

Motivation: In and Out of the Classroom



From the Classroom to the Living Room – How to Maintain Motivation During Traditional, Blended and Distance Learning

The Why

The upcoming 2020-2021 school year presents a lot of challenges for educators. Many schools still don't know what kind of schedule they are going to have in the fall, because of this they've adopted a "wait and see" approach. Even schools that have committed to a plan of distance learning, blended learning, or something else are far less certain about the details. Additionally, most educators have acknowledged that some students did not get the full benefit of their 2019-2020 school year and many students will be behind when they start in the fall. The enormity of these challenges combined with the ambiguity of the situation is enough to make anyone want to give up.

This is why it's so important to stay motivated. How do you stay motivated when the situation is normal and familiar? How do you stay motivated when everything changes? Furthermore, how do you motivate your classes and your peers? The following lesson will address all of these questions.

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Introduction

Motivation is a tricky thing. It seems that everyone agrees that we all need it in order to succeed at personal goals, professional undertakings, or life in general. Yet, how to have it, maintain it, and inspire it in others can be illusive at best and demoralizing at the most difficult times. (And ‘no’ the irony of that last statement is not lost on me.) The following lesson will discuss motivation, how it impacts the classroom, and techniques to help maintain motivation in the classroom as well as while practicing distance and blended learning.

Personal Motivation: What is it and Why Do You Want it?

Work is a universal burden. We all have to do it and it usually needs to be done in a specific schedule. The problem is that we don’t always want to do it when it needs to be done. That’s where motivation comes in. Motivation is the reason or reasons one has for acting or behaving in a particular way, or the general desire or willingness of someone to do something.¹ While being motivated doesn’t guarantee success, you’re unlikely to succeed at anything that requires work without it.

Tips for Staying Motivated

Lots of people have lots of opinions about how to stay motivated. Peruse the self-help book section at any office supply store and you will find countless volumes on the subject. Likewise, a quick search on the internet will yield page after page of videos and articles about how to stay motivated. We’ve searched through a bunch of these sources to find what we consider to be the best and most applicable advice for students and educators.

1 Google Dictionary, https://www.google.com/search?sxsrf=ALeKk01OvSwNtOGOZXSZjOlti-5aVSME0A:1591870902050&q=Dictionary&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAAONQesSoyi3w8sc9YSmZSWtOXmMU4-LzL0jNc8IMLsnMz0ssqrRiUWJKzeNZxMqFEAMA7_QXqzcAAAA&zx=1591871057330#dobs=motivation

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1.) Fun is a more powerful motivator than money.

In episode 6 of the Netflix series, 100 Humans, an experiment was conducted where 50 people were broken into teams given STEM materials and told to build a freestanding tower, with the group that builds the tallest tower receiving \$400. A second group of 50 people were given the exact same challenge except no prize money was offered. Instead, they were told that they were just doing it for “fun.” Not only did more teams from the “fun group” successfully build a free standing tower, but the tallest tower from the “fun group” was several inches taller than the tallest tower from the money group.

While this may not be hard science, the idea is not unique. Similar sentiments have been mentioned in many other articles like the first item listed in *6 Ways to Stay Motivated*² which states to “build a business around your passion.”

If you enjoy what you do, if you are passionate about it and it plays to your skills and talents, you will be happier when you are working and thus more motivated to continue, even when things get difficult.

² Jonathan Long, 6 Ways to Stay Motivated, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/278033>

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This also applies to your students. If you create situations where they can choose subject matter that is of interest to them, or have opportunities to be creative about how to solve a problem, in most cases, they will be more engaged and more productive. Here are a few suggestions:

- Put students into small groups to solve a problem, do a challenge or answer a big question. This will allow students to specialize in their role within the group and take greater ownership of their own contribution.
- Create challenges or problems with open-ended solutions. Let students use their own creativity, deductive reasoning, and problem solving skills to propose solutions.
- Allow students to fail! One of the most important parts of problem solving is trying things that don't work. Give students the opportunity to explore without consequence for getting an answer wrong. Any successful person will tell you that they didn't succeed by avoiding failure, they succeeded by not giving up when they did.
- Create a fun environment. Students may be more relaxed and more engaged if the classroom is more inviting. If you teach in a traditional classroom with lots of beiges, whites and browns, add color! Cover the institutional looking walls with artwork- preferably done by students! Play music. Use fun videos. Open windows if you can, or even better, take the class outside (weather permitting). Your students will feel better and chances are, you will too.

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2.) Own your goals.

