

LEARNING ALTERNATIVES: THE KEYS TO MOTIVATING UNMOTIVATED STUDENTS

by Don Glines

OVERVIEW

PERSONAL ATTENTION for each student—not a cliché but a reality in any size school enrollment—is the missing link in the overwhelming number of cases of youth who are labeled “unmotivated.” For most, a successful reversal to “motivated” requires a search for a confluence of mind, spirit, and body. Evaluating only cognitive growth through language and math scores begs the question, for almost always the desired outcomes involve a priority focus on the affective and/or psychomotor components of living and learning.

People are motivated to learn and can learn **unequally** in the various fields of pursuit. However, every year numbers of K-12 students are categorized as unmotivated for not performing to “standards” in achievement and discipline. **Multitudes of educators** over many decades have tried to find, **without great success**, the keys to unlock guaranteed approaches for motivating these youth to “learn” conventional required courses in traditional structured classrooms.

Ironically, recent efforts to **assign** unmotivated students to what are perceived to be “alternative school programs” have not improved the results. Even teachers in these different settings are asking how to “motivate the unmotivated.” The obvious observation is that neither conventional nor alternative forms of “schooling,” when **assigned** to all, are the best learning environments.

Leaders of LEARNING ALTERNATIVES FOR EVERYONE (as contrasted to the misconceived “alternative education for the FEW”) **have long recognized that uniform-one-size-fits-all patterns of alternative structures and curriculum for those considered unmotivated do not work any better than the uniform-one-size-fits-all conventional schooling maximizes learning for “regular” students in “regular” schools.** In the latter, approximately thirty percent of the youth appear successful through the “grin-and-bear-it” approach to achieve report card markings for ego (honor rolls), for eligibility for athletic or college scholarships, or to prevent “grounding” by parents, but most are not truly excited with their classes or learning environments. In 1971, outspoken and noted sociologist Paul Goodman stated in *Compulsory Miseducation*: “Modern education fails for a number of reasons...Educators have convinced most laypersons that when students fail it is because they have chosen to reject or repel the wholesome ministrations prepared for them.”

Educational efforts may never reach 100% of the students labeled unmotivated. This would require dramatic change in socio-economic conditions, and new bio-chemical-medical discoveries enhancing personality, intelligence, memory, and perception. The current success ratios are lowest in states where the focus is on one model. As illustration, administrators take students out of a “regular program” and place them in a **uniform** “alternative,” of 20-30 youth assigned to one classroom with a teacher and an aide. They assign the same books to study lessons they had just failed to prepare them to return to the “regular” school which had previously rejected them. The officials then wonder why this structure motivates only a few.

When multiple learning alternatives covering the great majority of conditions causing alienations are created and selected by student, family, and facilitator choice, perhaps as high as 90-95 percent of the youth

can be motivated to learn **what is important to them**, and thus become successful members of their various communities.

In 2002, a ten-year federal Department of Education study cited increased graduation rates. However, a meta-analysis of the data revealed that when programs labeled “alternative” were removed, the national graduation rates had actually decreased during the 1990-2000 period. Good optional opportunities can make a significant difference for many students.

REASONS

There are diverse circumstances leading to lack of motivation to study traditional, assigned “schooling studies.” Though not uncommon for some students to have a “problem” within only one component category, others are affected by a combination of factors—overlapping two to five of perhaps nine or ten “categories” of reasons. However, it is “amazing” how many motivation dilemmas can be resolved by simply creating successful programs for each individual **built upon strengths and interests rather than weaknesses and failures**. Conventional curriculum-driven assigned schools mirror the latter, while student-centered alternatives reflect the former.

Those leading successful self-selected alternatives programs are sensitive and accept treating the “whole child” in a holistic manner. **The affective domain is the priority focus** in “turning around” most unmotivated youth. The cognitive and psychomotor are usually less important, but are interwoven. If Juan and Clarissa come to school with a “Hi world, I am so happy, Mom and Dad are great, I had a good breakfast, I have friends, now teach me to learn” attitude, there are few problems with learning motivation.

But if they come to school with a “I hate the world, I did not have breakfast, Mom is always gone, I have no father or no friends”—or similar negative views of life, **all the world-class standards, accountability assessments, remedial classes, and threats of parent conferences will do no good for the individual** or his or her test scores in the cognitive domain. In a negative societal view, many of these youth are still motivated to learn in **their** areas of interest, need, or approval, such as learning to steal a car, handle a weapon, or sell drugs without getting caught. Reflecting the positive, others are ready to be engaged, but outside of school, for they want to learn to ride a horse or paint street scenes. Dissecting a frog, reading a book, or figuring a fraction may not be high among their current priorities.

