
Essential Motivation in the Classroom

Ian Gilbert



London and New York

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Essential Motivation in the Classroom

Essential Motivation in the Classroom is the definitive one-stop guide for teachers who want to know how to motivate children – and how children can learn to motivate themselves.

In this rollercoaster guide through the theories of teaching, learning and thinking, Ian Gilbert highlights the ‘seven keys’ of motivation, offering a range of strategies, ideas and insights to help learners become motivated from within.

An entertaining and inspiring read, this book is full of useful, practical advice, ranging from motivational research from leading theorists to philosophical gems from Homer Simpson. Teachers in all sectors of education will find this book indispensable, helping them to change the culture of their classrooms and improve the effectiveness of their teaching.

Ian Gilbert is the Managing Director of Independent Thinking, a company he set up to ‘enrich the lives of young people by changing the way they think’. He has worked with thousands of young people, teachers, parents and governors both in the UK and abroad.

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Above all else, this book is dedicated to my family, and especially to my wife, Lesley, who has been to hell and had the strength to come back

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Acknowledgements

One of the most inspiring and practical books I have ever read on teaching is *Super Teaching* by the American educational pioneer Eric Jensen. It is from his original premise that there are seven elements needed for motivation in the classroom that I have chosen my seven keys as chapter titles, and then greatly expanded upon them.

I would also like to thank a number of people who have been significant in a number of ways in my own journey. My sincere thanks to Sue and Paul Chamberlain, Joan Ebsworth, Angela Preston, Andy Vass, Bill Cusworth, Margaret Abbott, Lis Howarth and her team, Margaret Holman and the Danger and Excitement Group, Mike Cousins and the Raising Standards Partnership schools, Frank Robinson and all those who have had faith from the beginning, and, now especially, Roy Leighton.

How to read this book

Every idea in this book may turn out to be wrong, but that would be progress.

Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*

With all that is going on in schools today there is a need for a profound, academic and theoretical book on motivation in the classroom. This is not it.

I am not a neuroscientist, a pedagogical theorist or an academic researcher, although I know some people who are. I do not write this book from any point of view other than as someone who knows things that can – and do – make a real and genuine difference in a classroom full of living, breathing people.

Over the last few years I have soaked up information about learning like a sponge. This book is me wringing myself out. There are items of research that I have picked up for which I do not know the source, I'm afraid. Yet, if I quote it here, I present it in good faith and know it to be valid because it works in practice. And, anyway, I do not want to encumber either of us with vast footnotes and appendices. I simply want you to read this book quickly and easily and enjoy the process. This work is also relevant for all teachers at any level and so, for reasons of inclusion, I interchange 'learner' with 'child' with 'student'.

I have also peppered the pages of this book with the words of men and women wiser than I, so feel free to use them for posters, assemblies, newsletters and thoughts for the week (or thoughts for the day if you do not feel you can hold a thought that long). Many

use the term ‘man’, ‘men’ or ‘he’ when actually they refer to humans generally, so please excuse the anachronism. Be aware that I also draw upon an evolutionist frame of reference rather than a creationist one.

While I want you to walk away from this book and be able to take ideas straight into the classroom for immediate effect, I have not set it out as a step-by-step guide. Motivation is more than just a set of prescriptions; you will also need to reflect deeply on what teaching and learning is all about. This will be especially true as you consider the changes needed to take the ‘teaching school’ model and turn it inside out and upside down to create a ‘learning school’.

‘We know that teaching does not simply produce learning.’

Professor MacBeath, during his time on the government’s Taskforce for Education, giving an indication why he probably never received a Christmas card from Chris Woodhead.

Be honest, not everything you teach is learned. We can teach for a week without anybody learning anything. I want this book to help you as you make the shift from teaching to learning, with all the positive effects on motivation – theirs and yours – that such a move brings. I have met too many teachers now who have said things like, ‘I’ve been teaching for more than thirty years and I’ve never enjoyed it as much as I do now’, ‘I feel like I’ve been teaching asleep for the past ten years’ or ‘I’ve never felt as alive in the classroom as I have over the last few months.’ These are all genuine quotes from real teachers, the last from a woman who said she had been teaching since 1965.

‘If you’re not learning, I’m just talking.’

Slogan seen on a teeshirt – sometimes it takes an item of clothing to help us see the truth.

Furthermore, I have seen too many instances of children who re-find their fire for learning as a result of the changes that the teacher has made, sometimes without even being aware of it. A teacher recently told me how he had pointed out to one of his year 11 students

how she had got herself back on track again after a poor time the previous year. When he commented that she had changed she said abruptly, 'No, Sir, you've changed!'

