

“Coaches who can outline plays on a
blackboard are a dime a dozen.
The ones who win get inside their
players and motivate.”
--Vince Lombardi

“To learn, you must want to be taught.”
Proverbs 12:1

IT'S ALL ABOUT M.E.

(Motivation through (self) Evaluation)

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ABSTRACT

Middle school is a paradox. Students want nothing more than autonomy, while classrooms become more structured and demanding. With the increased structure, however, are increased expectations for the students to determine what to do and when to do it, on their own. This rapid increase in personal responsibility creates confusion in an already tumultuous time in their lives, and a common retaliation, out of fear, apathy, or simply not knowing, is to do nothing. It is a given that students differ in their motivation to learn, and tapping each one of those sources becomes, in effect, a quest for the academic holy grail. Knowing that students are prone to confusion and certain gaps in their transitioning thought processes in middle school, and that kids respond readily to their own ideas, why not utilize a process of self-evaluation which lays out guidelines, but requires the responsibility to assess and improve their own work? This was the basis of my research. Utilizing portfolios, rubrics, and the multiple ability levels of my students, I wanted to see if this sort of guidance and awareness would effectively increase their intrinsic motivation.

ERIC Descriptors:

Classroom Techniques
Grading
Instructional Improvement
Student Attitudes
Writing Skills

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: THE SETUP

Defining Motivation.....	2
Challenges in Our Classroom.....	7
The Three Players.....	11

CHAPTER TWO: THE INQUIRY

What We Have Tried.....	21
The Portfolio Plan.....	25

CHAPTER THREE: OBSERVATIONS

Student A.....	34
Student B.....	41
Student C.....	47

CHAPTER FOUR: ELEMENTS FOR CONSIDERATION.....53

CONCLUSION.....57

APPENDIX A: Sample Rubrics.....59

REFERENCES.....62

Imagine this. Your eyes are agape with wonder and anxiety. Your palms are sweaty, and you squirm mercilessly. Your attention zooms back and forth faster than a tennis ball in a high-speed match. One time your attention lands on the man's veins bulging in his forearm, engaged in a death grip. Next, on the recipient of the death grip--a woman paralyzed with fear as she hangs on to her sole mortal savior. She dangles perilously from her frayed harness, suspended from a cable strung taut between mountaintops thousands of feet in the air.

Her eyes are at once panic-stricken and pleading. His eyes are intense, steadfast, and tenacious. Her screams are blood chilling. His voice is tinged with desperate words of encouragement. The camera zooms in on their hands, intertwined yet separated by gloves to prevent a solid grip. A cinematic yank back to the eyes, their fear, their intensity. Unconsciously, you wipe the sweat off of your palms, as the gloved hands slip centimeter by grueling centimeter. Her safety harness threads are weakened by the weight. Sweat drips from his fatigued forearm. Panic and despair in her eyes are palpable. Slowly--excruciatingly so--her hand slips out of the glove. She plummets helplessly into the depths of the canyon, as her eyes stare hauntingly into the eyes of her would-be savior. He is helpless and can do nothing but watch, forever to be ingrained with the guilt that he could have or should have done more.

He shoulders the entire blame, with irreparable mental despair.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGIN OF INQUIRY

Despite its lack of comparable finality, the guilt can be just as real for me as a teacher whose student has failed--an unshakable guilt that I could have or should have done more. The helplessness can be just as consuming as Sylvester Stallone's after he could no longer hold on in this sweat-inducing opener of the movie *Cliffhanger*. And it can certainly be as detrimental.

When there is a failure, my first thought rarely concerns why the student didn't hold on tighter, or why the student couldn't have "reached up with her other hand" to help herself. Instead, I am the type to presume myself guilty first—did I instill the knowledge within her to hang on? Did I teach her *how*? Does she know *why* she's hanging on? Does she *want* to? Simultaneously, there is a selfishness of wanting to "let go", to regain "my" time or family time, both of which are inevitably pushed aside when I worry about my students. The consuming guilt, however, deftly prevents me from doing so. Realizing and understanding this has helped me determine the importance of my research as it pertains to both my students' well being, and my own. Only after muddling through self-evaluations and analyses of the situation, can I then turn to the students for unanswered questions.

This past year, more often than not, answers to the questions above have boiled down to pure laziness and apathy in my most recalcitrant students—a complete and utter lack of motivation to perform, take responsibility, and otherwise demonstrate initiative for their own learning. That indeed has been at the heart of my dilemma as a teacher this year, hence my enigma: "Can I unearth the origin of the will to hold on, or at least guide the students to discover it for themselves? And once they become aware of this internal motivation, can they be inspired to modify their self-perceptions positively enough to want to learn?"

Defining Motivation

My definition of motivation has changed slightly since the outset of my research, ironically not because of what I have seen in the classroom, but because of what I have not seen.

Motivation, in my ideal world, is an internal characteristic driven by pride and a desire to achieve more. It is not driven by external rewards, fame, or glory, but by the satisfaction of a successful struggle, the mastery of a new concept, or the beckoning of a new achievement level. There is often competition among students in any given classroom, but internal motivation is doubly effective, as it keeps one going despite—or maybe in spite of—external competition; internal drive pushes you to become better than your previous self. It is a sense of pride as well as honesty, and entails the skill to critically view one's own actions and

behaviors. One who is intrinsically driven will take the risks inherent to great gains, regardless of who tells them otherwise.

As a teacher, I feel blessed with an inherent and copious amount of such motivation, which parallels the belief that “teaching is more closely linked with intrinsic motivation than many other behavioral domains” (Dornyei, 2001). In my experience, educators maintain motivation through the educational process itself, the subject matter (assuming they are teaching in their field of expertise), and by setting goals for their teaching. There is certainly an overwhelming “disregard” for disproportionate pay scales, long hours, and emotional investment, and, more than any other people I know, conscientious teachers are concerned with the critical issues of both teaching and personal efficacy. I am case in point—I am constantly evaluating and re-evaluating how best to accomplish a teaching goal in accordance with my students and their abilities. As you read in the beginning of this paper, though, I am also quite relentless in the personal appraisal of my effectiveness. These two aspects are the driving forces in my life and career, inspiring me to do more, and to do better. They are also precisely what prevent me from “letting go”.

Having such internal motivation can also be a “curse”, since I have difficulties relating to those without an apparent inkling of it. This leads me to wonder if, perhaps, my expectations are too high for my 6th grade middle school students. I believe they are not. In simple terms, this is the same motivation that pushes students to simply do the work asked of them, at or exceeding a level appropriate to their abilities, without promise of the tangible rewards to which

they are so accustomed. Internal motivation, as a source of pride, prevents someone from "just doing it to get it done", and encourages that same person to take the extra measures and time to complete a task as best as they can. It means not taking the easy way out, and it requires critical thinking and forethought. Thought which originates from within, and not from external props of a computer-generated world.

Someone with this intrinsic motivation is not necessarily "on" 100 percent of the time, but therein lies the beauty of self-evaluation skills. For a student to determine why his or her learning is not going as well as it should, and to analyze it for future changes, indicates a higher level thinking pattern. With this ability, she will be able to alter her actions accordingly or monitor her motivation and reactions for improvement.

I believe that motivation itself can be, and is, influenced through various means. The primary means of motivation enhancers within an elementary school seem to be tangible rewards--trinkets, goodies, grades, and continual pats on the back. The reinforcement theory, one of several psychological theories used in the attempt to analyze motivation (Skinner, 1974), claims that a behavioral consequence determines future behavior—in other words, whether it occurs or not. It is a theory based on observable behavior rather than factors such as feelings or beliefs. According to this theory, for example, if a first grader knows that he must pull a "conduct strip" for misbehavior, he will supposedly not misbehave in that way again because of his shame or remorse. On a more positive note, if that same first grader receives a smiley sticker each time he does

his homework, there exists a supposition that he will continue to do his homework. It is a symbiotic relationship between behavior and consequence, and it can be assumed that motivation originates more in the environment than within the person. Or so believe the reinforcement theorists.

In sixth grade, to put it mildly, things change. The students are now considered "middle school" rather than elementary, and as such, they must make the transition from reliance on external rewards and punishments to reliance on the internal. It is a harsh and confusing reality for them to confront, and is yet another integral facet that has come to the fore in my studies. The equation of "behavior = consequence, and therefore = eventual correct and desirable behavior" is no longer reliable. My superhero "caped assumption" is that I, as their teacher, should somehow be an external factor which helps influence internal motivation, at least to some extent.

The question is "how"? I am cognizant of numerous degrees of motivation, and despite my high expectations mentioned above, I would be content to learn how to influence any one level of motivation. My ideals seem to follow more along the lines of the intrinsic motivation theorists who believe that people are born with the skills and desire to learn, and that satisfaction is a direct result of the actual learning process itself. (Stipek, 2002; White, 1959) I intend to see if it is possible to draw out and influence this motivation by tossing the responsibility onto the students themselves. I will discuss this more in detail later. Before describing my project, let me first describe my context, and with whom I am dealing.

