign points or a grade.

This applies not just to U.S. schools—many of my students attended high school in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.

The concern over standards and outcomes is pointing us in the wrong direction. Such well-meant efforts are making education worse by teaching students that we should only work hard in order to gain markers of success. Students have learned this lesson well, but is that the lesson we want to teach?

I humbly suggest that instead of teaching to outcomes, we teach to values such as curiosity and collaboration and inspiration. What if we asked ourselves as we chose every reading and crafted every assignment, Will this encourage curiosity? Will this foster critical thinking? Will this allow for creativity? Will this inspire? If the answer is no, then why are we teaching it?