Oversimplifying for brevity, but to offer practical clues and specific illustrations related to “motivating the unmotivated,” nine **categories leading to lack of desire in assigned school studies** are reviewed. Each must be considered when efforts are made to seek successful reversal of student perceptions. The keys again are (1) PERSONAL ATTENTION for each individual, (2) choice of multiple learning alternatives, and (3) individual diagnosis, prescription, or suggestion related to one or more of the nine categories.

It is important to remember that **teachers cannot teach anything to anybody**; they can only act as facilitators. The learner must learn what he or she has chosen to learn in the manner that best fits the individual. In most learning alternatives models, this requires a “guide by the side” staff member, not a “sage on the stage,” as in the conventional school alternative. Even touted mass military success is flawed, for among those soldiers specially “trained” as infantry leaders, there are some who can never learn to re-assemble their rifles. There is no reason to make learning so difficult that only a portion of the students can persevere to success. Given sufficient time, appropriate help, and a conducive learning environment, the overwhelming majority can achieve realistic performance goals.

CATEGORIES

1. Personalized Interest Curriculum:

For a large majority of “unmotivated” students, the lost key to unlocking success is simple to find: the curriculum must be personalized, individualized, integrated, and interdependent—a very realistic goal for any humane learning environment. These youth need to have all required courses removed, or be allowed to meet the field of study in their own manner. They select advisors/teachers/facilitators with whom they relate, and with them plan a program for NOW. Such changes are easy to make if there is a transformation away from the old uniform schooling paradigm.

Very few topics in the standard, conventional curriculum are essential—only those most related to HEALTH and SAFETY. Some state mandates can be ignored (the chapter on radicals in algebra), others can be camouflaged (taxidermy for biology), many can be covered differently (US History from 2025, not 1492), and some eliminated through waivers (swimming for chlorine-allergic youth). The conventional curriculum mandates for all **must be challenged**—even in court if necessary. As illustration, there is absolutely no research validating the need for **algebra for everyone**. Some students do well in numerical computation but cannot understand areas of abstract reasoning, spatial relations, or technological diagrams. Not everyone must have the same exact studies, books, methods or time sequences, for even if algebra is “required,” in a class of 30 students only 3 need the traditional 36 weeks. The talented in the field can learn the material in 6, 10, 20 weeks, while the less talented in that subject may need 40, 45, 50 weeks to succeed.

Rick, an artist, may want to paint all day and work with one mentor. That is fine, for there is no need to go to English or history classes every day, every year. Eventually he may paint a mural depicting peace and war and thus will read stories and histories of war, use math to design the mural to scale, and involve science in selecting paints for the wall surface. Excellent balanced learning experiences evolve while Rick is motivated to learn most every day.

Pete may “hate” women teachers and English, and misbehaves in those classes. Therefore, for **now** he spends two hours in shop with a personality match male teacher, two hours in physical education with a compatible male teacher, and two hours in science with animals in the science area zoo and an animal loving male teacher. Pete “suddenly” is motivated, gets “good marks,” and is no longer a discipline problem.

Sally and Robert, both struggling with reading and not happy in traditional schools, transfer to one of the non-traditional alternatives and spend hours in the Environmental Center (integrated old science, social science, home economics, health and physical education) where they enjoy cooking and learning about parents and friendships. Ironically, they also enjoy reading, for Helen the “reading teacher” has headquartered in the Center. The recipes (stir, blend, mix) make great reading material and add math too (1/4 tablespoon.) Before long, both are reading without taking “remedial reading.”

The “remedial kicker” in the physical education class will never kick on Sunday in the National Football League. Building the learning experiences on student strengths and interests, not on their weaknesses and failures, is the best way to motivate those unmotivated, primarily Category I students.

2. Teacher/Facilitator Match Factors:

Assigning students to facilitators in student-centered alternatives is almost always wrong when addressing the needs of unmotivated youth. In fact, assigning teachers is wrong even for “regular

students” in the traditional curriculum-centered alternative. In many optional environments, people are given choices. There are six factors creating the best student-facilitator match: **Personality, Interest, Gender, Perception, Age, Skill**. If these six areas do not fit like a puzzle, the unmotivated dilemma is very clear. Students do not work hard for someone with whom they do not relate. Even if the teacher perceives that Johnny is “a great kid,” if Johnny perceives that the teacher perceives him as “an annoying pupil,” there is an immediate lack of motivation.