Challenges in Our Classroom

The sixth grade class I am studying is a group of sixteen native English speakers, with an average age hovering at eleven years old. The class subject is Language Arts, which encompasses reading, reading comprehension, writing, and grammar. It is part of the core curriculum, and is therefore required to pass before promotion to the next grade level. It also happens to be a historically weak area for the majority of the students, and there is no academic middle ground. Half of the students are able to write a coherent page and a half within fifteen minutes, while the other eight students struggle to complete three or four lines without multiple spelling and grammar mistakes. Half read on at least grade level, while the other half "survive" at the second grade reading comprehension level. Attitudes vary according to ability level, with the more adept students exuding higher positivity, as the lower performers (note that this does not necessarily equate to lower ability!) display a lethal mixture of defiance and irresponsibility.

In general, they have difficulty distinguishing between subjects and verbs within a sentence, making it all the more difficult to rationalize the concept of a complete sentence to them. They retaliate with apathy when I insist on capital letters and periods to distinguish where a sentence begins and ends. Even tasks such as forming plurals or indenting the first word of a paragraph, have not yet been thoroughly grasped, let alone the concept of a paragraph. Organization appears to be nothing but a bother, and there has yet to be a day when all sixteen

students have their completed homework. What alarms me the most is their lack of concern, or even realization, that they are so far behind their peers in these integral academic areas of reading and writing. This surprise awakened me to the belief that perhaps the students need to become more aware of what they need, where they are, and what is expected of them, before I can expect them to change. Step by step, and with unrelenting analysis, my ideas of what the students might “need” formed throughout the semesters.

Socially, it is interesting to note that these students have been together since kindergarten, with the exception of two students--one who joined them in 2nd grade, and the other who joined the class this year-- so they are well aware of each other's abilities and shortcomings. This has proven to be both a positive and negative factor within the classroom community, and the dynamics among them are electric. I can only compare their relationship to that of siblings--the rivalry is impelling for some, and destructive for others. They have also, unfortunately, been branded within the school as a class with discipline problems--it is the quintessential class that elicits coos of sympathy and murmurs of awe for the teacher who indicates she is working with the "sixth grade".

Just as unfortunate are the individual "labels". Many have been tagged with the labels of ADD (attention deficit disorder), ODD (oppositional defiance disorder), or any other of a slew of "learning disability disorders" which, to me, merely amplify the soft bigotry of low expectations. These particular students have been enabled, in my opinion, from the beginning, and have escaped "normal consequences" for not trying hard--or harder--to succeed. Different expectations

for those with or without labels are blatant; a teacher can read the students' files and prejudge with ease. It is only human to do so. To claim, as a teacher, that I have never been biased, or have never prejudged a student, would be dishonest. I have learned over the years the dangers of doing so, having been proven wrong more than once. I prefer to allow my students the benefit of the doubt, however, and tell them they must prove their abilities to me, whether (especially!) they who are deemed "golden children", and are loved by all previous teachers, or whether they have been a continual source of frustration throughout their academic years.

In light of this reality, it follows that the students themselves are ultimately the only ones with the power to change their own perceptions of their abilities. Here lies the domain of the cognitive motivation theorists; they are interested in the beliefs and expectations of the students, and encourage more direct involvement from the person whose behavior is to change. (Stipek, 2002) The power of their revised perceptions will supposedly allow them to prove their competence not only to themselves, but also to others who may have doubted them. In order to accomplish some semblance of this revision, I believed it would be more meaningful for them to compare the level of their own past performances with their current level. The idea should be for them to become better in light of themselves, rather than in light of the performances of others who are beyond compare. It breaks my heart to hear them insist: "I'm stupid." or "I can't do this." as many of them do. Where did they get these ideas, and how can I get them to realize, in all honesty, the contrary?

My enigma shifts slightly to emphasize the awareness aspect: "How can I help to create a higher awareness in my students, and will doing so motivate them to raise their own perceptions and expectations?"

From the class, I have chosen a total of three students on which to telescope my research focus. Two students are in that elusive "other half" of lower performers, though not necessarily lower abilities, thus graciously providing the greatest mystery for me. The third is one of the top students both academically and athletically, and will be observed so that I can collect data relating to "maintaining or enhancing motivation". I have never worked with such a divergent group, ability and attitude-wise, and it has thrown me for a loop. I have also never encountered such a lack of desire to work, think, or otherwise value education as evidenced in the eight previously mentioned students, and I have failed to relate to what they are thinking, or their intentions of acting in such a manner.

On the other hand, I *have* seen them do well, I *have* seen them care—once in awhile, and that is what ups the ante for my research. How can I harness that occasional "oomph" in their actual *want* to perform in light of their social context? Can these students, through their own enhanced evaluative skills, determine this same impetus, and then apply it effectively and consistently? Can they make connections between their pieces of work, and integrate the information surrounding their abilities? If they "do not have" motivation, can it be created, or have we reached, just as assumed in language acquisition at

puberty, a “critical period”? Using the three students I have chosen, I will attempt to provide an answer for these questions.

The Three "Players"

STUDENT A: She happens to be an extraordinary athlete with abilities in several sports, and undeniably fierce determination. She loves competition, and is especially adept when faced with others at or above her ability level. Fear is never a factor. Sportsmanship, however, is not a strong point, as her intensity breeds impatience with those not as talented, and ignites without warning. In the classroom, her intensity does a complete turnaround. The minute she is faced with a challenge, or any amount of thinking, she quits. She simply puts her pencil down and stops. Cajoling, politely requesting, ignoring or pleading for her to "try" are ineffective. She rarely completes assignments, and has yet to complete a test--the most frustrating aspect is that she begs for more time to finish her test later, insisting that she didn't have enough time with the rest of the class. Blameshift occurs at mach speed in her little world, and she is reluctant to accept any responsibility for her lack of scholastic motivation. Her famous phrase is, not surprisingly, "I don't care", although I am pretty sure she does.

She is definitely intelligent, with plenty of academic ability, and has unusually mature insights when she cares to share them. She has been labeled "ODD" (oppositional defiance disorder), as has been her twin brother. She has no official academic modifications due to this label, yet her twin brother has been

institutionalized for years on account of the same disorder. They only see each other about twice a year, although she claims wholeheartedly that she doesn't miss him at all. She lives with her mother, who just recently adopted two toddlers, and she seems to take great pride in her new maternal responsibilities at home.

Her mother is readily supportive of any school interventions, and is realistic about her daughter's attitudes and performance. She has indicated that her daughter has had this issue of quitting for quite some time, apparently even giving up on last year's end-of-grade tests three times before deciding to persist long enough to barely pass it on the fourth try. Ideally, with an increased awareness of her actions and reactions, I would like to think that she can begin to comprehend her control of her decisions to perform or not in any given task, and that the responsibility for her actions and her learning lies solely within her own self.

It is a lot to expect from her, especially with her "track record" of hasty retreat into the nether-world of petulance and discontent when things don't go her way, but I unhesitatingly believe she is capable. As I mentioned, her intelligence is undeniable, and much of it can be easily recognized as "street smarts". This sets her apart from her peers as well, and not necessarily in a negative way. It is ironic to me, however, that considering these "street smarts" and outward toughness, she is the quickest to give up when faced head-on with mental demands. She is intriguing and keeps me continually on my toes. I am anxious to see what changes will happen.

STUDENT B: He is angry, seeming to thrive on defiance. His academic abilities, especially in the areas of reading and writing, are very low, but he tends to have accurate aural retention and comprehension. He is entranced when I read aloud in class and when given the chance, can retell with ease.

Unfortunately, he frequently lies outright, while insisting vehemently that he has completed classwork. For example, when his desk is cleared and I ask to see his classwork, his arms immediately cross, and he guards his notebook with a passion, claiming the work is in there but he doesn't want me to see it. Once he finally allows me to look at his notebook, I see only empty paper. When one-on-one, he is slightly more compliant, but not always. He is frequently disruptive during class time, especially when faced with work. His lack of desire to work on assignments appears to me to stem from a fear of failure rather than a conscious act against the teacher. It is as if he is so accustomed to doing things wrong, that it would merely be wasted effort to do the actual work when the outcome would be still be failure—social cognitive theory supports his behavior in the claim that people develop interpretations and expectations about reinforcement, which in turn, affect their behavior. His previous teachers indicate that his defiance has been a trend since he was young, and that his unwillingness has been a continual bane throughout his academic career. His outer shell is hardened, but he has shown rare instances of remorse, even to the point of tears, so I know the desire and concern is there.

He is unlike student A, because of these inklings of remorse, and he honestly seems to be a bit embarrassed about not knowing the answers, or not

being able to read above a third grade level. He is afraid to take the risks necessary to advance his learning. I also notice that his defiance is not as rude as that of Student A. A will turn around and walk away when I am talking to her, she seems to "expect" preferential treatment, and she does not hesitate to tell me—as I am explaining a concept—that she has never heard of such a stupid thing. B, on the other hand, will be defiant unto himself, if such a thing is possible. He accepts blame and obviously has some respect for adult authority, never failing to maintain eye contact and never berating anyone except himself.