This tip comes from a Youtube video about how to stay motivated³ which states, "you won't have the perseverance to achieve your goals if they aren't yours."

Owning your goals is the process of actively choosing what your goals are and being mindful about where those choices come from and why.

Very few people actually like being told what to do. It's hard to be enthusiastic about a project that has been thrust upon you by others. Perhaps a specific task is not something that you chose for yourself, but it may be part of a situation that you are passionate about, or a necessary step in a plan to achieve a goal that you believe in. For example, you may hate a certain duty at your job that you dread, but overall, you love your field. Being mindful about the necessity of the task as part of the overall field can help keep you motivated when the task must be done. Of course, if you find that most of the tasks you do in that field are ones that you do not like, it may be time to question whether you want to be in that field after all.

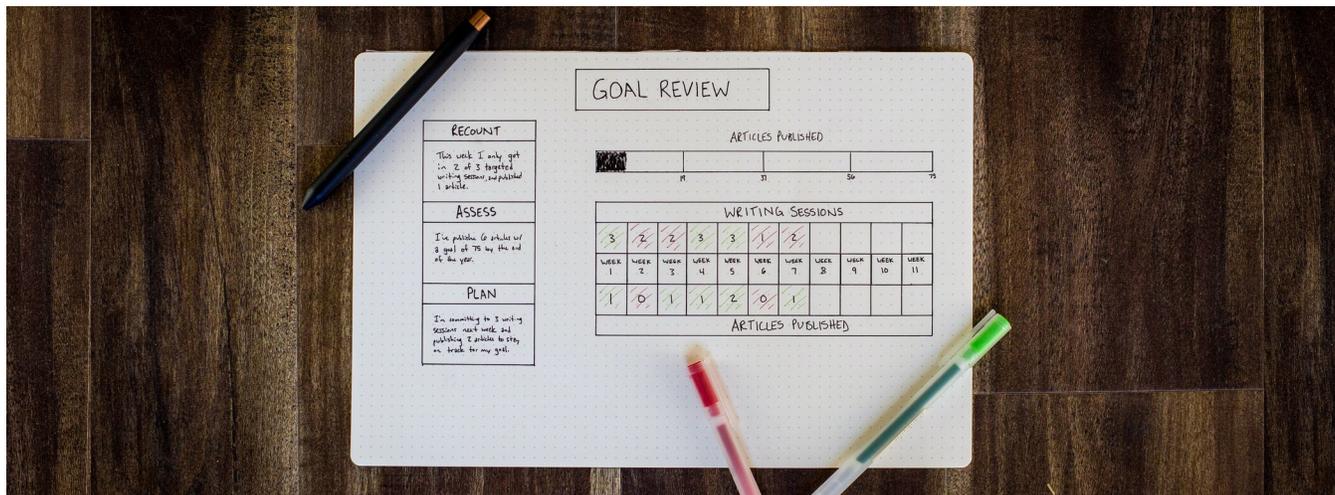
³ TopThink,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnxUdD17iR0>:

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Students rarely get to choose their goals. They are given a select few options when it comes to their classes, their assignments, and their schedule. It's not surprising how often students are far more interested in the extra-curricular activities they choose than school itself. While much of that is necessary, (because, honestly, how many students would actually *choose* to give themselves a chapter of math homework?) there are ways to allow students more ownership in their education. Here are some suggestions:

- Menu boards and choice boards give students multiple options for assignments or projects. The teacher is still able to create the selection, but the more options that are available, more ownership the students will have in their selections.
- Give students a voice in their curriculum. Perhaps there are a number of topics that need to be covered over a term, but the order they are covered in is less critical. Can you have your class vote on which topic to cover next? Will they push the stuff they don't want til the end, or will they try to mix it up a bit so they have more desirable lessons to look forward to?

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3.) Detail your goals.

Ambiguity is motivational poison. Most of the sources we've researched echo this idea. The TopThink video referenced in the last tip calls this "envisioning the details" and points out that the difference between dreams and goals is that dreams can be vague ambiguous outcomes without any actionable path to attainment, but goals have measurable results, and specific paths to completion.

We see this reiterated by Nick Wignall in *10 Psychological Tricks to Stay Motivated and Stick with Your Goals*⁴, ... the more specific, concrete, and available our mental representation of a goal and its benefits are, the more we'll feel motivated to achieve it."