Students should select the teachers and advisors with whom they relate, but if for any reason they must be “assigned,” these six factors are essential to consider in the placement. Some, for instance, do better with a “grandma” with a big cookie jar; others do better with a “young swinger.” Others need a “daddy” or “older brother.” The selection process is not difficult if the school is flexible and humane.

This human “match” is more important than personalizing the curriculum for many youth, for regardless of changes made in the studies, if most of the six facilitator factors do not mesh, improvement in student motivation may be minimal. The “artist” does not want to be with the wrong art facilitator, even if art replaces algebra.

3. Person Centers—for Self-esteem or Behavior or Both:

There are students who—at **this moment in time**—cannot relate to the school, staff, or structure—whether conventional or one of the other existing choices of alternatives. They are on the verge of dropping out, delinquency, or quitting on themselves. They are not motivated by schooling and will not improve if given traditional counseling and instruction. **Most teachers are not trained to work with these youth who need a focus on the affective domain, not the cognitive.**

The students can be enrolled in one of the appropriate varieties of environments which can be called or thought of as Centers for the Person. These options are staffed with the few simpatico teachers who can work with the affected youth, assisted full or part-time by sociologists, social and mental health workers, psychologists, police officers, physicians—specialists who can focus on the individual. **There is no concern with the cognitive unless it helps the affective domain.** Concepts such as self-esteem, self-image, and self-direction can eventually lead to the acceptance of positive societal and individual relationships. Students can choose other learning alternatives when they again have a positive view of themselves and their role in life and can accept personal and social responsibility.

4. Family and Peer Relationships:

The most common response of traditional school people is to place the blame for negative student behavior and motivation on the family for not being involved and not providing proper supervision or support. **This category is seldom the real cause or the only one** leading to the unmotivated student, but it receives the most publicity. There is no doubt that problems at home can cause the student to “give up,” whether it is from lack of attention, drug use, lack of food and clothing, physical abuse, or lack of caring.

Sometimes the misconception is as simple as communication and acceptance. Eugene wants to be an artist and attend art school. Dad, the architect, is insisting Eugene become an architect and join the family business. Eugene decides his form of saying “no” is to do poorly in school. The staff must work with the family.

If it is a matter of peer relationships, (nobody likes me or needs me) often the school can establish groups volunteering for community activities such as caring for orphaned children or forgotten senior

citizens, and urge the “unwanted” student to participate. If the “problem” is a matter of family neglect, poverty, or abuse, the learning alternatives program—with the help of outside agencies—must do what is “impossible,” for the possible is not working for these youth. **Again the cognitive domain and the test scores are not priorities here** until the personal perceptions of the student, peer, and family relationships are addressed.

5. Environmental Illnesses and Intolerances:

Though often hidden or masked, and on the surface difficult to recognize, a surprisingly large number of students suffer from **food, chemical, and inhalant allergies and/or intolerances**. They cannot be motivated day after day when they are “sick” with reactions from these problems. The student who is allergic to milk (perhaps without realizing it) can suddenly fall asleep, break into rage, or become foggy and not able to spell his or her own name. New paint and carpet are also culprits. Strong perfumes—worn by a teacher in the classroom, or by a fellow student sitting at the next desk, or by another student in a restroom—can result in “fog,” a headache, or irritability, and thus apparent lack of motivation from the affected individual. During fall mold or spring blossoming seasons, many students are not as motivated and do not do well on tests. Irritable bowel syndrome can cause agonizing discomfort. Two fine books by Doris Rapp MD—very strongly documented with double-blind studies—spell the details for parents and school people: *Is This Your Child?*, and *Is This Your Child’s World?* No school should be without copies for teachers to read, recommend, and loan to families.

Most borderline special education labeled youth are NOT traditional special education candidates, but instead are suffering from an environmental illness. Unrecognized sight and hearing deficiencies can fall into this category. It is hard to be motivated when environmental illness is the major factor in the life of a student. ADD and ADHD are often misnamed and misdiagnosed; most of these youth should not be on Ritalin or similar drugs. Motivation without Ritalin involves matching the interests and attention spans of the individual with the appropriate curriculum, staff, and environment. Environmentally ill students need a school with “wobble-time” built into the structure, and a “4-T” outlet—a Teacher/advisor To Talk To program.

Parents and teachers of these youth need assistance from medical personnel who specialize in environmental medicine. Even such a seemingly small factor as the reduction of fast food products and an increase in Omega 3 in the diet can make a major difference in the lives (and school motivation) of many youth.

