

**HOW TO MOTIVATE
THE RELUCTANT LEARNER**

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Introduction

Educators from elementary to secondary levels have met Bill Bright and Sam Slack. These students have features we recognize. The first student, Bill Bright, comes to class on time, has his homework done, eagerly raises his hand to answer questions, volunteers to go to the chalkboard, does his work neatly. His teachers say he is a motivated student. And they love him. Our other student, Sam Slack, comes to class tardy (when he comes at all), seldom does his homework, sits in the back row, daydreams. His teachers say he is an unmotivated student. And they leave him alone.

Bill Bright made A's and B's, and passed easily to the next grade. Sam Slack made D's and F's, failed, went to the principal's office, became a behavior problem, and is now on the "dropout track." Sam Slack may well be lost as a member of the student community and possibly lost as a productive member of the society we live in—a society, which places a high value on formal education as the entry ticket to most jobs and careers.

Myths of Motivation

Why are some students motivated and some not? We have said, "Some have it, and some don't," as if motivation were genetically imprinted. This view is the "innate ability fallacy" the false belief that performance is mostly a function of innate abilities. But quick and easy answers don't tell much about the nature of motivation, about what can be done to increase motivation, or even why people can become **unmotivated**, which they obviously can and do.

Motivation for learning is not always tied to basic ability. Many students with apparent ability are not motivated for study, and many students with little apparent ability are highly motivated for study. We cannot pin motivation down to cultural advantage or deprivation, because some children with every advantage become dropouts, and children from the ghetto become Rhodes Scholars. We often characterize motivation as a mysterious source of energy, but how it is created and how it evolves seems to defy understanding.

Some educators and psychologists believe that the source of motivation is an **inner drive**, the inner desire to achieve and get ahead. Others maintain that motivated people commit themselves to purposes, goals, and ideals, and this **commitment** spurs their achievement. But these statements simply describe what we call motivated behavior; they don't tell us how and why "some have it, and some don't." Nonetheless, many people—professionals and laymen alike—hold fast to the notion that motivation is an energy or drive that emanates from **within** a person. If we really believe that, then we might as well stop trying to increase Sam Slack's motivation; we should just leave him alone, because he doesn't have that "commitment," that "inner drive," within him. This presents us with a rather bleak picture—fortunately for Sam

Slack, it is a false one. We **can** motivate our students to learn. We can help them succeed. But how should we do this?

The most recognized approach to motivation has assumed that each student has within him or her, if we can only find it, a spark, however faint, that can be fanned into a flame for learning. The traditional approach to motivation for learning has been an approach aimed at fanning this hypothesized interior spark. But sporadic efforts to fan this flame may or may not help the student to any great extent. We may also tend to underrate our influence on the student, or shift blame to the student when our efforts don't seem to work. In fact, motivation is not an inner "thing" within the person. Rather, students become motivated to learn as the result of outside influences. The better organized and directed these outside influences, the better chance of success for the student.

The Negative Approach to Motivation and Why It Won't Work

Often, unmotivated students exhibit behavior that competes with the teacher's efforts to teach. Frequently, such students do not attend to instruction, nor do they participate in regular classroom exercises. Being "off-task," they will wander about the class, talk inappropriately to other students, and engage in a variety of disruptive behaviors.

Naturally, a teacher will make every attempt to control such incompatible behavior. And, how can one talk about positive motivation without first getting students to focus, to attend to instruction? The use of aversive measures becomes the "treatment of choice" for misbehavior. The teacher might take away points, embarrass the student, send the student to the office, take away privileges, isolate the student (send him/her to the corner).

The use of aversive consequences for undesirable behavior has a long history in education--all the way back to antiquity (Marrou, 1956). Education and corporal punishment existed as much with the Hellenistic Greek as it did in early Jewish and Egyptian cultures during the time of the Pharaohs. "To hold out the hand for the cane" was an incisive way of saying "Study!"

Caning and paddling of students by school officials for whatever reason is not approved of or allowed in most schools in the U.S. However, the teacher and administrator are permitted to use other forms of punishment such as threats, sarcasm, more homework, suspension, and the ultimate punisher, failure.

However, the power of aversive practices has eroded over the past 25 or 30 years they simply don't work like they used to. Sam Slack still cuts class, avoids studying, and disrupts other students. The parents don't support the school's punishment measures, further weakening the power of punishment. Reasons for the lack of parental enforcement of school decisions and recommendations vary from "loss of family values" to divorce, drugs, indifference, and delinquency. The list goes on. Schools blame parents, as if the problem could be solved by blaming someone.