This is a concept that makes more and more sense the more you think about it. Being able to visualize the details of our goals is not just an emotional comfort. It helps us to create an actionable plan towards achieving those goals. At the beginning of this lesson, I mentioned the terrible ambiguity hanging over many educators in regards to the 2020-2021 school year. It can be terribly difficult and stressful to try to make a plan when so many details are still unknown.

In order to plan in circumstances like this, remember that you are not alone. Many educators are in the same position. Look at what other schools have done and what their plans are. Reach out to your peers

⁴ Nick Wignall, *10 Psychological Tricks to Stay Motivated and Stick with Your Goals*, <https://nickwignall.com/stay-motivated/>

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and collectively list all the most likely options for what will be done in your school. Finally, create plans for how you will reach your goals in each situation. Again, you don't have to figure out these plans on your own. Reach out to educators that are also in these situations. Find out what they are doing and how they are dealing with challenges. Chances are, even if your specific circumstance varies from other schools, it will be similar enough that whatever plans you come up with can still be followed.

Once you have a plan you can employ another technique discussed by Mr. Wignall, chunking. Chunking is the process of breaking your goals down into smaller, more easily digestible pieces. While this is listed as a separate technique in Nick's article, it seems more appropriate to include it as part of visualization here. The reason is that chunking, at its heart, is focussing in on those details and isolating them as smaller goals. It allows you to avoid the intimidation of a huge project and instead focus on smaller more easily attainable parts of it. It has the added benefit of providing a sense of satisfaction when that smaller part is completed instead of the feeling hopeless when seeing that the large goal still looms ahead. Being able to maintain a healthy balance of short and long term goals is a powerful asset for maintaining motivation and productivity.

This is a great topic to share with students. Helping students to understand how to organize their goals into attainable tasks and how to break down tasks into easier objectives is profoundly useful in school as well as in a career and in life.

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4.) Appreciate and be appreciated.

As mentioned in tip #1, environment can have a profound effect on motivation. However, this time, I'm not referring to the color of the room, the ambient lights and sounds, and the air quality. In this case I'm referring to the emotional environment. Motivation can be infectious. Being around people who are inspired and enthusiastic about what they're doing can make you more inspired and enthusiastic. Sadly, the opposite is also true. Being around people who are uninspired and unmotivated can destroy your own enthusiasm. So how do you influence your emotional environment so it can best influence you?

We've already talked about how fun is more motivating than money. Well, appreciation and respect are equally effective. In an article on [emergenetics.com](https://www.emergenetics.com)⁵, O. C. Tanner discusses the profound effect that appreciation has on performance in the workplace. "On a surface level, appreciation is good for employee engagement, motivation, and retention. Employee recognition and appreciation can also create unique company culture and strengthen employee relationships."

People want to be appreciated for the work they do, but often don't get that appreciation from the people they work for. You may not be able to change the behavior of a boss or supervisor who fails to acknowledge your efforts or the efforts of your peers. However, you can contribute to having a positive work and/or classroom environment by being proactive about showing appreciation to others and

5 O.C.Tanner, The Psychological Effects of Workplace Appreciation & Gratitude,
<https://www.emergenetics.com/blog/workplace-appreciation-gratitude/>

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encouraging others to do likewise. Showing appreciation isn't difficult, but it does require effort. The following tips can be applied to students and peers alike:

- When someone finishes something, stop what you are doing for a moment to really look at the work. If you don't understand something, ask questions. People are usually eager to talk about what they've done.
- Give honest and relevant feedback. Don't hastily glance and say that something is "nice." Insincerity and dismissiveness will often hurt a person's motivation more than help it.
- If you really don't have time to appreciate something on the fly, let the person know that, but ask if you can look at it at a given time. Suggesting a specific time in a case like this is important. It shows sincerity in your interest.
- Sometimes it may be hard to give positive feedback for something that doesn't impress you or seems lacking. You may need to use your best judgment, but it may be appropriate to be honest. Being careful not to be overly critical, you can tell someone that you know they can do better. Encourage them to keep going, rather than dismissing what they've done. It may not be what the person wants to hear, but it's honest and gives you credibility for the times when you are impressed.

Earlier I mentioned a boss or supervisor whose actions you may not be able to change, but if the above practices are embraced and employed by an entire group whether that be a class, school, or office the effects can at least negate the demotivating attitudes of the boss, or at best the culture may rub off on them. As stated earlier, motivation is infectious!

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5.) Reward yourself. Reward others.