Student B, also has commendable athletic prowess, and is often in demand for team membership with his peers for their various sports competitions. (I have the privilege of teaching their Physical Education class, too, so these observations are firsthand.) Like A, his sportsmanship is marred by a short fuse and undeniable intensity—the latter of which can be both a hindrance and an asset on the playing field. His intensity likewise takes a detour when en route back to the classroom, leaving B stranded and feeling helpless, without his hardened exterior, but not necessarily enough to just quit. Very intriguing.

His home life is demanding, tough, and undeniably emotional. His mother passed away when he was in the first grade, so he lives with his father and grandparents on a working farm. His father is often away from home on business, and his grandfather is a bedridden invalid. Both his grandmother and father push him hard, wanting desperately for him to succeed and to be like one of the most successful students in his class, an effortlessly brilliant one at that.

Since he lives on a farm with his family, he bears the brunt of responsibility for manual labor to be done. Despite his small stature, he is rugged and hardy, and works for a couple of hours before school, then a couple of hours in the evening before bedtime. Some days he is visibly exhausted, certainly accounting for his impatience and short attention span, but here again, responsibility is evident, and just needs to be transferred a bit to his academic realm. I don't expect him to be a straight A student, rather, I would just like to see him come to understand the benefits of completing his work, trying various tasks to prove his capabilities to himself, and taking advantage of the help around him by completing in-class assignments. He, too, is a good person, with a lot of "baggage" for his age, and I would love dearly to see him succeed. I am curious to see if we can demonstrate, in one short quarter, his abilities when he tries—to enhance his self-evaluation and increase his awareness. His major obstacle will be to try the assignments, and to get over his fear of failure. Once he can start comparing his work and seeing the betterment of his skills with his own eyes, perhaps he will begin to believe in himself more?

STUDENT C: Student C is at the other end of the academic spectrum. She is a straight-A student, one who is well-rounded, polite, and an encourager for everyone she is near. Her maturity level is phenomenally high, and her creativity is incessant. She is self-driven, almost to a fault; her mother claims C is a perfectionist. She does all of her homework all of the time, and she is the type of student who begs her parents to allow her to come to school even if she is too sick

to move. She loves school, loves to read, and loves to write. She is pleasant to have in class, is eager to help, but not overly so, and gets along extremely well with her peers. There seems to be no animosity whatsoever among her and her classmates, despite her abilities and performances, and this is most certainly due to her endearing attitude.

She has extremely supportive parents, and her family is involved in many different activities. They are involved in community and church activities, and C is involved in various clubs. She, too, is athletically adept, and is unrecognizable on the basketball court due to her aggressive intensity. Unlike A and B, she carries the same amount of intensity and drive both on and off the court, but displays them in astonishingly diverse ways. Her mother claims that C is the one who drives herself so hard, and that she (the mother) doesn't quite understand how C became so competitive. She worries that C participates in too many activities, although she organizes her time and energy efficiently.

She is the epitome of organization, graciousness, and self-discipline; the kind of girl you can picture accepting scholarships as well as the crown for Homecoming Queen. She is the type of student who will field anything a teacher can toss at her, and do it with pleasure.

My intention of using C as part of the research is primarily to observe her already-present motivation--a control person, or benchmark, if you will. I worry that she will lose interest and become lax in her own performance due to the attention demands of the other half of the class. In a multi-level classroom there is always going to be instruction unnecessary to students at C's level. My

intentions for C are to provide her with the opportunity to enhance her writing, thinking, and overall evaluation skills at her level. I expect her insights to become more intricate and for her to catch on at a fairly quick pace. I would also like to think that she will be able to make ready connections between past and present work, and will, by the end of the quarter, be fairly adept at effectively applying the thought process used in self-evaluation.

What I Know

I know, simply via my own observations in the first two quarters, that these students (the previously mentioned “other half”), are by far the most challenging and apathetic students I have ever dealt with. It is through pure serendipity that I have had the pleasure and opportunity to work with the mystique of these students this year, the year of my first classroom-based research. I also know that these students are capable, some more than others, but each and every one has the capability to do the work I expect of them. I know this because I have seen firsthand examples of their work--at least one notable example per student, from various assignments so far this year, and this is precisely what spurs me on in this investigation of motivation. Once I know a student is capable, I cannot accept work that is not at or above that level. Up until this point I have been holding high expectations for my students, hoping that they would--by now--be able to hold these high expectations for themselves. Such has

proven not to be the case and I now know the difficulty of holding students accountable for work at or above their competency level.

I know, by virtue of my own experience and observations of students who experience it, the value of the internal reward of satisfaction—the undeniable pleasure of the “a-ha!” moment. In the same vein, I also realize this is a difficult concept for eleven-year old students. I also know that external rewards are transitory, that they leave attitudes and commitment untouched, but that this is virtually impossible to escape when grades continue to be such an honored external reward. I know that shallow praise can be more destructive to motivation than direct criticism, but that constructive criticism is a sensitive area for emotionally fragile middle school students.

I know there is a difference between obedience and responsibility, and that the latter is higher up on the intrinsic ladder, but students are not necessarily aware of this. I know students will need ownership of an idea to change, but that it will take awhile to break down prior self-perceptions, many of which have been ingrained for years. In speaking of change, I know just how difficult it can be to let go of old ways, and that it is easy to cling to the very ideals or habits that hold us back. I know that responsibility engenders responsibility, but that it is easier said than done, especially when trying to help someone else who may be resistant. To word it simply, I know that internal motivation lies at the heart of creativity, responsibility, and lasting change—whatever it takes ultimately comes from somewhere inside.

I feel strongly that discipline leads to responsibility, and that it is lacking in the academic context. I also believe that the students have choices—it's just a matter of making the right ones. I know that this time in a middle schooler's life is unimaginably chaotic, a literal emotional and physiological volcano, with continual threats of eruption. It is also extremely feasible that perhaps my students just don't know how to make the right choices. Self-perception is critical at their age, so their defiance may well stem from negativity in this area. I realize without hesitation that there are infinite variations of "issues", at home, at school, and the "real world"; I also believe that as quickly as these kids are growing up, they are doing so without the proper critical thinking skills to handle the pace at which they are being pelted with these issues.

Lastly, I know now the depth of impact a few unruly students can have on both the teacher and other students. This year I have been working with five grade levels, teaching a total of more than 120 students, in 4 different subject areas. Out of those 120+ students, I have allowed a whopping eight to consume the majority of my efforts, emotions, and mental rigor. Eight. How fair can that be to the other 110+ students? It is not surprising that both my teaching and personal efficacies have been weakened. In order for my motivation to be intact, perceptions of my efficacy must be positive, and in order for my teaching efficacy to be verified, I need to have positive feedback in the form of student performance and success. Without that, a void exists. Arriving at this insight illuminated the mental and emotional parallels I now share with my recalcitrant students (and

others, as well), but I cannot bring myself to bestow shallow or undeserved positive feedback, even as a “bribe”.

Now, thanks to what I do know, my question evolves slightly. Earlier, my query was: "How can I help to create a higher awareness in my students, and will doing so motivate them to raise their own expectations?" Now it has evolved more specifically into: "Can my students learn to use self-evaluation to heighten awareness of their own abilities, then utilize this information effectively enough to positively alter their actions and motivation?"

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT I HAVE TRIED

I have worked with my sixth grade students for three full quarters now, having spent the first of those getting acquainted with my new school and new students. As the weeks progressed I continued to learn more about my students as individuals, both personally and academically. They are a diverse group with many fascinating qualities to keep me on my toes.

During the latter two quarters I have observed my students' ability and motivation to "hang on" from multiple perspectives. I have tried external rewards, parental intervention, one-on-one discussions, and tutoring. I have given simple assignments as well as challenging ones, along with precise evaluation rubrics to ensure clear expectations. I have provided choices in assignments-- from choice in topic to choice in levels of challenge. I have tried to both act upon and ignore apathetic or defiant natures, and I have allowed the frustrations I feel to consume me emotionally and mentally. I have tried to provide a "safe" classroom for making mistakes, and I have tried to impress upon them the importance of holding high standards for themselves. All of this and more I have done with the hope of discovering what fuels these sixth-grade middle school students. My desire was to find the magical elixir with which to enhance, or

perhaps develop, their intrinsic motivation--an elixir to unearth their internal curiosity and desire to do more.

