



# How to motivate your students

We know that motivation is an important tool in helping students to achieve more. When combined with other self-management abilities (like planning and organizing work), motivation is a bigger predictor of grades than IQ.<sup>1</sup> **So how can we encourage this in our students?**

Frequently, people think of motivation as something either present or absent. *"Jo is a motivated student, but Ali isn't."* However, academic research on motivation has revealed that a more productive question to focus on is, *"What factors are motivating this person's behaviors right now?"* With this lens, we don't focus as much on whether or not a person is motivated, we focus on whether the motivation a person is experiencing is appropriate for goals they are pursuing, and the environment.

As learning is increasingly happening in online environments, independently driven, and over the course of the lifetime, this kind of lens becomes even more critical. As we move from thinking of motivation as *"the fuel"* of behavior to considering it as a tool to effectively *"steer and accelerate"* towards your goals, this guide will give you ideas on how to better support different aspects of motivation to lead to improved learning outcomes.



## About the author

Dan Belenky is Director of Learning Science Research at Pearson. Prior to joining Pearson in 2014, he was a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Human-Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. Dan earned his PhD in Cognitive Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, where he studied how student motivation interacts with (and is impacted by) innovative instructional methods. His current research projects explore how insights from cognitive psychology and behavioral science can be used to improve learner outcomes, at scale.

<sup>1</sup> Yarbrow, J., & Ventura, M., (2018). *Skills for Today: What We Know about Teaching and Assessing Self-Management*. London: Pearson.

# Do they believe they can do it?

## A growth mindset will help students if they hit a bump in the road.

**We all hit bumps in the road—it's inevitable.** But what happens next? Some people may feel demotivated, taking the difficulties as a sign that they don't have what it takes to succeed. Others may see these difficulties as important parts of the journey—they feel driven to overcome these challenges, as a way to improve and develop one's abilities and skills.

Academic research has explored these two different perspectives people may hold, labeling the idea that you have a set amount of ability which can't be increased a *"fixed mindset"* and the belief that your abilities can develop as a *"growth mindset."* In general, holding a growth mindset is associated with more persistence, less anxiety, and better outcomes than holding a fixed mindset. A growth mindset helps people who get temporarily lost to reorient themselves back in a productive direction, rather than just thinking, *"Oh well! I'm a bit lost so I'll head home!"*

### Fixed mindset

I'm not good at this—I've never been good at this.

I give up—I can't make this any better!

If I fail, I am a failure.

I can't do this—I keep on making mistakes.

### Growth mindset

I'm finding this hard now, but I can improve with time and effort.

I can improve if I keep trying!

Most successful people fail along the way.

Mistakes help me learn!



## How can you help students develop a growth mindset?

### "Direct" Approaches: How to talk to your students about growth mindset

- 1 Help students develop a growth mindset by talking about what it is and how to adopt it. Researchers have used a variety of approaches to deliver this kind of a lesson, ranging from dedicated class time to 1-hour online modules, and they can all be effective.
- 2 After introducing growth mindset, ask your students to write a brief letter to a student in another school, or a student who will take the same course in the future. The goal of the letter is to explain what growth mindset is, why they should adopt one, and some strategies to do so. Having students do this exercise can help them internalize those ideas.