Aversive measures, or punishments, lose their power to control undesirable behavior (Matson & DiLorenzo, 1984). As educators have seen, punishment has side effects such as student hostility, resentment, and “dropping out” to avoid punishment. The removal of punishment may cause the original behavior to return, usually at a higher level and frequency. Sam Slack sits sullen and combative in the back of the class.

Often punishment aggravates, rather than eliminates the behavior. Obviously, punishment is not a successful or lasting method for controlling behavior.

What we need is a revolution in our thinking about how to manage students’ behavior. Sam Slack doesn’t do his work. He has given up. If he hasn’t yet dropped out of school physically, he has dropped out mentally and emotionally. As his name suggests, he has slackened, he has lost the motivation that would compel him to learn. In contrast, Bill Bright can be counted on to be sharp, attentive, and responsible.

What if Sam Slack were given an assignment he could do well? What if there were math problems he could complete rapidly, with a score of 90%? If he couldn’t write an error-free paragraph, what if he could write three correct sentences and get an A on an assignment, probably for the first time in months or even years? What if, for once, he could receive recognition and approval from his teacher for work he could actually complete well? This scenario would reinforce both Sam and his teachers. Sam would feel he had succeeded. And his teachers would feel they had succeeded. If we changed our thinking to emphasize a model for **positive reinforcement** rather than punishment, we could create these kinds of success experiences for Sam. The model based on positive reinforcement is more humane, and most critically for educators, it **works**. It clearly works far better than punishment.

The particular model of punishment used now in schools muscles out the development of procedures that could lead to more effective behavior management and positive motivation.

To start our thought revolution, we should begin by rejecting punishment as a regular practice. Here are four good reasons:

1. Most undesirable behaviors can be eliminated without the use of aversive consequences.
2. The results of punishment frequently create undesirable side effects, including increased aggression, resentment, anger, and vandalism. The student is sullen, unresponsive. His rate of learning drops off.
3. For punishment to have maximum effect it must be swiftly and surely carried out. However, because of certain cultural, economic, and family changes, school and family backup of punishment may be inadequate or non-existent.
4. Punishment is a poor builder of skills; positive reinforcement is far superior.

Once we reject the punishment model, more effective, positive techniques for management of behavior are available to us. Motivation is not a mysterious wellspring dried up in Sam Slack and running freely in Bill Bright. Their motivation or lack of motivation is the result of the ways their environments have responded to them.

How do we recognize motivation in students? We see their performance, their behavior. Motivated students are usually on-task. They are eager to learn and eager to show what they have learned. They are the Bill Brights of any classroom. But how did they get that way? And why aren't the Sam Slacks, found in any classroom, motivated in similar fashion? Actually, Sam **is** motivated but for different things, and by different people in different settings. Sam Slack may be seeking attention from his classmates, who will laugh at his antics, or admire his defiance of authority. Or, his audience may be the "boy-gang," a quasi-delinquent group on their way to serious misdemeanors and crimes.

If Bill Bright has home support, which is likely, and Sam Slack doesn't, which is also likely, it is probable that their current behavior patterns began early in their lives. The "behavioral history" of both is important to our understanding of their current educational performance. A relevant study can shed light on this matter. It shows that students who come from an economically deprived background bring to their first day of schooling only 60 hours of home training and experiences that are related to school performance. Kids from middle-class families, on the other hand, bring 1,000 hours (Adams, 1990).

Of course, poverty doesn't **cause** this disparity, but it is clear that persons deprived economically are frequently behind academically and have many knowledge gaps. To be sure, many exceptions exist. Still, you can imagine the effect such intellectual deprivation has upon the child: He or she is starting far behind the middle-class child in language skills, numeration, reading, listening skills, and experience with ideas, events, and people.

Does it help to understand the backgrounds of Bill and Sam? Such understanding prevents us from playing the "blame game" — blaming the victim (the student), his parents, his teachers, the educational system, poverty. And, there is little gain achieved by saying that Sam is simply unmotivated. Does understanding the backgrounds of Bill and Sam provide clues as to how we might motivate Sam to be a better performing student? No, because the diagnosis of Sam's problem doesn't lead us to obvious methods of increasing his motivation. We may blunder in our attempts to fan Sam's latent "spark." Of course, Sam will suffer the most for our failed attempts. We must, therefore, proceed in a better-organized manner to inspire our reluctant learner to unaccustomed achievement.

We know motivation only as behavior. When we examined Bill Bright's eagerness to learn, his energy to acquire knowledge, the joy he gains from the learning process, we noted the characteristics of his motivation. We sensed Bill's motivation through the **behavior** we observe. How was Bill's motivated behavior established, maintained, and increased? Experiments in motivation and learning can answer this. Behavior is increased by its consequences—that is, by what follows the behavior after it occurs.

