

## MOTIVATION 101

### Defining motivation

What moves you to act? What makes you invest time and energy in one task but not another? These are the kinds of questions that concern motivational researchers.

Researchers generally define motivation as something that influences or explains:

- why a person will start a task;
- whether or person will approach or avoid a task;
- how much effort a person will put into a task;
- whether or not a person will continue to work on the task once they start

### What it's not

Often, we hear from teachers that “my students are simply not motivated”. In other words, there is a tendency for teachers to think of motivation as a personality trait – students either have it or they don't. Although it is certainly possible to identify students who appear more or less motivated in a classroom through their behavior, it is important to note that *motivation is NOT a personality trait*.

Consider yourself. I bet you that there are times when you feel like you can take on the world. This probably happens when you feel empowered and supported, competent, and generally love what you're doing. Now, I'm sure that there are times when you don't feel this way – why is that? Is it because you feel less competent? Less supported? Less empowered? Or maybe you simply don't value what you're working on?

Now let's go back to the student(s) that appear unmotivated in your class. Take them out of your classroom and place them in a setting where they're working on something that they love to do – maybe it's an athletic field, maybe it's at their place of work... If you observed them there, I bet you will see a totally different child. Again, *motivation is not a personality trait*.

### Top 10 Facts About Motivation

1. Motivation is changeable – it is not a personality trait. Altering the task or the general learning environment can change it.
2. Competence is at the core of motivation. When you feel like you can do the work, you're more likely to do it.
3. But... sometimes it's not enough to feel like you can do the work. You must also value it in some way – maybe it's something that interests you, or something that you find useful for future goals (e.g., job, college).
4. When students perceive the task to be relevant to their lives, they are more likely to value the task.

5. When you are placed in a setting where you feel autonomous (or empowered), competent, and that you belong, you are more likely to feel intrinsically motivated.
6. The quality of behavior is generally much better when an individual feels intrinsically as opposed to extrinsically motivated. In other words, you're more likely to put in more effort, persist longer, and learn more when the source of the motivation is yourself not others.
7. Although other people can be powerful motivators, it is generally better to decrease social comparison if you want *all* students to be motivated. Social comparison generally works as a motivator for stronger students; for weaker students, it is usually a deterrent. In other words, don't set others as the standard; set the task as the standard (e.g., don't grade on a curve).
8. Rewards can be tricky. Simple extrinsic rewards generally do not promote lasting motivation. If you want to sustain motivation, it's much more important to find ways to get students to value the task and feel more competent about what they're working on. Rewards can backfire if they're not equitable (so everyone feels like they all have a chance to get them), if they don't make students feel competent about what they're doing, and if students don't feel in control (i.e., teacher is dangling a carrot on a stick).
9. Students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated when they know what they know and do not know. In other words, there is a symbiotic relationship between motivation and self-regulated learning.
10. Given this research, [ALL-ED](#) routines of group learning, self-regulation, and planning with clarity, access, rigor, and relevance are central to fostering motivation.