6. Biochemical and Neurodevelopment Disorders:

Just as in cancers, strokes, AIDS, and other well-recognized diseases—where there is not yet a known cure—the same is true **with students who have developmental disorders**. One example is the imbalance of neurotransmitters in the brain as in serotonin, dopamine, and nor epinephrine, which can lead to headaches, migraines, and in extreme cases bi-polar disorders. Some students lack hormones or other latent growth-related maturation factors. Unrecognized autism or similar syndromes are typical cases of this category of disorders. Teen-diagnosed type I diabetes can lead to thoughts of suicide.

Many of these students can function in an appropriate learning alternatives environment, but staff of the program selected must work closely with the medical field. Test scores are NOT the priority. It is hard for a student to be motivated when battling daily just to live normally or even stay alive. Often these symptoms go unrecognized until the K-12 school years. Good (humane, student-centered, flexible) medical specialists (perhaps endocrine, neurology, psychiatry, and environmental), interacting as a team

are usually needed to communicate with educators to help prescribe an individualized plan—assuming the student can be in school and not in a medical facility. Unfortunately, in the fast-paced, stress-filled days of the current decade, more students fall into this category—or are finally being recognized. Their conditions do affect motivation to learn conventional required school subjects—or often to continue on with their own lives.

7. Court-ordered Lockup:

Some students have gotten so involved with drugs, gangs, murder, rape and other such charges that they are **on probation or are in court-ordered delinquent lockup facilities**. The traditional school structure seldom fits these youth. A lockup “boot camp” facility may work for some—or be mandated by the courts. Regardless of the environment, for the majority of these youth, once more **the affective domain** is the key to positive socially responsible motivation to learn “school subjects.”

Younger violators may be paroled perhaps at age 15—but enrolling them in the conventional school almost never works. If they are to return to lead productive lives, with positive family relationships and social justice support, they must first renew to the status of a “humane person.” For a few, this may not ever be possible, but if there is a chance of success, the motivation for these unmotivated youth to relate to school work is almost always through learning alternatives focused on the affective domain.

8. Home learning Disabilities:

Personal attention for each student—again a reality, no matter the various cited categories—is the priority in the majority of unmotivated cases. This is clearly demonstrated through home-learning programs for those who have been temporarily or permanently disabled. The initial problem may result from a car accident, a near drowning, a difficult-to-cure disease, complicated surgery, emotional stress, or other factors that make it impossible to attend “regular” school. When left alone with only medical care and parent support, most of these youth just give up related to schoolwork: what is the use of studying “grade-level assignments”?

The turn-around for them is often when finally a very flexible, caring, humane, school/home-teacher (or volunteer) becomes involved. The interest response to “schoolbooks” may occur when the “patient” realizes **this teacher really cares about “me” as a person**. Provided is the **personal attention** that has been missing in almost all “regular schools” that cater to groups and claim there is not staff time, money, or facilities to give to individuals with “problems.” Educators must finally ask: what is more important, teaching one mandated group the usually irrelevant subject matter—most of which can be learned alone—or the individual crying out for a reason to learn?

9. Individual Factors:

Lists of categories and documentations of reasons related to why students are unmotivated could fill the proverbial book. These nine cited are the most prevalent noticed in optional learning programs. All (almost all) students want to learn—even if it is in an unprofitable societal direction (stealing a car). **They want to learn, can learn, and will learn** if in the appropriate environment. There are factors that arise that **do not fit the typical patterns**. In these cases, **the individual must be considered just that**, and not placed in a traditional group program (special education as an example) as one of theoretically diagnosed and labeled students.

Ironically, a large group situation provides clues to the need for learning alternatives for all youth, but especially those considered “unmotivated.” One summer in the 1970s, the late Morrell Clute, a Wayne

State University professor, was one of the leaders of an experiment performed with unmotivated “ghetto youth” in the Detroit schools; they had just failed junior high. They were told that if they passed a special summer program at Wayne State, they could go on to high school; otherwise each would have to repeat studies in junior high—or possibly be placed in a correctional detention center if they had a record. Free transportation would be provided, plus breakfast and lunch, if they agreed to volunteer for the session.

Finally enough youth were convinced to attend. The first three days, the students were asked what they wanted to learn. No one spoke; they were smart enough to know they did not want to study “ancient world history.” The staff were patient; the enrollees sat quietly for hours. At last one of the youth caved, and challenged the staff with, “We want to learn about sex and drugs.”