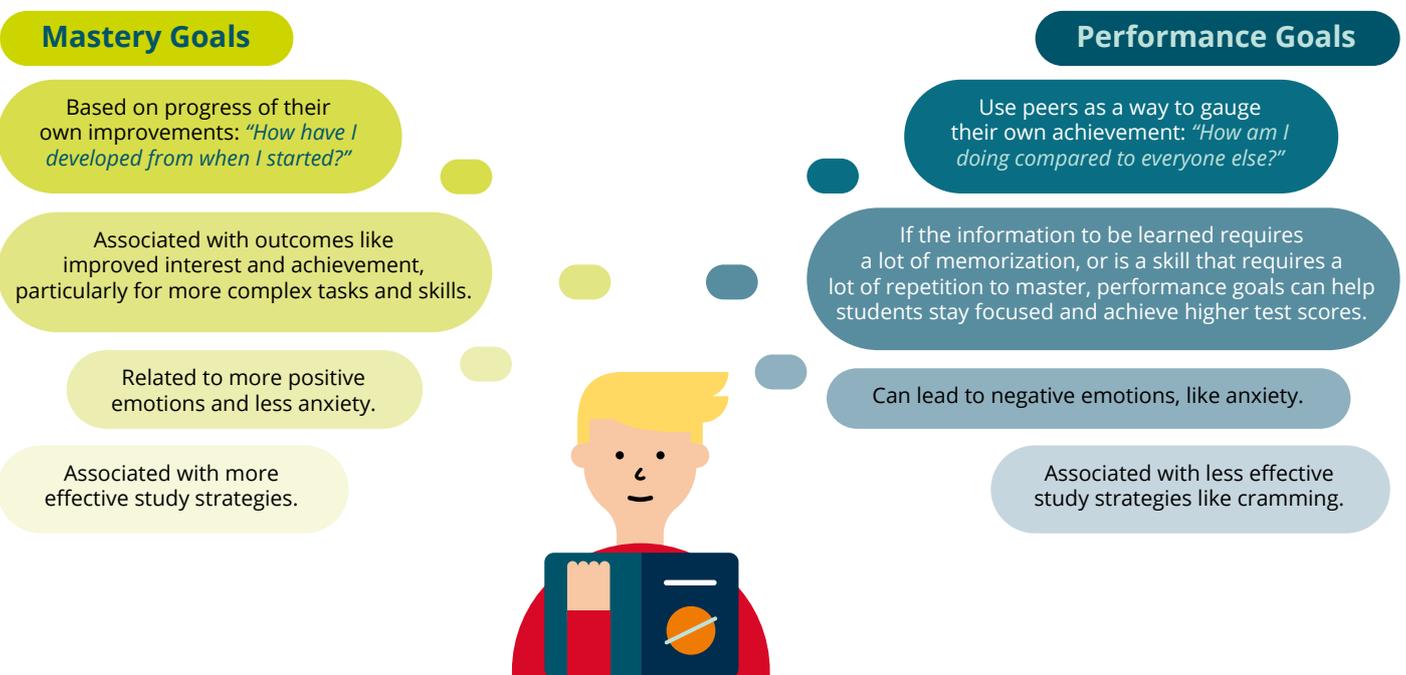
### "Indirect" Approaches: How to create a "growth-oriented" context in your class

- 1 Pay attention to how you structure your class and the signals it sends to your learners. Are you structuring assignments in ways that reward incremental progress (e.g., requiring multiple drafts, letting students rework problems for more credit)? Are you allowing your students some meaningful choices in their own learning process, so they can feel more in control?
- 2 Consider the language you use with students, and make sure to highlight both the effort as well as approaches that are likely to lead to success. Pair messages like, *"Keep trying, I know you can get it!"* with actionable steps they can take (e.g., *"Before your next attempt, why don't you talk this problem over with one of your classmates and see if you can figure out what part is giving you the most trouble."*)

# How do they determine their progress?

**A student's motivation is more likely to increase if they gauge their progress by looking at their own improvements, rather than by comparing themselves to others.**

Some goals are self-focused—they use self-referenced improvement as their barometer (e.g., *"How have I developed from when I started?"*)—which some researchers refer to as "mastery goals." Others may use their peers as a way to gauge their own achievement (e.g., *"How am I doing compared to everyone else?"*), often labeled as "performance goals." Take a look at the differences:



**You should encourage mastery goals as a general approach and think strategically about places where performance goals can be used effectively.**

**It is important to have a classroom oriented more around progress than markers of performance (like scores). Here are three ways you can achieve that:**

- 1** Structure lessons and assignments so they continuously build off one another.
- 2** Demonstrate individual students' progress compared to their own benchmarks.
- 3** Allow and encourage revision of work (where possible, such as submitting multiple drafts of writing or reworking of incorrect homework problems).