Educators are not naive to the role of reward and punishment. They recognize reinforcement theory when they hear it described. They learned in Psychology 101 that Pavlov's dog would salivate to a bell when it was paired with food, that pigeons in a learning lab will peck a disc for grain, and that rats will press a bar for food pellets. We can say that the pigeon and the rat are **motivated** to perform, motivated to work for their food. In Psychology, we also learned that if you shocked the animal — punished it — it wouldn't emit the behavior at all.

Reinforcement Principles Applied to Real Life Situations

Reinforcement theory isn't just about food pellets and grain. Educators know about the student's dread of the red pen, and they know how a student will smile when he reads "Very Good!" on an exam. We can take reinforcement theory out of the laboratory and apply it to Bill's and Sam's life experiences, including those of the classroom. Clearly, Bill Bright's classroom behavior developed because he received positive consequences for it—the compliments and smiles of his teachers and his parents. Moreover, Bill's parents encouraged him, talked to him about his school experiences, and told him many times that education will unlock the doors of opportunity for him, that he must have it to succeed in life and get the things he enjoys. Bill Bright is in a win-win situation.

Sam Slack's situation is not so fortunate. Sam's father is gone. His mother doesn't get home from work until 6:00 p.m. She starts preparing dinner while Sam and his younger brother and sister watch a TV show. Sam's mother doesn't have much time to talk to him—she has dishes to wash and clothes to wash and iron. The kids have never stopped watching TV, even while eating dinner. After dinner, their mother announces that they must now do homework. Sam says he doesn't have any; an argument ensues about his veracity; his mother gives up and joins in the TV watching and later makes a lengthy telephone call.

The picture painted by this scenario, bad as it seems to be, is often worse for the many Sam Slacks who attend schools throughout the U.S. And the paucity of communication, the lack of vital parental involvement, the absence of queries about school and the events children experience during the day, communicate low priorities for education within families.

Despite this dismal depiction, we must realize one favorable circumstance about Sam: He is still in school. Yes, he's on the dropout track, and he will drop out of school if educators don't intervene quickly. But right now, his classroom experience can change, can influence him to stay rather than leave, can motivate Sam. Once he has left school and escaped that punishing experience, it will be much harder to convince him of any value to be found in learning. Time is critical. What feasible options do we have, and how do we implement them?

For productive strategies, let us return to some applied reinforcement principles. Recall that **behavior is determined by its consequences**. Responses to situations are learned established or extinguished by what immediately follows those responses. If positive consequences follow, then the behavior is learned; if the consequences are punishing, the behavior will be extinguished or suppressed. If Sam attempts an essay and his teacher mentions that eight out of ten sentences are correct, he is likely to remember what he did correctly. If, on the other hand, his teacher returns the essay with only "Bad grammar" written on it in red, he is simply reminded that he's no good at writing and hates English. If the consequences are neither rewarding nor punishing, the behavior will simply not be learned. If the behavior has been established but is no longer being rewarded, it will, in time, no longer be emitted.

It's easy for us to characterize the consequences of Bill Bright's responses to school and academic learning as positive and reinforcing. And, it's easy for Bill to emit responses that will be reinforced because they are well established in his "response repertoire." His behavioral history and current family support provide assurance that he will continue on a path of accomplishment. Bill exemplifies the adage, "Nothing succeeds like success." In other words, **reinforcement is the primary source of motivation.**

This is good news for educators who thought motivation was fueled by some mysterious, untouchable inner drive. We **can** motivate students to learn by reinforcing their desirable behavior. Unfortunately, we can also discourage students by punishing them or ignoring them altogether. Just as Bill has enjoyed praise from all quarters, Sam has been deprived of it. We see where he is now: Although a ninth-grade student, Sam Slack reads on a fifth-grade level and finds it difficult to write a correct sentence; he has difficulty with subject-verb agreement, with spelling, and with punctuating his sentences, especially if they contain quotes. He can do very little that will please his teachers because of his limited repertoire of academic skills. Actually, school is not very important to him, and the peers with whom he associates strongly reinforce this attitude.

The school recognizes Sam's deficiencies and has assigned him to a remediation class twice a week for two 50-minute periods. Sam is required to take his textbooks to this class, and the remedial teacher, with the assistance of an aide, does his best to do as much one-on-one tutoring as time will allow for his class of 25 students, all needing individualized attention.