I have spent my time trying different activities to stimulate learning as I learned more about my students. I have chosen activities according to their choices of topic to ensure at least minimal interest. I have asked for written and oral feedback on activities they like and dislike, as well as what helps or hinders their learning. I have used activities directly from their lists, and have purposely curbed the use of those that supposedly "hinder" their learning. I have done assignments straight out of textbooks, and have employed many hands-on activities with manipulatives. I have tried to match assignments to strengths of particularly defiant or reluctant students, to allow them more opportunities for success, and therefore, self-confidence. I have tried collaborative activities as well as individual, both in class and out of class. I have tried to guide them through goal-setting, and we write down our goals every 2-3 weeks, with an evaluation each time of goals we are working on, or which goals we have accomplished.

For the disruptive non-performers, I have called parents, and have held conferences with the principal and other teachers, as well as outside behavior specialists. I have used rewards and punishments, and have asked students to evaluate their own strengths in an effort to heighten awareness for themselves. I have given assignments that were graded, but most were for simple practice. (ie-- credit for doing the work, but no penalization for mistakes) I have tried to take note of those who are uncomfortable answering questions in class, and in the

attempt to foster an environment of comfort, have not forced them to answer in class unless they raise their hand. Strategically assigned seats have also been used, with the more disruptive students being separated and placed next to higher performers.

I have tried to maintain an organized structure in class by posting an abridged schedule on the board at the beginning of most classes, and by being strict and consistent with my classroom procedures. I have tried to explain a reason "why" each given task is being worked on, so that the students learn to link the relevance of the task to their own lives. I have allowed extra days to make up work, in honor of learning, rather than preventing late acceptance for the sake of discipline. Understanding the undeniable link between teacher and student motivation, I have tried my absolute human best to maintain the highest motivation in presenting information to them. The experiential learning cycle has always been effective for me, but in experimenting with it here, I have once again learned that what works with other groups of students will not work with all of them. I have tried to maintain neutrality with all students, as much as possible, but I have seen the complexities in that idealism. (I still strive toward unwavering fairness, though.)

What then, is there left for me to do? I honestly felt that there was nothing left to do--if these students weren't getting what they needed, and I was doing as much as I humanly could, what was left? In asking this question, I determined the impasse immediately: I was (and am) doing too much for them. I was taking on the responsibility for their learning, and trying to find for myself, how best they

could learn. I realized this was precisely what they needed to do themselves. Why did they need to be motivated if I was, in effect, doing all the work for them? If my question was truly, "what is there left for **me** to do?", then I was plainly looking out for the wrong person. Instead my question should be: "What is left for **them** to do?"

I resorted to my belief that the key to enhancing student motivation is increasing the autonomy of the learner, and I decided to somehow test this by helping the student to understand his or her most effective learning methods, strengths and weaknesses. It is much easier said than done, but it would be a dream come true for me. I analyzed once more what had been tried in the classroom in pursuit of this autonomy, and came up with one major missing piece--that of self-evaluation. I have taught via experiential learning in my previous years of teaching, and knew that, despite the extra work required for planning and preparation, the depth of learning was far more substantial. The key element of this type of learning was often the reflective process. This process required students to think about, and create an order or sense of, what had occurred in a very brief presentation at the start of my classes. It involved scaffolded instruction, with my gradual withdrawal from the "center", and replacement by the subject. It required their attention and critical thinking to discover a pattern and to apply it to their own work. As written above, I did try experiential learning with this group, along with some reflection, but I did not stick with it, after several unsuccessful attempts.

Thus I reverted to the assumption of this being the missing piece. My students were not reflecting on their learning, and, as a result, were losing out on a tremendous opportunity for mental development. Without this development and maturation of thought, there would be no change in self-perception. Without change in self-perception there would be no change in motivation or desire to work. I decided to try the reflective process, but with some modifications, in order to make it more individual, and to focus on both academic and behavioral progress. I also needed to create an “accessible” form of reflection, somehow enticing the students to actually do the work, since that has been a major glitch from the beginning. In order to encompass the range of ideals necessary to accomplish this, I resolved to experiment with portfolios.

The Portfolio Plan

Portfolios would be novel for both the students and myself, since they have not been used in our school with any sort of regularity, except as mere collections of papers. The obvious benefit here is that I am able to develop my own criteria based on my students' greater needs. Elements of writing will be the focus this quarter, since I believe this would be an easier venue to trace and prove progress than reading. I read about several types of portfolios, then narrowed my decision down to these two general classifications: product-oriented and process-oriented. (Epstein, A., 2000-2001) The former focuses more on the final outcomes of any given project, while the latter is more beneficial for tracking progress from

one stage to the next. Even though I want the students to be proud of their final products, and product-oriented portfolios are more in line with the final result-oriented learning environment of the secondary level, it isn't what I perceive to be most helpful. (Again I notice myself assuming what is best for them—where do I draw the line?)

I also feel that the students haven't quite developed the higher level thinking skills needed to either choose their best work, or to reflect effectively, so the latter is a primary task for us to practice, and the choices would subsequently become more feasible. I want to teach the students how to reflect, and how to self-evaluate their work with poignant accuracy and honesty, since no teacher is able to follow them from grade level to grade level in order to do this for them. Eventually I would love for the students to realize how much they have improved, and how their work exemplifies change. My Mom knew she couldn't teach my brother and I all of the answers, so instead she concentrated on providing us with the proper tools and thinking abilities to develop our conclusions and solve our individual problems. This is along the same lines of goals for my students; I would love to see them learn how to think, process, and wonder, rather than teach them "answers" and concern for pure results. Thus my decision for process-oriented portfolios.

I consciously try to give students the benefit of the doubt. I truly believe, deep down, that these kids have the motivation within them, not to mention the potential for learning in some way. They have a survival instinct to want to learn about the world surrounding them. They also have the seedlings of critical

thinking, but they simply haven't been required or taught to entice these skills to the fore. I cannot blame them, and I try desperately to put myself in their position, trying to recall my thought processes, concerns, and beliefs from when I was their age. I continually search out their potential for growth and maintain strong beliefs that indeed these kids—my students—can learn. And that is what tugs at my heart.

The Pygmalion Effect is an intriguing theory involving a teacher's expectations about the performance of her students. In a nutshell, a student will generally work "up" to a teacher's expectations or "down" to them. There have been several experiments in which teachers were told of their students' high or low potential, and the teachers unwittingly acted accordingly. (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968; summarized by Dornyei, 2001) Rosenthal and Jacobson purported that those who were assumed to have higher potential, performed more successfully than those with the alleged "low" potential. The researchers thus linked teacher beliefs and student performance, and it is easy to see how this can be both beneficial and destructive. In today's school system (in the USA), it is not uncommon for classes to have specified ability groups, which can certainly hinder one's drive to excel if he or she is placed anywhere lower than the "high group". (assuming they care) The previously mentioned labels of my students are another example of how predetermined beliefs can influence a student's performance.

Many of the students with labels do not **try** to read on their own, instead claiming inability without a read-aloud, or an otherwise modified workload.

From their experiences they have learned that they do not **have** to do as much. I simply want them to try, to break out of the biased and immutable chains haphazardly wrapped around their mental powers in the name of higher test scores. Students who do not need, in my opinion, labels or modifications, are routinely identified as such so that schools can grab the advantage come test time, and thus receive more funding and higher prestige. I digress—it is just hard for me to blame the students completely for their conditions, learning habits, and low expectations for themselves when I consider their previous academic experiences. That is what makes it all the more imperative for me to teach them how to judge themselves, how to analyze their work thoughtfully, and to therefore learn what they need to.

I harbor many expectations as I set out on this experiment, and although none of them are what I consider “low”, I admit to holding different expectations for different students. I perceive this to be an advantage of portfolios, though, in that I can legitimately hold differing levels of hope to more aptly mirror various abilities. Portfolios, I feel, would be the ultimate synthesis of skills for my students in question. I expect, through their use, a greater sense of organization, opportunities to develop problem-solving strategies and critical thinking, less dependency on the teacher, and a more effective integration of tasks. (For instance, grammar and writing coherency will be integrated in the context of writing assignments, followed by reflection.) Included in the portfolio, along with each writing assignment, will be rubrics to facilitate self-evaluation, or reflection, on their individual pieces of work. This provision is intended to heighten

awareness of their own writing, as far as grammatical aspects, conceptual ideas and contextual ideas. It should also give both myself and the students an idea of their understandings, strengths, and weaknesses. This will help me to tailor instruction accordingly.

Most of their reflection will be in writing because of their age and experience—I don't expect them to be ready to express themselves or leave themselves "vulnerable" in public through oral self-evaluations at the sensitive age of eleven. (Perhaps their expressive powers will be enhanced as a peripheral result?) Knowing that many of my learners have great difficulties with writing, I will begin by providing checklists, with one or two pointed questions for response, so that anxiety is lessened. These checklists will encompass both academic and behavioral aspects, and I will coach them to be as specific as possible, and to support their ideas. I have decided to include behavioral elements which are crucial to their learning, and which they can learn to monitor. For example, I might include attention in class, independent working ability, task completion, class participation, having supplies, etc.. Again, I want to do this to show students that academics is not purely about brain power, and that they do have control over quite a few disciplinary factors, which in turn, can affect their learning. With luck, a certain amount of awareness concerning one's behavioral effect on both oneself as well as on others, will encourage thought before action. Critical thinking through self-evaluation.