Too often in the classroom, and within the disciplinary systems in a school, it is the symptoms that are being treated – the poor behaviour, the lack of motivation, the disaffection – rather than the causes. Young people act the way they do for a reason that is in their *self-serving interest*. How can we ensure that we are not so busy looking at the *acts* that we overlook the *reasons*? When those children misbehave, why do they do that? Asking *why* until you dig deep enough is a powerful management technique that takes no prisoners. A headteacher once told me how he used it with his staff: 'This class isn't achieving the results they are capable of, Headteacher!' – '*Why* are they not achieving those results, Miss Jones?' – 'Because they are too busy messing around.' – '*Why* are they messing around?' – 'Because they are bored.' – '*Why* are they bored?' – 'Oh, is that the bell ...?'

'To teach (someone) a lesson: to cause (someone) to suffer the unpleasant consequences of some behaviour or action.'

Oxford English Dictionary – so it must be true.

Although every teacher needs to have a range of powerful and effective behaviour management techniques *and* be backed up by a school-wide system that lets everybody know where they stand, this alone is not enough. Addressing the *causes* of the symptoms can – and does – prevent many discipline problems arising. Yes, many factors contribute to the mindsets of children as they walk into school in the morning. Yet, above all else, it is what you do that will be the deciding factor in the quality of the learning experience for all of you. And I do not say that to blame you, or to bash you, but to *empower* you. You do have the control and influence necessary to make a difference. *The Elton Report* from 1989 concluded that 'the behaviour of the teacher is the single most important factor that determines student behaviour'. And according to accelerated learning pioneer Dr Georgi Lozanov there is even a name for the 'sickness caused by poor teaching methods' – didactogenic syndrome.

'The history of the world shows that methods of political action that are used by the oppressed are determined by the oppressor.'

Nelson Mandela on where to start the search for ways to address motivation and behaviour.

Think in terms of: 'Can't Learn; Won't Learn'. Some can but won't; others would if they could but feel they can't. To address motivation we need to look at both to ensure the 'can'ts' can and the 'won'ts' will. This means we cannot separate learning strategies from motivation to learn and also that we look beyond mere strategies to the feel for motivation at an attitudinal level. *This is the essence of the 'essential motivation' in the title.* And that means *your* motivation as well as *theirs*; after all, the way that you are in the classroom teaches far louder than what you say.

No printed word, nor spoken plea
Can teach young minds what they should be
Not all the books on all the shelves
But what the teachers are themselves

Another stanza from the great poet Anon.

Some of the ideas I suggest will not work all of the time, but all of them will work some of the time. Above all, the book is designed to give you insights, ideas, support and succour as you do what you need to do to make the changes in your classroom that will lead to better motivation and learning and a far more fulfilling experience for everyone. Read it with a highlighter pen in one hand, a pen in the other for your own ideas, an open mind and a song in your heart. (Choose any three from the above.) And then, when you have read it, go and *do* something:

If we come here today and there's no trouble tomorrow then we haven't done our jobs.

Gloria Steinham

Introduction

Everything has been said already but as no-one listens one must always start again.

André Gide

You are a great teacher. You know it. Your colleagues know it, although of course they do not let on – professional jealousy and all that. Your line manager knows it. Even the parents know it. Why, then, do your students not know it? They sit there like puddings, passive and inert, while you show how great a teacher you are with your pyrotechnic displays of knowledge and wit. If only they were better motivated, they would appreciate how good you really are and results would really start to rocket.

Motivation is one of the most used words in teaching today, usually in the phrase, ‘How can I motivate these kids?’ It is also a very misunderstood process. Even that question alone reveals that we are approaching motivation from the wrong angle. Carrot and stick may work if you want a classroom full of donkeys, but real motivation comes from within. Napoleon may have learned that men will die for ribbons but his successes were short-lived.

One of the *Harvard Business Reviews* most requested articles is one first published in 1968 by Professor Frederick Herzberg, entitled ‘One more time – how do you motivate employees’. Here the professor talks about KITA – ‘Kick In The Ass’ – motivation. It gets the job done but does not lead to better motivated employees. He describes how in the training of his one-year-old Schnauzer puppy, when it was little, if he kicked it, it would move – ‘push motivation’. After

obedience training he could offer the dog a biscuit and it would move – ‘pull motivation’. Yet on neither occasion was it the *dog* who was motivated to move. As the professor points out: ‘the dog wants the biscuit, but it is I who want it to move’. Perhaps a better question for our staffrooms is: ‘How can I get these kids to motivate themselves?’

In this book I want to offer practising teachers – and let’s face it, we all need the practice – a range of strategies, ideas and insights to help them consider what they can do to have better motivated children in their classrooms.

