

Behind Every Silver Lining

Wade A. Carpenter

The Other Side of Motivation

Maybe we shouldn't worry quite so much about motivating the kids. Don't get me wrong: I know how important motivation is, and I know exactly how unmotivated N percent of the population is. I'm not arguing against motivation, but that perhaps we shouldn't worry so much about motivating the *kids*. I reckon I'd better explain.

Recently St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Rome, Georgia, began a search for a new priest, and already parishioners are pestering the search committee. I thought one suggestion was really silly: a parishioner's request for a rector who would "inspire" her. Of course, we all chuckled at that one. Episcopalian clergy aren't supposed to inspire anyone: that isn't their job. As the old saying goes, they may "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." They may bemuse, trouble, inform, persuade, and on very, very rare occasions, they may even dismay, but they may never, *ever* inspire. Any congregation that needs to be inspired has either been misled or just hasn't been paying attention.

I. In some ways, teachers and kids are in a similar situation. First of all, there may not be too much teachers can do about motivating some kids. There are some kids who have perfectly good reasons not to like school—those who've been savaged by previous classroom experiences; those who have been told in X ways that they're stupid Y times per day for Z years of schooling; and finally, those who *correctly* see school as irrelevant to their problems. Let's get real: school is not the solution for all of life's inadequacies (and the way many legislatures, administrators, and professors operate, it soon may not be the solution for any of them).

Another reality check: in trying to get and hold little Johnny's attention, no matter how interesting, entertaining, and motivating I am as a teacher, I still will have trouble competing suc-

cessfully with little Britney's chest. Sometimes, in fact, motivation just boils down to making it more unpleasant for the kid not to learn than it is for the kid to learn. Certainly we must be careful here: this sort of reasoning has been used far too often to excuse cruel teaching practices by lazy incompetents. But coercion may be necessary if (1) the material is so important, (2) the kid is so resistant, and (3) the institution is so impersonal and inflexible that less-directive methods to ensure mastery of essentials are impractical.

No educator, then, should ever get by with the excuse that "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink." Teachers have legally and morally contracted to see to it that the kid's only choice is to drink or drown. If more teachers presented students with the choice of learning or drowning in a perfect storm of adult attention (and *more administrators backed their teachers up*), I'll betcha more of the horses would drink. If a kid insists on not learning and hinders the learning or jeopardizes the safety of others, he belongs elsewhere.

Last on this point: if the material is important enough, the kid resistant enough, and the institution rigid enough, worrying about motivational teaching may miss the point entirely. These three conditions occurring together suggest that the problem may lie more with policymakers, principals, and ultimately, the public. Making teachers believe that the fault lies in their inability to motivate sometimes just amounts to a cruel fraud.

II. Still, we do also have to consider presentation. I know that all the above appears dreadfully

Wade A. Carpenter, Ph.D., is an associate professor of education at Berry College, Mount Berry, Georgia.

threatening, at least manipulative, and suspiciously . . . (c'mon, go ahead and say it!) *behavioristic*, but behaviorism may not be so bad if the behaviors themselves are good; after all, the word "manipulation" in itself implies only the use of an opposable thumb and forefinger, and any institution that is completely unthreatening can never be completely protective.

Rightly or wrongly, Americans have turned away from the costly education of free people and taken up the free schooling of coerced people. Since we have decided to coerce schooling, do we not have the responsibility to mandate learning? In our much-needed efforts to make learning palatable, we cannot succeed just by making it sweet. Isn't there a middle ground between directive and non-directive education? Given that in this era of higher standards we have chosen to teach much, do we not have the obligation to teach well?

Frankly, behaviorism sometimes gets a bad rap. Constructivists should be fair enough to admit that behaviorism involves a remarkably hopeful premise: no matter how sad a kid's background may be, given the right presentation, reinforcement, etcetera, just about every kid can learn the needed material, and it's up to the adults to ensure that just about every kid *will* learn it. Alfie Kohn is a leading critic of extrinsic motivation, and of course, he's right: everyone wants kids to be intrinsically motivated to do the right things. But contrast that to a point Aristotle once made: sometimes a little extrinsic motivation may provide a necessary kickstart in the right direction. Likewise, Maslow, nobody's dummy, said yes, we should meet the child's basic needs if we wish to motivate the child to higher possibilities, while Horace Mann, another pretty bright man, said the public has opted to fund classes rather than to enrich children. By the nature of things, Aristotle and Mann are telling us, a class makes demands that may not allow much time for individual handholding. We ought to try to meet children's basic needs, and we must do better than we have—but to the extent that we cannot, thoughtful manipulation may be just about as important as cheerful motivation.

III. We can worry about the preparation of teachers. Are teachers being prepared to do behavioristic teaching or direct instruction well? Unfortunately, teachers too often impose lectures that are boring and long—and too often lead activities that may be clever but may take much longer. How many times

have I heard the sharper students of "innovative" teachers grumbling something along the lines of: "Yes, dammit: this is cute. But I've already got the point, so let's move on!" Mature, intelligent, and spirited kids *ought* to complain when treated like infants, morons, and victims. Recently, a couple of veteran English teachers have introduced a new e-zine with an eloquent corrective to the "current best practice" so beloved of education professors:

After teaching for a few years and becoming thoroughly underwhelmed with the results we were getting, we each did a little self-analysis. Eventually we arrived at the conclusion that not only were we ineffective teachers, we would have despised our own classes if we had been unfortunate enough to have been enrolled in them. We discovered that we had built our classrooms on the innumerable suggestions of strangers and their lists of books, standards, and competencies. We had heeded their advice without ever considering our own talents or those of the students we taught. . . . The Bohemian teacher is no guide on the side, but is a charismatic, demanding artist who expects students to create papers and performances that are meaningful, lively, fresh, and beautifully rendered. (Baines and Kunkel 2000)

Professors can start by dropping uncritical allegiances to one-size-fits-all pedagogies that marginalize teachers. Very rarely have I met a teacher who has had formal preparation in how to lecture well; given the nature of our schools, most teachers will need it. We can prepare them to be skilled authorities when direct instruction is appropriate, and knowledgeable facilitators when guidance is appropriate. Professors of education can start by opening our office doors enough to our students that they develop the intellectual firepower to recognize when to be which. At the podium I can teach, in the desks they can learn, in the armchairs we can educate.

Then all of us can do a better job of differentiation, distinguishing which problems can best be addressed through better motivation, and which require wiser leadership and service. Maybe motivation is really society's job, and the teachers' job is to . . . (C'mon, go ahead and say it!) *teach*. We may respond, "But what if the society isn't doing its job very well? Somebody's got to," and we too are right. But instead of worrying so much about motivating kids to learn, perhaps we should first learn how to motivate legislators, administrators, and professors to worry.