Still, Sam shows little motivation. Matters are deteriorating. A conference is called by the school counselor, and Sam's mother is invited to attend at 2:30 p.m. on Tuesday. She declines because she can't get off work. The conference is held; all agree that Sam needs help. His math teacher makes the point that Sam refuses to take responsibility for his learning, and unless he does, there's little she can do to help him. His English teacher makes the point that although Sam is rapidly becoming a behavior problem, he's not a "bad boy," and that maybe he would respond to a "strong male model" in the community who would take interest in Sam and help him. The counselor says that she will counsel Sam and try to "work through his feelings of low self-esteem."

We could go on describing this rather typical scenario, but the most needed, the most practical step that could be taken to help Sam is not being addressed. Sam desperately needs **success** experiences in school instead of experiences for which he is constantly being punished. More homework won't motivate him, nor will raising standards lead to greater achievement. Suspending him won't motivate him, nor will requiring five 50-minute remedial periods a week giving Sam more of the same. Above all, there is nothing to be gained by blaming him, his mother, his absent father, his school, his teachers, poverty, or even society.

Of course, I do not suggest that his negative behavior be ignored, especially if it interferes with the learning of other students. What I am recommending is an effective remedial program in which Sam can **succeed**. Students are motivated by doing their work well. Having opportunities to do school work well creates motivation in students. Sam can't do school work well and he is consequently being punished every day he comes to school. School for Sam is a

continuous and bitter experience of failure. Raising his hand to answer questions has long been extinguished in Sam's repertoire of responses. When he attempts to do his math homework, he finds it too difficult—he just doesn't understand the assignment because the class has moved far beyond his poor power to compute.

The Essential Experience for At-Risk Students

The student who is at risk of failing must have a **fail-safe** learning experience for academic achievement. Sam Slack, who is on the dropout track, will not survive another year of personal punishment. To find solutions to Sam's problems we must change our thinking about motivation and learning. It's imperative for us to create a learning environment where Sam can succeed. Each success experience will build momentum for continued success. Such positive reinforcing events create what we call **motivation**. Finally, we can close the gap between the reinforcing environment where Bill Bright has spent the whole of his academic career, and the punishing environment where Sam has languished ever since he entered school, already three years behind.

When we accept this idea regarding the source of motivation, an idea accepted by an overwhelming number of learning specialists, we are then challenged to “engineer” a fail-safe learning experience that teaches basic skills to a 100% level of mastery. Dropout prevention, the eradication of illiteracy, workplace literacy, science education, tech prep, school-to-work transition, and successful competition in the global economy—achieving any of these goals depends absolutely upon proficiency in basic academic skills.

Through the employment of progressive learning technology, **all students can learn twice as much in the school day** as they are learning today. If this astonishing feat can be accomplished, what impact do you think it would have on the long list of educational goals and objectives demanded by various reform groups? Such groups would be very satisfied with a two-fold increase in achievement. Teachers and school officials would be ecstatic, parents would shed tears of joy, students would love it, and our politicians would, of course, take the credit. We would cease all our hand wringing and our mournful predictions about losing out to Japan and other nations. **All** students could benefit, and the many Sam Slacks populating our public schools would experience **success**—many for the first time. And, as we all know, success experiences generalize to other areas of our lives. Discovering that we can do one thing well encourages us to try other things. We gain self-confidence and self-esteem. We learn to stop saying “I can't” and learn to say “I'll try.” Think what this would mean for Sam.

Listed below are feasible steps that can be taken now that will rapidly teach basic skills to deficient students. Basic skills must be taught first and thoroughly, for they are the building blocks for higher-order language and math skills.

1. Assess the academic needs of each student. The assessment process must pinpoint the student's deficiencies. Effective procedures definitely exist for accomplishing this task.