# How rewarding is it?

## Help students see that it's worth the effort.

We all do this—either subconsciously or explicitly. We ask ourselves, “How hard is it going to be?” and, “What do I get out of it?” before deciding to do a task. If students believe they have the knowledge and skills to succeed and understand the value of what they're doing, they are more likely to be motivated.

### How hard is it going to be?

Known as “Expectancy”

- How good am I at these kinds of tasks?
- How hard does this particular task look?



### What do I get out of it?

Known as “Value”

- How important is the task to me?
- What costs are associated with doing it? (What do I have to give up? What will happen if I can't do it?)

#### How to increase expectancies (the student's belief they will succeed)

- 1 Research has shown that experiencing success (or even observing success of similar peers) can help learners feel more likely to succeed in the future, so consider how to structure tasks so they can have “quick wins” on the way to harder tasks.
- 2 Students' beliefs about whether their effort will lead to meaningful changes in their abilities can impact expectancies, so try some of the approaches relating to growth mindset discussed earlier.
- 3 Helping students set appropriate, challenging goals and providing task-oriented feedback and support can promote students' perceptions of their own likelihood to succeed.

#### How to increase perceived value (how important the task is to the student)

- 1 A task can be seen as valuable because it is inherently pleasant (it is fun), because we can see how it will help us do something we want to do (it is relevant), because it would increase our social standing (it looks good), because it gives us some external reward (we get something else of value when we do it), or many other reasons.
- 2 To help students see the relevance of what they are learning to their own lives, ask them to generate those connections for themselves. Across a number of studies, when students are given prompts like, “Consider how what you are learning could be useful to you in your everyday life,” they come up with interesting connections that help them develop stronger interest in the topic and, potentially, higher achievement. This effect seems more meaningful for “at-risk” students—those with lower levels of interest and expectancies for success in the course.

# How effective are incentives?

## Carefully balance external rewards with activities that increase internal motivation.

Another way of increasing motivation relies on extrinsic (external) factors—rewards of various kinds, or the avoidance of punishment—rather than internal factors.

While it would not be a good idea to have people rely solely on extrinsic motivation, it can have a place in the suite of tools available. This table will help you decide when it is appropriate to use it:

Examples of extrinsic motivation	When this might be effective	When this isn't effective
<p><b>Positive feedback from instructors or peers</b></p> 	<p><b>Routine tasks</b> (e.g., studying vocabulary terms)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Deep thinking</b> (e.g. writing persuasive essays)</li><li>● <b>Creative tasks</b> (e.g. solving novel problems)</li></ul>
<p><b>Grades</b></p> 	<p>When points are awarded based on clear milestones and evidence of desired behaviors and learning outcomes.</p>	<p>When students are placed into competition and have no clear guidelines about how to earn points. When there isn't a clear link between the points and the learning it takes to achieve them.</p>

When you see behaviors you want to see more of (e.g., taking out notebook at beginning of class to take notes, asking good questions, etc.), consider offering both praise and some kind of reward (e.g., extra credit points, ability to choose a topic for an assignment, etc.), which can help others see what behaviors are potentially going to lead to rewards.

Really, the key to consider is how to balance different kinds of approaches. While motivation can certainly increase when rewards are introduced, a person who relies solely on extrinsic factors is more likely to give up when things get hard, to lose interest, and to burn out. In addition, when people start receiving extrinsic rewards for something they already enjoy doing, it could lead to an “overjustification effect,” where the intrinsic motivation decreases over time.

So, consider how to incorporate factors that we have talked about in this guide that improve intrinsic motivation.

The different aspects of motivation discussed in this guide provide potentially useful ways of increasing students' engagement and perseverance in their learning journey. Here, two educators share their own stories about improving student motivation.

