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THE MOTIVATION GAP

Ronald Gosewisch

While there is little a teacher can do about classroom size or composition, teachers can change the attitudes of their pupils. Teachers can motivate pupils to learn. In making this statement, however, one has to add that there is more than one way to motivate people, pupils in particular. The purpose of this paper is to review the levels of motivation, because there seems to be a lack of use in the classroom of several of the motivation levels, a motivation gap, so to speak. Though these levels may be in use elsewhere, such as in the home, this writer wishes to show, in a very general way, that they can be used in the classroom as well.

As mentioned above, motivation can be divided into several levels and can take on many forms. The most basic level is physical sensation, such as food or touch. Next is audio/visual sensations, such as a kind word or a smile. The third level is materials, such as toys or other objects. Closely related to the second and third levels is the use or manipulation of these objects in such a way to bring forth audio/visual sensation in the form of approval, e.g. "Good boy!" or "Nice work!" together with a smile. The next, or fifth, level is a method of substitution: the giving of tokens in place of material objects or audio/visual sensation. Following this is perhaps the most commonly used level of motivation in secondary education: the knowledge of results, the evaluating through testing and, in turn, letting the pupils know how they have done. Finally, the highest level of motivation is internal or self motivation.¹

Although it has been used in elementary schools, the basic level of motivation, in the form of food or touch, is, in this writer's opinion not appropriate for secondary education. Food can be costly and touch, recommended by some Western educators for use in elementary schools, is certainly culturally inappropriate in Japanese middle and senior high schools. Even if feeding and touching were economically feasible and permissible, this writer is struck with the image of training dogs and seals. Surely our pupils are one level above the canines and phocidae.

The widely used second level, audio/visual sensation, is, indeed, the human level, as it is based upon language to such a great extent. This together with knowledge of results, comprises, with rare exceptions, the entire body of motivation techniques used in the classroom. A kind word or a smile are the chief motivators used before and during learning. Knowledge of results, testing, is the motivator used after learning has presumably already taken place.
The next three levels of motivation, and combinations of the same, constitute the main concern of this paper. Main, because these are, perhaps, the most neglected forms of motivation that could, should, be utilized to motivate pupils during the process of learning. The third and fourth levels, material objects and their manipulation, are, to some extent, present in the classroom in the form of workbooks. Such materials, however, must be attractive to the pupils lest they be ignored or boring to the pupils and, therefore, be of no use as motivators. Word and grammar games that attract interest are appropriate. Word games, such as Scrabble or Boggle, are interesting and adaptable to the middle school English language classroom as they can be played with little command of the language other than vocabulary. In the high school English class, Story Squares could be adapted to be more interesting and varied than those found in the text of the same name by Knowles and Sasaki. Word games in the middle school foreign language class could prove useful in reinforcing the pupils’ vocabularies, while grammar games in the high school foreign language class could help with the development of the pupils’ powers of imagination as well as reinforce their grammatical skills. Both types could be employed as motivators of the third level.

To see more clearly how games and educational toys might be used profitably in the classroom, level five must be considered. This level of motivation involves substitution or tokens. Tokens could be given to individuals who do well in the regular classroom exercises and, once a previously agreed upon number of tokens were accumulated, these could be then traded for privileges. For example, a certain length of time to use some games as mentioned above. (This would mean making some adjustment in classroom management by setting off one section or corner of the classroom for such purpose.) As Dr. L. J. Peter states,

“A token can be anything that is used to represent something else. Token economies are universally employed. Money, beads, shells, script—all are used as a means of exchange. Adults collect money, trading stamps, scores, or poker chips that can be exchanged for each other or for goods and services. Children’s behavior can be reinforced through the use of tokens, such as money, stamps, chips, stars, or check marks on a score card, which can be exchanged for toys, food, privileges and other satisfying reinforcers.”

While envy and frustration on the part of slower pupils are possible undesirable side effects of using such a token system, if the teacher allows all his pupils the chance to earn tokens, the privileges of using educational games could then be motivation for all his pupils to work harder. This might be especially true were the teacher to take the time to introduce the games by making a contest of it. Students who did well during this introduction of the game could then be given tokens right away. In other words, if it were managed well, the privileges
of using such educational games could be just the motivation that many pupils need to break them from their lethargy.

Privileges would be earned by the accumulation of tokens (level five). Trading tokens for the priviledge of playing educational games (level three) would allow the teacher to evaluate and praise the pupils' manipulation of those games (level four). Thus, the gap between motivation levels two (audio/visual sensation) and six (knowledge of results) could be bridged. This could serve to reinforce the pupils' knowledge of subject matter and to further stimulate them toward the highest level of motivation. By continual effort, using the various levels and forms of motivation, teachers can lead young people to this final form of motivation, a frame of mind clearly in keeping with life-long learning and development. This is the reason this writer has written this rather wordy attempt at giving a few hints, hopefully helpful in a small way, towards the attainment of this goal.

BACKNOTES