During the ensuing discussion, it was obvious this rationale was sound. The students lived in an environment of drugs, prostitution, and crime; they wanted to understand their surroundings better, the causes for the anti-social industries represented by the crime syndicates, and the seeming inability of police to control the activities. They also saw the money exchanged, with some becoming rich and some remaining in poverty.

The curriculum was launched—with individual flexibility in agreed-upon assignments. They learned chemistry, biology, health, and psychology through their study of drugs. They learned economics, sociology, politics, and sexual values through their study of prostitution. They learned maths, cultures, environments, and courts, through their study of crime. They read books on these topics, wrote papers for “English”, painted neighborhood scenes, and recorded “street corner” music sounds for the arts. **They all did well, were motivated, and promoted to high school. THEY COULD AND WANTED TO LEARN!**

The common educational tragedy again resulted: the Detroit public schools ignored these summer results. The students were once more placed in traditional high school classes. They slowly rebelled; the follow-up tracking revealed that they all eventually dropped out or were “pushed out” of high school. **They were unmotivated to learn traditional irrelevant required school subjects taught through the conventional system known as schooling!**

Even more, a sociology major and former Peace Corps worker in Africa—who related well and was a perfect match for many of these students—applied for a job teaching geography in the Detroit schools. He had taken education classes, but was rejected because he had not completed the three-unit course titled “Methods of Teaching Social Studies in the Secondary Schools.” How inane can teacher-training programs remain. Though some teacher education efforts have improved, outmoded requirements remain a typical pattern. They prove the need for preparing teachers for flexible learning alternatives.

PUNISHMENT

Unfortunately, too often traditional school people continue to seek “punishment” methods of motivating the unmotivated. They threaten suspension, repeating the grade level or course, or staying after school. Occasionally the tough military style does work by saying: “I do not care about your problems. Just sit there and do it. There is no reason to give up just because you had a bad break...or...” Such boss-style dictates can be part of carefully planned therapy for the very few. However, in almost 100 percent of those affected, negative punishment either does not work or makes the condition worse. Even simple measures can do considerable harm.

As late as 2004, though not the old switch or dunce cap of the 1800s, or the paddle of the early to mid-1900s, a school district was finally ordered to cease their “red dot” version of “time out” punishment. When a student misbehaved or did not follow policy or rules (as established by the adults without student input), he or she had to stand for a specified time in front of everyone during lunch and recess on large red dots painted on the hallway floor and playground. The issue finally came to a head when two parents complained to their school board. One 2nd grade child had to stand on the “red dot” for not turning in homework; the other was penalized for going to the restroom during class time.

What invigorates educators to create such devious solutions related to motivation? Another form creating “unmotivation” punishment is homework. It is conclusive that homework makes no difference in test scores. However, for political reasons in the conventional school alternative, it is still a major tool for forcing conformity. School should be for school; home should be for home. Long range out-of-school interest projects can be effective as a learning mechanism; nightly assignments are “against the law” in most student-centered alternatives.

One school district has tried to charge parents \$40.00 a day if their students are truant; another has offered a three percent increase in grades, and ice cream, for good attendance. A third has hired “attendance deans” to bring back truants. These actual cases illustrate that few “educators” are willing to admit that changing programs for these youth might eliminate the need for such negative measures.

Districts with schools that have failed the adequate yearly progress test outcomes are now forced to offer students the opportunity to transfer. Most of those affected are minority or low-income youth who, to have a “better school,” must leave their neighborhood to go to another site **with the same curriculum, books, teaching methods, and organizational structure.** What will be better?? This busing response to a flawed school system is hailed as the solution for “motivating the unmotivated.” **Punishment thus becomes the cover for not addressing the personal needs of students in the nine suggested categories.**

SUMMARY

If each student is individually evaluated for possible relationships to one or more of these categories, almost always **the cause can be determined**, programs can be established, and the “unmotivated” returned to among the motivated. The student may fit into one, but the solution is more often found through an interdependent relationship of two or three components.

Traditional schools put the blame on the child and the family, and sometimes the community. Learning alternatives look at the unmotivated and accept their share of the blame. They acknowledge deficiencies, but then seek help from outside school resources. Educators cannot solve all the motivation problems, but they can alleviate most. For the serious conditions, they need help from medical, psychiatric, law enforcement, social work, and other specialists. **Student-centered learning alternatives leaders bend over backwards to find the best niche for all non-motivated youth.**

“Unmotivated” is not “normal.” Such conditions usually denote a need to alter the uniformity of the one-size-fits-all conventional and alternative school system by creating multiple diverse learning choices as OPTIONS FOR EVERYONE.