

Motivation and self esteem

Learning is not just a cognitive exercise: it involves the whole person. The need to motivate pupils is evident, but it is often assumed that this is best done by offering such extrinsic rewards as merits, grades, gold stars and prizes. There is ample evidence that challenges this assumption.

Pupils will not only invest effort in a task if they believe that they can achieve something. If a learning exercise is seen as a competition, then everyone is aware that there will be losers as well as winners: those who have a track record as losers will see little point in trying. Thus, the problem is to motivate everyone, even though some are bound to achieve less than others. In tackling this problem, the type of feedback given is very important. Many research studies support this assertion. Examples are:

- ¥ Pupils told that feedback will help you to learn learn more than those told that how you do tells us how smart you are and what grades you ll get ; the difference is greatest for low attainers (Newman and Schwager, 1995).
- ¥ Those given feedback as marks are likely to see it as a way of comparing themselves with others (ego-involvement), those given only comments see it as helping them to improve (task-involvement): the latter group out-performs the former (Butler, 1987).
- ¥ In a competitive system, low attainers attribute their performance to lack of ability , high attainers to their effort; in a task-oriented system, all attribute to effort, and learning is improved, particularly amongst low attainers (Craven *et al.*, 1991).
- ¥ A comprehensive review of research studies of feedback showed that feedback improved performance in 60% of them. In the cases where it was not helpful, the feedback turned out to be merely a judgement or grading with no indication of how to improve (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996).

In general, feedback given as rewards or grades enhances ego — rather than task — involvement. It can focus pupils attention on their ability rather than on the importance of effort, damaging the self-esteem of low attainers and leading to problems of learned helplessness (Dweck, 1986). Feedback that focuses on what needs to be done can encourage all to believe that they can improve. Such feedback can enhance learning, both directly through the effort that can ensue, and indirectly by supporting the motivation to invest such effort.

References

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