There are no magic wands and it will take effort. You may even have to change the way that you do things – as the great actor once said, ‘Where’s my motivation?’ For example, a professor of education once described how when he was in teacher training in the 1970s he used to instruct the student teachers to ‘play to the intellect and then the emotional brain will follow’. He now knows that to be totally back to front, that we have to play to the emotional brain, then, and only then, will we open up the intellectual brain (see Chapter 6 for more details). And Professor Tim Brighouse describes how he used to tell teachers that there were three things going on at any given time in a classroom: ‘children taking new information on board, children processing the new information, children being entertained, having fun’. The last one, he now knows, has to be an integral part of the first two for them to be effective. If such high-profile figures are prepared to admit to changing their minds, are you? (‘Change your mind, prove you’ve got one, that’s what I say,’ as Jools Holland once declared.)

Learning was once described as a four-step process – UI, CI, CC, UC – as follows:

Step 1 – unconscious incompetence

This is when you don’t know that you don’t know. For example, at the age of 6 you don’t know that you don’t know how drive a car.

Step 2 – conscious in competence

Now you are sitting in the car for the first time and suddenly realise how stupid you are as you look at the all the mirrors, dials, levers and

pedals (three pedals and only two feet). You are now starting the learning process and becoming aware of all those skills that you never knew you did not have. This is where you need the motivation to kick in. Do you face up to your own stupidity and progress to step 3, or do you retreat backwards up the dead end of your own ignorance?

Step 3 – conscious competence

As you learn new habits, to begin with you have to think hard about what you are doing in order to accomplish them. Not yet second nature, new skills seem hard and part of your brain screams, 'I'll never be able to do this,' as you get out and slam the door at the traffic lights, leaving your father in the passenger seat looking apologetically at the truck driver behind you, who has now missed the green light for the fourth time.

Step 4 – unconscious competence

'This is easy!' New skills no longer need conscious processing and are as easy to you as tying a shoelace or getting a soufflé to rise, or even both together with real practice. Have you ever turned up at school when you meant to go to the supermarket?

The need for motivation is as vital in steps 2 and 3 for you, as a learning professional, as it is for your students. Do *you* know how stupid you are? More importantly, are you prepared to accept it and *do something about it*? As teachers, we spend a great deal of time knowing all the answers. To a certain extent, it is our job. Or at least it used to be. In many ways the system – notably beyond primary-school age – called for a collection of professional 'know-it-alls', paid to share what they had picked up at university with the community at large. That was then.

'How can we remember our ignorance, which our growth requires, if we are using our knowledge all the time?'

Thoreau on why, as teachers, we need to be learners too. Ever heard the joke about the teacher who dreamt he was giving a lesson and when he woke up he found he was?

Now we are experiencing the democratisation of knowledge on a huge scale. My six-year-old daughter has access to all the knowledge in the world at her fingertips. And it is updated on a daily basis. No human could compete with that, and nor should we want to. Microsoft promotional material talks about the teacher of the twenty-first century being the ‘guide from the side not the sage on the stage’. There is a tremendously powerful role for educators in the great new era, not as founts of all knowledge, but as pioneers in the *democratisation of learning*. Helping young people want to acquire new knowledge (the motivation part), helping them know where to find it, how to know good knowledge from bad, how to know what to do with it when they find it – this is the stuff of the educator’s role in the twenty-first century. Are you up for it? Are you motivated to do something about it? Are you prepared to accept your own ignorance as the starting point for this journey?

Please approach this book with a demeanour of curious stupidity. As Lao wrote, ‘To know that you do not know is best. To not know of knowing is a disease’. Once you become aware of your own stupidity and (re)start your own personal journey with your own motivational engines firing you have a chance. We all have. After all, society needs great educators. Society needs you to be brilliant. The future of the world is depending on it.

Motivated for what?

Bad news, I'm afraid. The culmination of six million years' worth of neurological evolution is *not* the GCSE.

The human brain is the product of millions upon millions of adaptations and changes, which ensures that we are the ones best able to cope with what life will throw at us. And I am sorry to say that a key stage 2 SAT or a French vocabulary test is not among the eventualities that natural selection has prepared us for. Perhaps if the consequences of not having done your homework had been far more stringent hundreds of thousands of years ago, this might not be the case, but it is.

In a fascinating book, modestly entitled *How the Mind Works*, Stephen Pinker suggests: 'Without an understanding of what the brain was designed to do in the environment in which we evolved the unnatural activity called education is unlikely to succeed.'

At the end of the day the brain is designed for one thing – survival. It does all sorts of wonderful things, some of which we can barely begin to imagine, but the bottom line is that it is there to keep us and our progeny going. What this means is that each year millions of young people are tested for their ability to do something unnatural and biologically inconsequential. And if they fail to measure up, the implication is that something is wrong with them. As British business guru and troubleshooter Sir John Harvey Jones notes: 'We have an education system that is designed to get 200,000 children a year or so into university. Everybody who doesn't make it to university is told at some point that they have failed.'