Academically, I expect the extra evaluation and time spent rereading one's work to inspire greater autonomy as well as confidence, and the ability to perform

such functions with relative ease by the end of the quarter. More time will be spent in class to encourage use of available guidance. I would rather spend more time teaching them how to learn to learn, if I may say so, than starting new topics which might mire them in deeper frustration. I anticipate difficulties in the expression of their findings; it will be new for them to communicate their own strengths and weaknesses, purely due to their never having done so before. I will need to guide them through this, individually, I assume, and they will also need to be receptive. Confidentiality and trust will be tantamount.

I prefer to think of the portfolio process, with the self-evaluations, as more of an experience rather than an activity. In analyzing my own teaching, I realize that I tend to fall back on activities rather than experiences to tantalize my students' critical thought processes, thus lacking the necessary depth required for internalization. I am also aware of my "too present" presence, the fact that I am at the center of the attention (in theory, that is!), rather than the subject itself. I would much rather be the facilitator in the classroom, and allow the learners to become part of a learning group, perhaps even facilitators of each other's learning. Frequently, in graduate school, I found myself thinking and reflecting far more provocatively due to a colleague's insights or comments, than due to my pages upon pages of academic reading or lectures. I am completely cognizant of the value of such understated experiences, and would love dearly to include this sort of collaboration in the reflective process—therefore incorporating both individual and group reflection, and at the same time, enhancing classroom community.

Portfolios are often seen by eyes other than those of the teacher, and the element of an additional audience may be intriguingly influential. One's writing often reflects the audience for whom it is intended; to continually write for a teacher holding a red pen can be frustrating, boring, and intimidating. Each assignment will include a required number of readers to check off an evaluation rubric for the writing product. We will also experiment with peer response groups. The idea of a new audience might affect their writing in a positive way, as I hope it will lend the process more validity and heighten the stakes. Not only that, but the idea of having readers should also provide the opportunities for any missed mistakes to be corrected or honed before turning it in for final evaluation.

The final evaluation for writing pieces in the portfolio will be based, then, not only on content, but also on the honesty and accuracy of their own evaluations, and their resultant actions in subsequent works. If this is done as planned, it is my hope that the students will begin to rethink their work from new perspectives before turning it in, rely on their own judgments, and lessen the necessity for teacher approval. In my eternally optimistic world, students will become more organized by completing written drafts by a given date (I still need to guide them through these aspects), so they can experience the value of planning ahead, and the reality that good writing takes time and plenty of rewriting. It is exponentially more meaningful if they can see this for themselves.

The other angle of an additional audience lies in the very real possibility of inviting parents or other adults to a "portfolio party" at the end of the quarter, to allow the kids an opportunity to showcase their work. Prior to the "party",

students would be given a list of all assignments done during the quarter; from those assignments, students would be free to choose at least two examples of growth, especially the lower performers. They would then display these works for anyone (teachers, parents, peers) who wished to see them. I envision, again with optimism, them being able to explain that even though they may not make straight A's, they have certainly improved, and can pinpoint examples as proof positive. I wish for them to be comfortable enough with their own progress, to no longer worry about the performances of student X, Y, or Z.

CHAPTER THREE

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

In recounting general results of the portfolio process after this past quarter, I will return to my three players described pages ago. I will attempt to tell the story through their performances, and include assumptions I have drawn along the way.

I intended for these portfolios to provide several essential characteristics of a motivationally conducive classroom. These characteristics included varied learning activities—both collaborative and individual, graded and ungraded assignments, and the instructional guidance to become better organized. We also tried to commit ourselves to specific goals in writing (mostly short-term), followed by analyses for progress and performance discrepancy. Specific expectations for core academic elements such as grammar, conventions, and specific styles of writing were inherent in their assignments, and expectations were clearly presented through the use of both detailed and general evaluation rubrics. There were opportunities to choose concepts or writing prompts, and time for rewriting after feedback (via other readers and rubrics rather than the teacher) from the first two or three drafts. Simple accountability for each assignment existed by maintaining them in a central location, within the portfolios themselves, thus precluding the common barrage of excuses for students “not

having the assignment” there at school. Throughout the quarter, I wanted to use these portfolios to reward effort and persistence, not just high performances, and to encourage more active cognitive strategies by lessening reliance on the teacher to complete assessment single-handedly.

STUDENT A

Student A has been, and still is, bitter and resistant to things not on her own terms. She is reluctant and even more lackadaisical about her work than last quarter, refusing to try anymore. Cognitive abilities are not even tapped. She adamantly declined to write down her own goals, even when I told her she could write them in a private place where I wouldn't see them. She said it was “stupid”, and that she “didn't care”. She sat at her desk and did nothing, or glared at me with a dare in her eye, and sometimes merely stared out the window. When I strategically sat her next to student C (the high achiever), she became more alert and did some of her work. She did not put forth extra effort for long, though, and I frequently caught her scribbling down her homework at the last minute, if at all.

I sometimes asked the students to finish their writing at home for homework so that we could go through different rubrics step by step in class the following day, and navigate the process of self-evaluation together. Not once did she do her work on those days, and was behind the curve when it came to this most important part of the learning process. When I told her she needed to have

the work so she could participate, she shrugged her shoulders and, rolled her eyes with the snappy rejoinder, “I don’t care.”

What was at once heartening and frustrating was the fact that the few times she actually did do her work, it was insightful, often with heartfelt emotion for a friend who had passed away. I praised her genuinely, and she still rolled her eyes. She wanted no one else to see what she had written, and I honored that. She did write once, mid-quarter, that she likes to write because she feels she has a lot to share. I know she truly does care and that she has plenty of emotion and experience ripe for expression, which makes it all the harder to witness her withdrawal. She knows she is good when she tries, I think. Is it all a game to her? An attempt to see how far she can push the wall?

I feel that much of her apathy (fear? reluctance?) stemmed from her first assignment this quarter—one of the few of which she did at least half. She did the first draft, and filled out half of the rubric by asking her Mom to be one of the readers. She answered two of the questions herself, but did not complete the entire evaluation. The assignment was to complete a total of 3 drafts, with slight variations on each accompanying rubric, the third consisting of 4 simple questions about the process as a whole. (Did you complete all 3 drafts and the rubrics? What was the most difficult aspect of this assignment? What was easy for you in doing this assignment? What was new for you about this assignment?) Student A finished a “second draft” at the last minute (I watched her finish it at the beginning of class), and it was a verbatim copy of the first draft. She never did complete the second rubric, nor did she complete anything else. Grading for this

assignment, as they were informed, was based on the accuracy of their evaluations, rather than the content of their writing.

I gave her several chances to finish the writing, but she never did. Her grade reflected her efforts, and she received a failing grade according to the rubric I used. She received 60 some points, so she did get credit for her minimal efforts—all was not a loss. She was undeniably upset with me for that, and blamed me for days for being “unfair”, and treating her cruelly. After that, we had two more similar writing assignments, and she never did try to do them. Her self-perceptions in my class seemed to disintegrate into pure negativity, except for those days when I was suddenly, and without apparent reason, her best buddy.

Interestingly, she claimed she didn't have time to do the work at home, even over the weekend, or despite extra time I might have allotted her. She claimed she was tired, or that she had a late basketball game. Her mood shifted constantly; some days she would be my best buddy, hanging on me, searching me out at break time, or after school. On those same days, though, it wouldn't have been unusual for her to lay her head down on the table in my classroom, refuse to answer the simplest question, and whisper incessantly to her neighbors. When she received a poor grade, however, on a test, quiz, or project in which effort was obviously not a factor, she blamed me and would refuse to speak to me for days. Even the simplest of writing assignments, like a set of questions, for example, about the students' favorite rock group, favorite athlete/movie star, etc. went undone, again because she had no time. So, both simple and challenging assignments went undone.

Completed homework is worth 100% in my class, regardless of precision and accuracy—I don't even look at it first, I just give my students credit for their effort. We check the work and answer questions after credit has been given. She missed 16 of 20 assignments this quarter and again accused me for giving her a poor grade, not wanting to understand that much of the work was linked together, and that many assignments stemmed from another. There was no possibility of her becoming metacognitive regarding her learning. Her entire "collection" of writing and work samples was nowhere near the fleshed out version I had imagined (hoped) it would be, and could not be used for comparison. Hence my realization that I had not thought out consequences for those who failed to complete the portfolio, or for a lack of production on the student's part. I simply reminded her of her missing work, and allowed her until the end of the quarter to turn it in to me. Her mother was notified of all the missing assignments, but Student A decided to pit her mother against me by claiming she had turned in the assignments, and that I had lost them. I still doubt the mother believed me, even when I showed her A's near-empty portfolio.