It may seem silly to give yourself rewards, but business professionals and psychologists agree (as well as most of the sources I've already cited) that even the most disciplined adult benefits when he or she consciously and consistently assigns rewards for completing goals. Rewards do not need to be lavish or complicated. Even a simple reward like a favorite dessert or candy, or permission to take a break to do something fun, can have a profound effect on keeping you feeling positive about the task at hand. It's much like the appreciation talked about in the last step, except that in this case you show *yourself* the appreciation.

In practical application, this technique does not need to be only self directed. Simple fun rewards can go a long way to improving the motivation of students, peers, even a superior, who may not get much appreciation themselves. Once again, by practicing these techniques, applying them to others, and encouraging others to do likewise, you can improve the motivations of those around you and create an overall healthier and more enjoyable environment for yourself and those you work with.

In an educational setting, showcasing makes an excellent reward for the completion of a project. Displaying student work in classrooms and hallways is a time honored tradition in schools. With distance learning and blended learning, this tradition takes on a whole new meaning. Talk to the administrators of your school's website and social media. See if you can display student work online, or include it in a school newsletter. One teacher we work with had his students create web pages as part of their projects, which were hosted on the school's server. Motivation swells when students and teachers can take pride in student work.

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6.) Be optimistic.

While this tip originally came from the Johnathan Long article cited earlier, I'm going to use it to encompass several ideas that I feel share the same theme. Mr. Long writes: "When you are constantly optimistic you focus on just the positives, which helps you stay motivated and focused on reaching your goals. The minute you start to bring negative thoughts into your mind is the moment your forward momentum will come to a screeching halt."

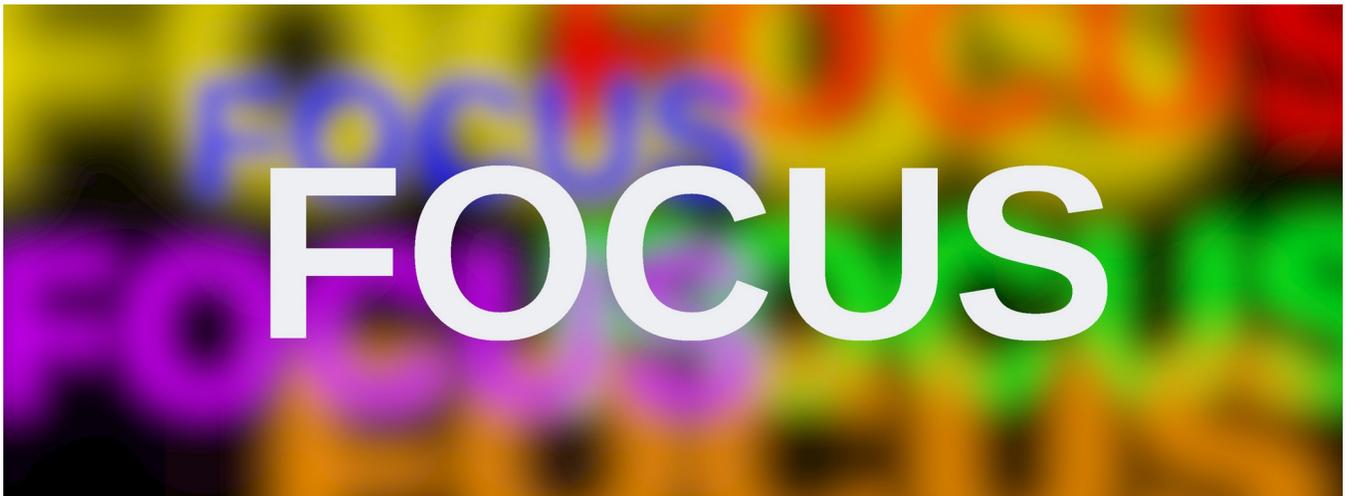
That's not far off from "gentle self-talk" described by Nick Wignall in which he points out that being self critical can be extremely detrimental to your own motivation. (It should be noted that being critical to others can be just as detrimental to their motivation. That's why criticism should always be offered carefully, constructively, and in a positive manner.) Earlier in Tip #4, I described a method for offering feedback when a piece of work fails to live up to expectations. The advice given there for dealing with others is no less relevant when applied to yourself.