2. Prescribe exactly the instructional lessons that will teach the skills the student needs and no more.
3. Next, organize and format instruction to facilitate learning. Preferably, the instructional material should be programmed--either in a print-based or computer-based format. Such a format will permit self-instruction and self-paced learning, two essential needs for individualized instruction. Mastery skills should be raised to a criterion of no less than 90%. Certain instructional techniques can take the student even beyond 100% mastery, to what is called “true” mastery or “fluency” (Lindsley, 1992; Binder, 1990).
4. Maximize student participation. This principle suggests that very little learning can occur merely through watching someone else perform a task. In short, effective learning principles underlie the age-old truism that we learn by doing.
5. Validate the effectiveness of the instructional approach. Any approach or learning system proposed should be supported by unequivocal research that demonstrates its power to obtain consistent and significant results.
6. Create a **valid** accountability system. Holding everybody accountable for the learning that takes place in the classroom is actually holding **nobody** accountable. Different contributors to the learning process should be held responsible for their particular functions and required performance. Whoever selects instructional materials should be held accountable for the proven effectiveness of them. The principal must be held responsible for the teaching and all other activity that goes on in the school. The schools of education must be held responsible for graduating teachers who can teach effectively when given proven instructional materials. Students are expected to participate in their own learning under optimal and positive reinforcing conditions. Accountability doesn't stop with these examples. Others who play a role in the educational process should also be mentioned – government, parents, and courts (which are concerned with matters of equity in funding schools). The list is long because education receives so much of society's treasures – both human and physical. The most important contribution of a comprehensive and fair accountability system is that of assuring quality control and consistently valuable outcomes of the educational process.
7. Ensure the equitability of the approach. Many approaches and materials discriminate against diverse learners – those with disabilities and those who are impoverished. These students are usually hurt when highly promoted programs do not work. High failure rates for disadvantaged students cannot be tolerated. Equal access to an education should not simply entail using the same educational approaches with all children; the objective is to use approaches that best meet the needs of particular children. One size simply does not fit all.
8. Ascertain that the costs of the approach and its implementation are reasonable. Costs of implementing and operating an approach should be compared to benefits expected. Approaches which are capable of bringing about significant improvement to the greatest number of children should be given priority.

The above criteria can be used by educators to establish the superiority of one instructional approach over another. Fad-driven methods, which are frequently mandated by school districts as dogma, permeate classroom instruction in many places in our nation, leading to the dismal failure of children (Carnine, 1993). Teachers – the users of good and bad programs – can insist that these approaches stand the test of objective assessment and outcome data analysis. Does the approach teach the material to all students? Can we test whether students have learned the material?

Conclusion

No child wants to fail in anything. For reasons described in this paper, many students are defenseless against an educational system where failure is accepted. Failure is even rationalized as an inevitable outcome for many, many children in our public school system.

Unfortunately, staggering numbers of children do fail – the system sees to it. But in another sense, our educational system also fails. Neither child nor system need to fail, however. Such an outcome can be avoided if teachers are given more effective tools with which to teach – tools based upon true learning technology and not upon an impotent technology incorporated in the conventional textbook, no matter how it is colored, or how many pictures and graphs are included.

Many children who fail in school also fail elsewhere – in their home, community, and with their peer group. But schools can be a major source of success, and when it is, the negative consequences of failure are avoided, and the so-called reluctant learner can become a positive, achieving person.

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APPENDIX

Recommended Resources for Publications on Accelerated Learning and Superior Instructional Practices

1. Pace Learning Systems, Inc.
3710 Resource Drive
Tuscaloosa, AL 35401
1-800-826-7223
www.pacelearning.com

PLS develops and markets accelerated learning products in basic skills, employability skills, and life skills.

2. The Institute for Social and Educational Research
3710 Resource Drive
Tuscaloosa, AL 35401
(205) 758-2885
www.behavior-science-press.org

Request papers on:

“How to Motivate the Reluctant Learner”

“School Reform--A Different View, A Different Solution”

The Institute has also recently introduced the Dropout Assessment and Prevention System, which identifies potential school dropouts, assesses their needs, and describes strategies to keep them in school.

3. The Center for Individualized Instruction
Rick Kubina, Editor
The Pennsylvania State University
Department of Educational and School Psychology and Special Education
231 CEDAR Building
University Park, PA 16802-3106
(814) 863-2400

The *Journal of Precision Teaching* is a multidisciplinary publication dedicated to a science of human behavior that includes direct, continuous and standard measurement. The journal contains articles that describe applied principles of accelerated learning.

4. The Association for Direct Instruction (ADI)
P. O. Box 10252
Eugene, OR 97440
(503) 485-1293
www.adihome.org

Effective School Practices is the professional journal of ADI. This organization is in the vanguard in promoting validated school practices.

5. The National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators (NCITE)
805 Lincoln
Eugene, OR 97401
(503) 683-7543
<http://idea.uoregon.edu/~ncite>

This organization publishes numerous professional papers on school reform, with an emphasis on the process for selecting and implementing valid educational approaches. An excellent essay, representative of NCITE, is entitled “Forward from the Basics--Business and Educational Reform.”

6. The Association for Behavior Analysis
258 Wood Hall
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008
(616) 387-4994
www.wmich.edu/aba/

During its annual conferences, papers are presented and seminars are conducted on educational reform and instructional advances. The ABA takes a leadership role in providing the scientific underpinnings of effective educational practices.