It was and is incredibly disappointing for me to watch her recalcitrance. No amount of verbal persuasion is effective, unless it has a negative bent. I suspect this originates with her street smarts, a defensive survival tactic of the tough neighborhood to which she belongs. Teachers who have worked with her for the past four years indicate that she is the most attentive when there is negative attention, or an argument to be had. This quarter, I had changed my attitude toward her in this respect; when she became argumentative or blameful, I,

out of a hatred for conflict, simply said, “If it makes you feel better to say that, then by all means do so.” And I left it at that. Now she rarely speaks to me, and I presume she’s unsure of how to handle a lack of argument or aggression. On occasion, however, she still loves to tell me she’ll “be my friend” if I let her do this or get away without doing that. (She continues to push my wall, as well!) Her emotions are highly unpredictable.

In behavior evaluations for the portfolio, she wavered among honesty, apathy, and prevarication, so I can’t say she learned much from doing those. If she did them, it was just to get them done so that she could go to the restroom or get water. After a day full of talking, disrespectful comments to me or other students, and a blatant refusal to participate in class, she would insist that she *did* pay attention, that she *was* quiet, and that she never said anything out of line to anyone.

She quit easily, too easily, in fact, as though she again craved negative attention from me. She was also a dependent help-seeker, continually on a quest for the direct answer, not a “hint” to help her think. This was routine for even the most straightforward of rubrics and assignments. I gave neither negative attention, nor answers, and she really struggled with that. She told me several times that I didn’t care about her. I refused to help her unless she could ask me specific questions for help, and it was tough—on both of us. It would have been so much easier to give her what she wanted and be done with it. I believe she has prior experience with getting what she wants from teachers out of exasperation, but I happen to be an immovable wall (on the surface!) in her garden of life. (I

can be just as stubborn as she is!) She appears tenacious in her stand that effort does not equate to success.

Rotter (1990) discriminates between internal and external loci of control, and those kids like student A, with an external locus of control, are prone to believe that both success and failure are caused by factors outside of their control. If she sees me as one of her external factors that she might be able to influence, and I do not budge from my expectations, perhaps this exacerbates her frustration. If, however, she understood the clarity and consistency of grading rubrics, for example, would it not help her feel in control? It cannot if she doesn't attempt the use of them, or is not receptive to help in learning how to follow them.

When presented with a writing assignment in class, for example, she immediately raises her hand and says, "I can't do this." Often she will refuse to answer questions (especially on tests), and when I press her about it, she insists she knows the answers, but doesn't "feel like writing them down." About mid-quarter, I began saying, "OK" instead of coercing her into doing the work; the first time I did this, she looked at me, eyes wide open, and blamed me for not caring. She was going to tell her Mom that I didn't care. I said, "OK—if that makes you feel better." She returned to her seat and worked until time was up. (Unfortunately, she did not do well, but at least she tried—a step in the right direction.)

I believe she is a prime example of learned helplessness, with a touch of victimization thrown in for good measure. She frequently does nothing productive in class, often says "I can't" without trying, displays no pride, never

volunteers, and does not respond to my exhortations to try. I can go right down the list of behaviors suggesting learned helplessness, as listed by Stipek, and apply each and every one to student A. Including what I have just mentioned, she also guesses or answers without really trying; frequently appears bored or uninterested; takes no pride in her successes; is easily discouraged; and maneuvers to get out of work, to name a few. (Stipek, 2002) I have been unable to break her of that cycle.

The activities I attempted with my class this quarter in the pursuit of self-evaluation and learner autonomy seem to have been lost on student A, which explains my focus on her behavior instead. I have to admit that I am unable to move her wall, or bring myself to acquiesce to her will. I have not been able to reach through her miasma of paranoia and anger to get to her, and this quarter seems to have deepened our separating chasm. She has an awful time writing anything positive about herself, and seems to have no problem relating criticism heard from someone else, doing so in spite, I feel. She is overly sensitive at times and takes any type of criticism quite personally. There is a struggle of wills—both of us are to blame—with pride and integrity at stake. I am extremely strict compared to her other teachers, and refuse to be “her buddy”, and in doing so, have perhaps compromised our relationship. I see her difficulties with not being the center of my attentions, and I sense she has willfully decided not to learn from me. Whether I’m supposed to or not, reality and humanness rule my world—I cannot help but take it personally regardless of what transpires between us. Is it possible to care too much?

In summary, working with Student A has provided quite a challenge, and unfortunately, after all of the hours of heartache, soul-searching, and prayers for patience, I cannot say I have seen any improvement in her motivation, critical thinking, or desire to perform academically. Of course, in my optimism, I never expected her to not do so much. My main goal for her this quarter had been for her to begin to comprehend the role she has in the outcome of her performances. I wanted her to understand that the primary person in charge of her learning was her own self, and to learn about the effects of her own actions and reactions. She admits she is responsible for her learning but vehemently blames me daily for failing her. She persists in her beliefs that she has a learning disability and cannot do the work, and has yet to absorb any iota of responsibility for work not done. Her self-judgments will become self-fulfilling prophecies. She shows characteristics of not-learning, an action which does take formidable strength and probably helps her feel as though she is creating a small, safe world for herself by doing so. In understanding this, I see how important it is to objectively view the relationship of our mutual stances toward learning. A portfolio collection with inquisitory rubrics is ineffective unless a student actually does the work and is receptive to change. She has not made a formidable effort in either area.

STUDENT B

Student B's story is different. I have, through observing both A and B so closely, gained a greater understanding of Herbert Kohl's concept of "not-

learning” (Kohl, 1994) versus failure. I see now where it is easy to be fooled by students who intentionally decide to not-learn, and are therefore believed to lack in ability. Student B is one of those students who toes the line between the two; I have seen his adamant refusal to learn on one hand (especially when it comes to reading), but on the other hand there is remorse and pride which has surfaced enough to help him ask when he needs help. That little bit of evident frustration is enough to signal to me that his defiance involved a desire to know, and that part of my job was to lessen the gap between what he wanted to do and what he was able to do.

B was successful in his first major writing assignment, the one with 3 drafts and accompanying rubrics described in my account of student A. Previously, if you recall, B’s defiance overwhelmed me, and I could not get him to make any effort whatsoever. By the middle of the second quarter, he began to soften, and he at least began to try. He struggled, and sometimes gave up. It was a start. This third quarter, he executed an amazing turnaround, and performed brilliantly, not just in comparison to his former self, but in comparison with even his highest achieving classmates. At the outset of the quarter, as I explained this new concept of portfolios to the class, he was surprisingly attentive, and was especially curious about who else was going to see the work at the end of the quarter. I informed him that it would be his decision to invite someone to our portfolio party.

It was so exciting for me to see the progress in his writing from one draft to the other, and his receptiveness to my help and suggestions. Actually, he asked

me for help several times, (an extreme improvement in itself), and did so because “doing better in Language Arts” was one of his initial goals for the quarter. I could not help but show my excitement for B in his success—for their first major writing assignment, he turned in each draft a day or two earlier than the due date, he was eager to show me his work, and he was proud of what he had done. All of this was unusual and I savored it. I also admit that I first wondered who had written it, even though it was his writing. I didn’t say anything to him, wanting to trust him, and giving him the benefit of the doubt. Even if someone did help him, I figured it meant he took the initiative to ask for help, and he still wrote it carefully enough to have impeccable spelling and grammar. It took effort on his part regardless. I had never seen such high caliber work from him, or such immaculate attention to detail. When I showed his work to his other teachers, they were just as surprised as I was, but we all supported his efforts.

I used his work several times in class as an example because I had it in front of me so early. I tried to play it off when I used his work; I wanted the pride he felt to be his own, and not implied by someone else. I think he already knew I was pleased. He turned in all of his papers for that assignment, and wrote his comments with evident thought. He even admitted it wasn’t as hard as he thought it would be, and that it was “sort of fun”. In contrast with student A, then, B was set up for success, with this major accomplishment under his belt. He started to come to class eagerly, was no longer disruptive, (although that may have had something to do with the fact that I assigned his new seat next to a quiet, studious,

and patient classmate, whom B is not afraid to ask for help) and started to raise his hand with confidence.

B's confidence was visibly boosted by his successes. When he worked together with his table partner, he was prompted to do more, to even be competitive, a feeling which I doubt has ever been very strong for him in his academic experiences. His disruptions in class were virtually nonexistent.

It was wonderful to see, and I asked him what made him work so hard this quarter. At first he resorted to his "old self" and cried out with exasperation, "I don't know!" But then he told me he didn't want to fail again this quarter. Simple as that. I'm not sure if it would be accurate to solely assert an uprising of internal motivation. I suspect his strict father may have had more to do with it than his initial (albeit phenomenal!) success in my class, but then again, perhaps the reception of his success at home inspired him to do it again. He actually scored the highest amount of points for that assignment out of all his peers—undoubtedly a first for him. Frequently throughout the remainder of the quarter, he asked me to "hurry up and grade" his papers, so he would know what he got, and could take it home to show his father and grandmother.