It may seem contradictory to the heading "be optimistic," but a big part of being able to be optimistic is understanding that failure will happen. Being optimistic doesn't mean ignoring the possibility of setbacks or mistakes; it means understanding that they will happen but also being confident that the goal will still be met anyway. So when you have an optimistic outlook, it becomes much easier to accept short term failures as nothing more than obstacles to overcome, and opportunities for learning. Here are some tips on remaining optimistic and staying positive:

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- Stay focused on the positive. In practice this means thinking about next steps towards a goal, and ways to use the resources available toward that goal. When dealing with others, the same practices apply.
- Look at mistakes and failures to see what can be learned from the experience. Blame is a motivation killer. It does nothing but costs much. Failures will happen through the process of pursuing any lofty goal. Learn from the mistakes so you can try something different during the next attempt.
- Prepare for failures. Have a plan for when things do not work. Having even a vague strategy for what to do in the case that something does not work out will reduce stress throughout the duration of your project and help keep you productive when the unexpected arises. Of course the more detailed your plan, the more effective this strategy can be.

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7.) Stay focused on your goals.

It may seem self evident, but remaining focused on your goals is a critical component to staying motivated. Distractions are all around all the time. People and devices conspire to steal your attention moment by moment, hour by hour, and day by day. With the unceasing call of distractions to keep you off task, it can seem impossible to meet even simple goals. Here are some tips on how to maintain your focus:

- Create a schedule and stick to it. This can be more challenging than it sounds. You may need to revise your schedule several times until it's fine-tuned enough to work. This means allotting time for distracting elements, but also scheduling time to work toward your goal. Don't forget to allow time for relaxation and fun.
- Keep a notepad handy while you work. When people or events occur that threaten to distract you from your work, make a note of the item on the notepad and go back to your work. Writing it down allows you the peace of mind that you can address the concern later when you've finished working on the task at hand.

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8.) Keep collaborating!

With health and safety at the forefront of educational concerns, it's easy to let collaboration take a back seat. Certainly with the current strategies for managing student interactions prioritizing distance and limited contact, collaboration seems like an unattainable goal. Collaboration, however, is not unattainable and is worth the effort to keep as a priority.

When students collaborate, they share their time, talents and passion for a common goal. This is not only a powerful tool for productivity, it's a powerful motivator. Working together creates accountability, and forces students to learn the difficult lessons of how to share ideas, be responsible, and work as a team.

The following are some tips on how to maintain student collaboration during distance and blended learning:

- Place students into small teams of 2 or 3 students. Negotiating different schedules is a major challenge for students, so keeping teams small will simplify the process.
- As a first group assignment, require that students submit a communication action plan. The action plan should include students sharing contact methods with the relevant identifiers, such as email addresses, social media addresses, or phone numbers. If students are not comfortable sharing personal contact information there are a wealth of free services and/or apps available which allow users to create accounts used for messaging, meetings, or calls. Some examples are: Google Hangouts, Discord, Slack, Zoom, and Skype, just to name a few.

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- The action plan should also include a schedule which indicates at LEAST one time each week when students will be sharing a group communication such a conference call, video meeting, or group chat. The schedule should also indicate times when each individual will be available to be contacted by any of the other team members.
- Require students to keep track of weekly meetings and progress from each team member. Forcing this kind of accountability will help to ensure that students take meeting attendance seriously.
- Encourage roll specialization within the team. With all efforts being made to prevent or limit physical contact between students it's hard for students to work together on the physical aspects of a project, but they can certainly work on different aspects of a project individually and share their progress and directions.

For example, one student can work on a model while another works on the packaging. They can share information and images so the end product looks great when put together. It should be noted that in the inventing industry, different teams are assigned to handle different aspects of a product throughout its development.

- Allow students to be creative in their solutions. Students are creative, energetic, and technologically savvy. When they want to have contact with a fellow student or friend, it is very difficult to stop them. So use the techniques in this lesson to help motivate them to want to work with their teammates and keep the collaboration going.
- Consider using a messaging program in the classroom. With students spaced apart or working with dividers between them it may be time to flip the script on the conventional wisdom that says to put mobile devices away. It may be useful to have your class participating in group discussions as part of class interactions. Many messaging programs feature group discussion features that can work this way, and some are even geared toward educators, giving teachers administrative controls.

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Conclusion

Maintaining motivation is an on-going challenge in any situation. Nothing worth doing is ever easy. Worthwhile goals require work. There are always times when you just don't want to do the work for any number of reasons. The key to maintaining motivation is to not let these times turn into stress, doubt, or fear.

Staying motivated doesn't mean working yourself to exhaustion, it means managing your energy levels and enthusiasm in a way that ultimately allows you to continue moving towards your goals and wanting to do so over the long term. If you can master that in yourself and encourage it in your peers and students, you and all the people around you will benefit. The rewards will be greater job satisfaction and a more enjoyable working environment.