## Motivating students at Solefield School, UK

*There are many contributing factors to student motivation, however the one that stands out for me is the one that motivates all of us: progress. We all like to feel that we are doing well and that effort is being rewarded. Students are no exception. To feel motivated, they need to understand where they are going; why it is important; how they can get there and whether they are being successful on that journey. For that reason, it is important to map out your course; explain why the skills you are teaching are useful; provide guidelines and exemplars to show how that can be achieved and then offer frequent, (and instant—when possible) descriptive feedback.*

*One of the factors that motivates the boys at Solefield School, is having a real purpose and/or a platform to demonstrate their newly acquired skills. For that reason, when teaching persuasive writing, I get them to write letters to the Headmaster or the local MP with the intention of creating real change. When studying speeches, we hold debates and I enter the boys into an annual public speaking competition. The boys love entering contests so I submit their creative writing and stories to a number of writing competitions. Their magazine articles are published and I regularly make booklets of student work to be distributed at school, usually a poetry anthology or collection of stories. In class we devote time to talking about how these writing skills will stand them in good stead for the future. After showing the boys model pieces of work, together we work out a checklist of skills that will help them achieve their goal. I find it most effective to*

*show them a WAGOLL one (What A Good One Looks Like) and a WARGOLL one (What A REALLY Good One Looks Like) and get them to explain which features made the latter more effective. Creating the checklist of features together makes it more memorable for the boys. It is easy to elicit the success criteria from them and this system has the added bonus of discovering additional features that the boys come up with themselves.*

*Instant feedback is also a key factor in student engagement and the Solefield boys prefer to have verbal feedback after a task, rather than wait for the next lesson to read the written comments. Sometimes I get them to read their work aloud and I drop a scrabble tile into a cup each time I hear something impressive. This way they understand the effectiveness of each sentence they have written, or point they have made, immediately after completing a task. Setting the boys individual targets or 'next steps' at the end of each task also helps steer them in the right direction on their learning journey.*

**Emma Snow**, Head of English, Solefield School, UK



## Promoting a growth mindset at Amarillo College, USA

*The developmental math faculty at Amarillo College are particularly proud of the holistic measures they have incorporated into the courses to promote a growth mindset and provide additional support for students. Some initiatives include:*

- Instructors meet one-on-one with students for a minimum of ten minutes each during their office hours to form a more personal bond and to break down barriers to each student's success.*
- Students review their tests and write reflective test journals to identify their mistakes and chronicle their progress throughout the semester.*
- Skill drills incorporate a unique motivational quote each day.*
- Accountability partners provide support, encouragement, and build community within the classroom, with each student asked to partner with three other students in the classroom to work with and serve as a go-to person to contact if they are running late, sick, confused on a deadline, etc.*
- Students receive encouragement bracelets at the beginning of each course with the motivational reminder that, "Success is the Only Option."*

*According to Edie Carter, the Dean of Academic Success, many of the students in these classes are first-generation college students who may have a supportive network of family or friends, but may not have the understanding of the pathway that a student needs to travel through college. These measures are designed to address and support those needs. For example, she says that many students will look down at the bracelet's inspirational message when they are struggling and remember that they need to push through to success. As evidence of the bracelets' impact in particular, Carter relates that faculty initially intended to collect the bracelets at the end of each term to distribute to future students, but the students wanted to keep them! Students describe their appreciation for all of the faculty's efforts, commenting: "The class was fast paced, but (my teacher) was thorough and allowed us the option to ask her to slow down and made us feel comfortable when we thought our questions were silly. She provided a wonderful environment for learning," and "Best format/regiment for a math course I have ever taken."*

**Edie Carter**, Dean of Academic Success, Amarillo College, USA



Are you using some of these strategies with your students? Tell us how. [efficacy@pearson.com](mailto:efficacy@pearson.com)