His motivation was not full-force every day, but I did not expect, nor did I desire, such an outcome because it would not have been realistic. The "old" student B still resurfaced, but rarely. He exemplified pride and exertion, benefited from the organization of the portfolio, and was concerned about completing his written work. Reading comprehension was, and still is, a viable impasse for him, but we can only do so much at a time.

One thing about B that intrigued me, and stood out for me, was his inability to integrate an objective reality of his recent successes into his feedback and self-evaluation. He had the hardest time writing anything complimentary about himself! I am loath to push too hard for fear of scaring him back into withdrawal. I always ask my kids to write 2 things they did well on each assignment or draft, and until recently, he has always left those questions blank. Sometimes I would pursue it with him, tossing out ideas for him to consider, and sometimes I would scribe for him as he talked.

It is tough for him to admit strengths, which I assume stems from his lack of prior positive feedback. With his newfound confidence, though, I keep reassuring myself that he will be able to express himself when the time is right. He frequently used to tell me how stupid he was, and I witnessed firsthand both the power and the scars of self-“mis-perception”. It has been tough for him to break away from that, to be a little arrogant, and talk himself up a bit, yet he has begun to open up, and to see success stemming not from an external locus, but from an internal locus. More importantly, he has begun to believe in himself, even if just a little.

One activity we used to work on evaluation skills from another angle was a peer response group for writing. I modeled it with the entire class for 2 days, with different readers—it was a fishbowl setup with a reader and two listeners surrounded by a circle of their classmates. The class watched as the two listeners learned how to give feedback on the reader’s story, as the reader learned how to take notes without reply or “defense”. It was an exercise to help the writers

compare the listeners' mental pictures with their intended ideas, to bring home the importance of clear, descriptive writing.

We scaffolded the process with the remainder of the class taking notes and providing feedback as well as the two "fishbowl" listeners. After a few times, and guidance in appropriately constructive wording, they tried it in smaller groups. B blossomed, anticipating his turns to both read and give feedback. His boldness increased quickly, and he displayed confidence when giving suggestions. I think the novelty of being "permitted" to give his opinion about a more advanced student's work—and actually be taken seriously—was priceless. His own writing improved greatly in both description and coherence. He was graceful in accepting comments from his peers, indicative of his maturity in this activity.

His advances came through his own understanding of what was possible as well as confirmation by both his peers (through peer response sessions) and teacher (I was obviously pleased!). He has learned that his capabilities are parallel, if not in excess, of his peers, although effort is required. He has at least learned how to write down goals, albeit mostly short-term. I'm not convinced, however, that he is writing them for himself yet; it seems that he fishes around for ideas from me first before writing anything, as if to please me. I accept it for now, since it indicates positive effort, with some attention to his own capabilities. He has become conscious enough of his skills to shun a goal that he feels he won't be able to achieve. He is conservative, and prefers short-term goals, with easily attainable steps.

I realize that time is an integral factor until his goals are excavated according to his own emotional and intellectual preferences. His honesty shown in evaluations demonstrate at once a potential for him to do well and to self-deprecate himself. I wonder whether he wants to do such a thing in the first place, and how we can increase the value for him. This self-evaluation is not for everyone, and sometimes I feel too controlling through its imposition, but it is simply an experiment. I see beneficial results from Student B, but I am not convinced of his readiness to pursue, and effectively apply, intended results of such evaluations. He performs best when someone is right there with him, through every step of the work. His initiative has been dulled by previous failures, and it will take much longer for him to gain appropriate autonomy and discover that learning is more important than performing. One day, perhaps his evaluations will at last redefine success in terms of personal improvement.

STUDENT C

Student C, the high achiever, was the only one who confirmed my expectations and concerns. She completed all the work assigned to her except one paper, and for that she was remorseful to no end. (Of course, she made that up by the next day.) She was organized before we used the portfolios, and using them only enhanced her organization. Hers was the most organized out of the class—I often looked through hers to organize my own notes! She was, for the most part,

attentive in class, but as I mentioned above, my concerns were confirmed. I am talking about demotivation.

The greatest concern I had for C was her boredom. She is on an entirely different plane than A and B regarding work habits, maturity, and ability, and I was worried that she would eventually tune out. Part of my reasoning behind the portfolios was also to maintain motivation in students like her, where I could push her limits a bit further than the others, but not make public differentials.

During the second quarter, I watched her presence in my class dwindle from an exuberant, self-motivated, sponge-like student, to a semi-motivated student who just wanted to get her work done so that she could read her book. I talked to her several times, and she admitted that she was bored. I gave her extra projects to do independently, but she never completed them. I'm not sure what happened to her usual work ethic, although I suspect she didn't fully comprehend why I was being so demanding in my hopes. She has always been at the top of her class, so all of her assignments, regardless of her effort level, have tended toward superiority in comparison. I wanted her to do better, but needed the evaluative set-up to reach the multiple ability levels.

I feel that her self-efficacy was dampened; after all the years of being a nearly "faultless" student, I strongly held her accountable for higher quality work. Her parents see her as near perfect, as do all of the teachers who have ever had the pleasure of working with her. It is easy to see her this way, and I have, more than once, found myself wishing I could have a whole class full of students like her. So, being accustomed to those impressions, she balked at suddenly being told that

her imaginative writing was lacking in emotion, for example—an integral facet of the particular prompt given—and thus threw her for a motivational loop. She was obviously upset in class, but I allowed her to respond to her evaluation (the whole class was given time to do this, as another perspective in reflection). She was mature in her insights, realizing that she could have done better, but claiming that she had also been unsure of how to fill out parts of the rubric. She further admitted that she had rushed, having wanted “to complete the assignment early”.

Many of the questions on the rubric were as simple as: “Are all three drafts complete? Are there capital letters at the beginning of each sentence and end marks at the end? Is there at least one specific emotion mentioned?” (we were focusing on this at the time). Only a couple related specifically to the content—inquiries as to whether or not the prompt was nailed, and whether descriptive details were appropriately used. The students were not used to being accountable for their performances like this, and the honesty was tough. If they checked “yes” for capitalization and punctuation, but I found evidence to the contrary, I took points away. I wanted them to understand that control on their part related directly to responsibility. Rubrics were the simplest method of presenting what they would be accountable for and when, and to instill the result of consequences for failure to meet these responsibilities.

The most telling results of development were the rubric responses from the first draft to the third (final); the rubrics were identical, and it was easy to see who paid heed to the results of the first draft comments. (First and second drafts were not graded, but the rubrics were used to assess accuracy and to further

elucidate my expectations for them individually.) Student C was one of the students who did not fare well on the first rubric, but benefited from the experience in evaluating her own work, as evidenced by her increased precision with each rubric.

My particular relationship with Student C is, I believe, a factor, although I'm unsure of its extent. Because C is such a prominent figure in my classroom, and does exemplify such a plethora of positive attributes, it is difficult not to want to lavish praise on her, or treat her with magnanimous privileges. Therefore, I force myself not to show her extra attention, and purposely try to distance myself from her, so that any extra kindnesses are not construed as favoritism. It is tough, and I know, through my own observations at school, that she is unaccustomed to the formality of our relationship in comparison with other teachers. That makes me wonder if the distance has helped create this tinge of demotivation.

I believe that much of the phenomenon of demotivation is attributed to what the teacher does or does not do, and Gorham and Christophel (1992; Dornyei, 2001) listed other factors which tend to lessen motivation. Dissatisfaction with grading and assignments was the most frequent factor as determined by their studies, followed by the teacher being bored/boring/unprepared, dislike of the subject area, and the teacher being unapproachable/self-centered/condescending. Differing teaching styles are an important facet as well—I mention this since I tend to have a more serious demeanor in class for fear of crossing that “line”. Half of the students in C's class are not ready to discern where the line of respect exists, so I feel a consistency in

stricter demeanor is necessary. My point in all of this is that, even though C does not portray lethargy, apathy, lack of effort, or an unwillingness to cooperate, I have noticed the changes noted previously in her classroom performance. The light has not been extinguished, but dulled in her eyes, and it concerns me.

Her evaluative work has become more accurate, but it appears that she still hurries to complete it. Her answers to goals and self-evaluation questions have been brief, and not as specific as expected. I asked her to provide more detail—instead of a goal to be “more descriptive” in her writing, I wanted her to tell me how she planned to do that. The difference I see in her from the beginning of the quarter until now, is that she has become more receptive to what I’m tossing out. She appears to have realized that I am not trying to hurt her with my questions, but am instead trying to tap those awesome skills already in existence. Out of all of my students, I probably push her the hardest, because I believe in her, and know that she is tough enough to take it, once she comprehends my intentions for her.

