

A New Motivational Principle for Educators

by Phillip N. Venditti

In Knoxville, Tennessee, something special takes place two hours before the kickoff of every University of Tennessee Volunteers football game: the college of arts and sciences puts on a lecture in the University Center.

The college has sponsored about seventy Pre-Game Showcase lectures since 1989, with a different distinguished faculty member delivering each one.¹ Almost all the lectures have drawn standing-room-only audiences of at least 220 people, which means that nearly 15,000 people have been affected since the Showcase program began. Topics have spanned the physical, natural, and social sciences, as well as the humanities—in short, all the realms of the liberal arts and sciences. The audiences, frequently numbering family members from two or more generations, are composed of members of all socioeconomic groups. The UT athletic department has co-sponsored the lectures, providing a door prize for someone in the audience and a free, highly coveted parking pass for every faculty speaker. The alumni affairs office has donated refreshments and sent out 10,000 promotional fliers a year.²

I believe the organizers of the University of Tennessee's Pre-Game Showcase lecture series have hit upon a profound motivational principle. I would also contend that our nation's teachers could reach valuable new audiences if they understood and used that principle.

The Old and the New

To achieve their professional aims, teachers and others who work in K-12 schools routinely strive to motivate diverse groups of students, parents, and community members. In fact, motivating people is a fundamental ingredient in teaching and learning. Therefore, it behooves us to review some features of social groups and examine those groups' openness to motivation.

A reasonable beginning point may be to ask ourselves, "Who will support causes or activities toward which educators try to motivate them?"

One answer to this question is that people who already know and care about a given cause or activity—let's call them "old hands"—are apt to respond favorably, provided they receive and understand a particular motivational message. People who don't already care about the cause, on the other hand—"newcomers"—are less likely to become motivated to support it. Figure 1 portrays these two groups and the ways in which they may respond to motivational efforts.

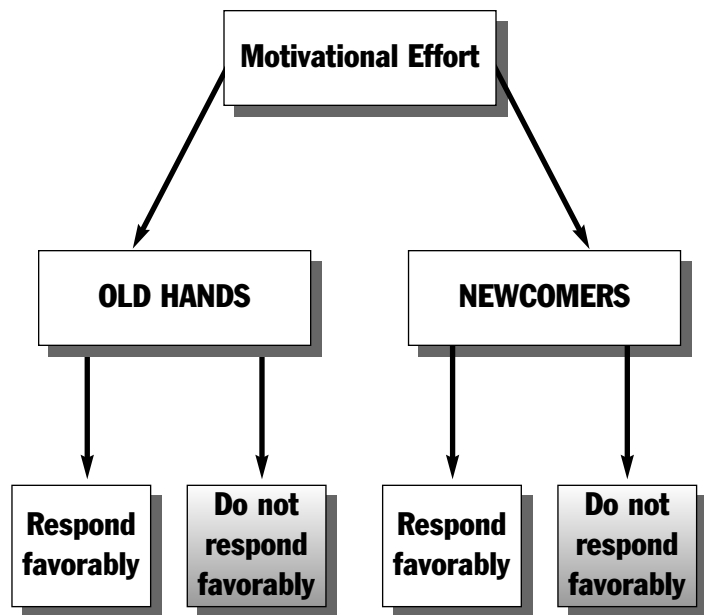
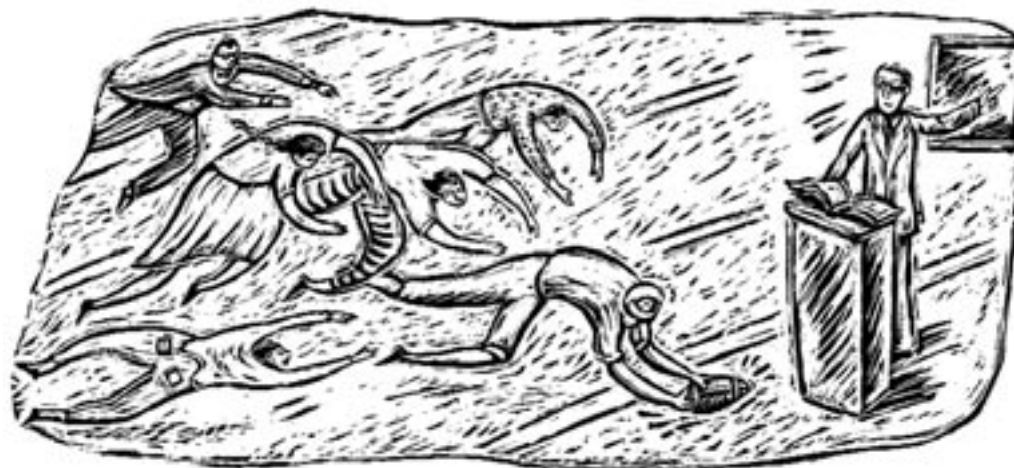


Figure 1. Possible effects of motivational efforts on old hands and newcomers

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Most people in the United States, including those who are newcomers in any cause or activity, are busy doing what they're already doing. Even if members of a particular "old hands" group are occupied with other activities, however, they may become motivated to support a cause or activity when reached by an individual motivational effort. Whether newcomers will be motivated, by contrast, depends largely upon the nature of the motivational effort—and, of course, upon whether that effort reaches their consciousness in the first place.

For the purposes of this discussion, I'd like to deal with the task of motivating newcomers to educational causes and activities—people who are happy doing what they're already doing and have not previously supported a given educational cause or activity. We educators should turn our attention to these newcomers not only because they far outnumber old hands and are thus a powerful potential source of support for things they haven't previously participated in, but also because the social and political trials we are apt to face in the future are so numerous and intractable that the current pool of old hands may not be able to handle them without being augmented.