My goals for her, with the use of self-evaluation, provided her the opportunity to work on her own level, and for me to push her beyond her own level. She did learn to use the self-evaluation process, as evidenced in subsequent writing assignments, and through the relentless questions I fired at her as she wrote her evaluations. The most impressive quality she has is her receptiveness. She also has immense respect for adults, so she would take what I had to say and consider it without argument. I provided opportunity for response and “defense”, if you will, with every assignment, and that, as already mentioned, added another

angle from which to view the students' abilities to evaluate their work. C was especially honest in doing these, and she would never fail to apply what she had written or become aware of in her evaluations, on the next assignment. She has a strong internal locus of control and motivation, and persists even in the face of "failure" or disappointment; the reality of being held accountable for her efforts does not intimidate her and she has adapted well. I feel that she has learned the value of making the connections from one piece of work to another, and that she will only improve with time and practice. This was a new undertaking for her, and although she balked at first, she has been mature enough to learn to value the process.

As for her level of motivation? Well, of course it's difficult to measure, but I did witness her aspirations to surpass her previous levels of performance. Using the rubric format gave her tangible guidelines, and she was one of the few students who went back into their portfolios to look at previous rubrics as she completed new assignments. Initially I was worried that she was doing less than I anticipated, but now I see that she is just as motivated without all the hoopla, bells and whistles I had for some reason expected from her. Expectations of the teacher missed the mark for realism this time; both her motivation and internalization of the process were precisely what I had hoped for.

CHAPTER FOUR

ELEMENTS FOR CONSIDERATION

My conclusion for portfolios is positive, despite a lack of conclusive evidence that their use directly enhanced motivation. Many factors affected their use, including the evaluations themselves, time, student ability and perseverance, and teacher empathy and patience.

My primary goal was to guide the students in evaluations of their own writing, an area in which progress is easier to track. Portfolios kept in a central location work well, especially if comparisons will be done with prior works. Students have a strong tendency to lose papers within nanoseconds. It is the perfect opportunity for them to evaluate and compare with themselves, and to teach them to view their performances without judgment—to see things as they are without adding anything to them; this was understandably complex. Students who are used to being graded in black or white, “good” or “bad”, do not initially bode well with gray areas and the responsibilities of honest self-assessment. Time, however, and patient guidance can help make it more effective.

Evaluating students on personal improvement is ideal for all ability levels. High-achievers, like Student C, have a higher standard to aspire to with the objective of surpassing their own performance. Lower and middle-level achievers, like Students B and A, can benefit because the comparison is with themselves, and therefore attainable. Through this they can also experience the payoffs of effort, which can in turn contribute to higher perceptions of their own abilities, and fewer misperceptions of bias.

Time is certainly an issue, and the brevity of a single quarter to introduce such complex concepts as those involved in self-evaluation is definitely insufficient. It would be best to introduce the process at the beginning of the year, with rubrics, goal-setting, and reflection. I know this was completely new for my kids, which grants me license to forgive them for not “getting it” right away; I believe it would have been more readily integrated had I started earlier. With additional time, we could include other types of work in the portfolio—audio tapes of the students reading throughout the year, miscellaneous projects with technology, and so on.

The students decided to forego the “portfolio party” as a whole, because they did not feel confident enough to show off their work. I acquiesced, but with Dan Millman’s (1979) thoughts on awareness in mind. He claims that a “sure sign of growing awareness is that you ‘feel’ as if you are getting worse.” Self-esteem drops, and efficacy is questioned when you are forced to look at your own weaknesses. There is a natural tendency to shy away from doing this, and it takes a special inner strength to persevere. This quarter I witnessed a few students at

various stages; first they were reluctant to do the work, and when confronted with the requirement of honest evaluation, they became frustrated. It is important for the teacher to stick to a given goal during times like these. Many are still at that point, but a few have moved on and have been visibly empowered by their understanding. I only expect a general awareness, and assume that the more subtle awareness will develop—again with time. Perhaps then they will be ready for a “portfolio party”? Perhaps it would be appropriate to have one regardless of their desire, to make it a goal in their own minds.

A new insight I gained from working with Student C, was the power of not-learning, (the decision, whether conscious or subconscious, not to learn something) and I now question my right to define motivation, or appropriate levels of learning, for my students. I have analyzed my prior beliefs and assumptions of those who do or do not want to learn and why, and I still believe it is worth the effort to help the students develop concepts and thinking processes rather than memorize miscellaneous, and possibly irrelevant, material. I accept that I am not fully aware of all the variables surrounding my students, and that there is a point when students at this age assert their “right” to not-learn certain things—some of which we adults applaud, and others which we do not. Many of these decisions, though, stem from the same basis of thought, an inescapable reality. As a teacher, I can guide, but not force, my students in a given direction.

Teachers must be patient and hold fast to their beliefs, especially when their own motivation starts to wane. During this experiment, insights into the feelings of my students crystallized. I saw and felt firsthand the frustrations of

putting forth my best efforts, only to “fail”, as I feel I did with Student A. I take the lack of positive feedback (in the form of performance) personally, and understand how quickly that can subjugate one’s will.

Ironically, though, I have been awakened. I have questioned the feasibility of persisting when I feel with certainty that I am setting myself up for disappointment. This reminder of what it feels like to fail, and to experience it on an almost daily basis has proven priceless. I step back each time I feel this, and remind myself to keep my expectations realistic. At times I felt “equal” to my students, although the main difference was that I knew that I had to care. Giving up cannot be an option for teachers.

There is an untold value of empathy in the learning process, and when there is an atmosphere of unrelenting assessment, as in a classroom, it pays to expose your heart occasionally, regardless of teaching style. Fostering relationships with the students is imperative, and through the use of portfolios, evaluations, and focusing together on the subject rather than each other, will help to bond those relationships. Sometimes. With Student B it worked. With Student A it did not. Patience and persistence are the keys. A trusting and respectful relationship helps create a value in learning, and if I can’t grab their hearts, as is the case with Student A, it makes it more difficult.

Using the process of evaluation as the primary locus of motivation was visibly tough for the kids. The novelty and the work involved seemed daunting at times for them, but I feel that many of them made great strides in their peer relationships in class, as well as learning to view their work from a new

perspective. The three students of my study still waver from being motivated to being unmotivated in this final quarter, but perhaps they have seen enough of the “motivated” side to be tantalized to return.

Conclusion

To wrap up my thoughts, I feel it appropriate to adjust my metaphor from the introduction of this paper. I have chosen to compare my students to beached whales rather than climbers dangling in peril. Beached whales have an innate quality that brings them onto the shore, a place where they cannot save themselves. Without external assistance, the whales will perish. Often they escape detection on the beach, only to be discovered when it is too late; other times, however, they are discovered in time to be helped. There are teams of “experts” to provide an even greater chance at survival, often with specialized areas of expertise and equipment.

If the whale has to be pulled backwards, the novelty of the motion may create panic and cause the whale to start thrashing. Thus there are contingency plans and additional safety measures in case one does not work well enough. There is still mystery surrounding the phenomenon of beaching, but, as with students who find themselves in predicaments from which they cannot escape alone, at least there are people who are concerned and try to help. Unfortunately,

there will always be whales that somehow survive, either of their own accord or by virtue of external help, only to become beached again.

One can draw multiple parallels, then, between the predicaments of the whales and the students. They both often find themselves in situations beyond their control, yet in both instances, there are many willing hands and hearts to help. There are contingencies in the event of failure, and safety measures for the rebellion of “being helped”, and being pulled in unusual directions. Nature is powerful, but the survival instinct is not the same for everyone. As a teacher, I can only do so much, but it is imperative to keep trying. Just as with whale experts, I can try to help the students, but only if the student is receptive and makes an effort herself as she is guided out to sea, will that help be viable. There is as much to be said for those who try to help as for those who want to be helped. The desire must be mutual. Sometimes it is, and sometimes, it simply isn't.

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APPENDIX A

I have enclosed two examples of rubrics used with my students. They are similar in design, but each one used throughout the quarter was tailored to include any specific aspect we were working on at that time.

On page 60, there is an example of a rubric, with the additional requirement of choosing two readers to evaluate the draft. The readers could be parents, peers, or even other teachers, but the point was to have other eyes than mine see the work before it was turned in. The author also had to answer the questions and fill out the last 2 questions. The students were incredibly reluctant to praise themselves with what they had done well, but more than ready to list things they felt were not good enough. Much of their growth over the quarter became apparent through use of question #1 at the bottom of the page.

The second rubric is an example of the “grading” system I used at the end of a writing assignment. The third column is designated for “points”, which simply means that they were given anywhere from 8-12 points for each question in which I could check “yes”. For example, students were given 12 points each for questions #1 and #12 if the answer was affirmative. I wanted to encourage them to at least turn in work, and to at least try, even if their writing wasn’t at grade level. This also allowed me to be stricter with those whose standards I wanted to maintain or improve upon. (such as Student C)

Using the rubrics made evaluations much easier for both the students and myself; they also gave me insight into my students’ thought processes. Rubrics were given out at the beginning of the assignments, and the evaluation rubric was handed out upon completion of a given draft, so I felt they were better informed as well.