I would maintain that few of us who work in educational organizations take time to identify ways in which old hands and newcomers differ, nor do many of us recognize the ramifications of those differences in terms of how we should approach the two groups. Instead, we generally take on motivational challenges with a one-size-fits-all approach, which I refer to as the Accretion Principle.

In most situations, we educators seek to motivate others by coaxing them into unaccustomed new territory—to have them accrete to

our outlook and behavior. We do our best to operate like a vacuum cleaner or an electromagnet; we attempt to draw distant objects toward us.

If we scan the rosters of volunteers who've taken part in educational projects in American communities, what do we see?—the same names over and over again. One thing these names demonstrate is that the accretion principle has been used pervasively by educators and that it has successfully attracted (and reattracted) old hands. Unfortunately, the recurrent nature of those names also bears witness that most Americans move in predictable circles and habitually associate themselves with tightly circumscribed activities.

Accretion has worked with old hands, in other words, but it has failed us as an organizing principle for motivating newcomers. It has borne us only to where we are today and is unlikely to convey us farther.

The Agglutination Principle

The heart of the Agglutination Principle, and the reason it promises to take us to new horizons, is that it adds something new to experiences that are already well-known and popularly accepted by other people. It also requires that we educators alter the sequence of our motivational activities. Rather than reviewing and reexpressing what we already value, we should begin by finding out what other people value. In short, we should understand the old hands of *other* groups. Only after we understand those old hands should we approach them to see if they might tune in to what we believe ourselves; only then can we logically hope to motivate them to support our educational causes and activities.

Attachment, Not Attraction

The essence of motivating people, after all, consists of asking them to change their behavior. When we use the customary accretion principle, we dispatch messages toward old hands and newcomers alike—usually without discriminating between the two groups. These messages say, “Come to us and act the way we want you to.” When we use the Agglutination Principle, by contrast, we *take* messages to newcomers rather than sending them. We ask, “Now that you can see that we care about what you like to do, will you consider experimenting with something else in addition to it?”

Figure 2 shows how our actions differ whether we operate according to accretion or agglutination.

How to Operate by Accretion

1. Define the values and activities you believe in.
2. Determine how you'd like other people to act in accordance with your values.
3. Dispatch messages asking people to support and participate in what you value.

How to Operate by Agglutination

1. Define the values and activities you believe in.
2. Determine what's popular among people who you wish would share your values.
3. Add something about your values to the popular things you identified in step 2.

Figure 2. Sequence of actions in accretion and agglutination

As Figure 2 implies, we can't take messages to people who are having a good time being old hands of a particular group until we find out where those people actually go to have a good time. If K-12 educators would like more students and parents to devote time to school activities, for instance, they should first ascertain how and

where those students and parents enjoy themselves now.

What pursuits relax students and their parents? What's fun for them? What makes them happy? What relieves their stress? If educators pose these questions sincerely and investigate them systematically, the outcomes could help greatly in motivating newcomers.

Answers to questions about newcomers' activities will differ from school to school and from group to group within schools. Parents' answers may differ from children's, too. Figure 3 presents just a few illustrative categories of ways in which I believe newcomers spend their time.

- Sports and recreation
 - Professional sports
 - Car racing and horse racing
 - Baseball, football, and basketball
 - Collegiate and other amateur competitions
 - Subculture activities
 - Wrestling matches
 - Dart tournaments
 - Tractor pulls
 - Demolition derbies
 - Kennel shows
 - Commercial television
 - Churches
 - Listening to music
 - Eating
 - Shopping and window-shopping

Figure 3.

Wrap-up

The eleven-year-old lecture series described at the beginning of this essay was clearly conceived and tailored to take advantage of many Tennesseans' customary affinity for mainstream collegiate athletic events. In fact, in the past two years the University of Tennessee College of Arts and Sciences has expanded its educational motivation activities by using the agglutination principle on an even more ambitious level. For thirty to sixty seconds at some point during every Volunteer football game, the gigantic multimedia “Jumbotron” scoreboard in Neyland Stadium plays

a videotape about faculty research. In September 2000, one such videotape introduced “the physics of football” to more than 100,000 people.

The lesson to be learned from Tennessee’s Pre-Game Showcase Lectures and its Jumbotron productions is not that every school and every educator in America should advertise at intercollegiate athletic events, although certainly more could than currently do. The lesson, instead, is that at least two significant benefits can arise through using the agglutination principle. First, educators themselves can acquire a deeper understanding of newcomers and the activities they value. This is to say that they, themselves, as educators, can become more fully educated. Second, many newcomers who have never known the basic features, virtues, and expectations of educational institutions—that is, people who have never been reached through the accretion principle—may for the first time become aware of those realities. Even if this awareness is brief and intermittent, it carries a potential for positive change that would not otherwise be possible.

Think of all the youngsters—including thousands of K-12 students, undoubtedly—scattered among each delirious autumn crowd of football fans in Knoxville. Consider how, just a few months ago, those youngsters found themselves part of what was probably the largest live physics lesson of all time. Is it too far-fetched to imagine that just one or two souls among those youngsters might have caught a spark from that lesson—a spark that already may have caused them to feel more enthusiasm toward schoolwork or to share new insights with friends and family? How, if not through such innovative use of the agglutination principle, can we hope to find the people our society will need in order to address the vexing global challenges of our new century?

Notes

1. Lynn Champion, conversation with author, 3 August 2000.
2. Champion, telephone conversation.