

Cynthia E. Mader

“I Will Never Teach the Old Way Again”: Classroom Management and External Incentives

Person-centered instruction recognizes the importance of internal motivation in learning. It is difficult, however, for many teachers to hold on to their early visions of interacting in classrooms filled with internally motivated students. This may be due to escalating demands for test score accountability. It may be due to reliance on packaged instructional programs, rather than on teaching that connects with students. Teacher education programs, themselves, may send mixed messages about the rewards of learning versus learning for rewards. This article shares how the removal of instructor grading in a graduate course in classroom management helped teachers to see anew the connection between good teaching, good learning, and good management. Many

vowed to replace their use of external incentives with more meaningful instruction.

MANY TEACHERS USE EXTERNAL incentives in the belief that they will enhance student learning and behavior. Gold stars, extra points, pizza parties, dress-down days, bumper stickers, and sometimes even grades serve as rewards for learning and good behavior. Some schools have elaborate, building-wide incentive systems. “Rewards work,” many teachers insist. “Rewards help students learn that this is how life is. If they don’t do the work, they won’t be rewarded. Students do all sorts of extra work to get those points.”

Although most educators would place the first two statements below among education’s eternal verities, the third statement is not as widely acknowledged by teachers or teacher educators:

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1. Classroom environments are best when students are internally motivated.
2. Good teaching can set the stage for internal motivation.
3. *External incentives can undermine internal motivation.*

External Incentives

A substantial and consistent body of research on rewards and incentives questions their motivational benefits. It draws from scholarship in education, psychology, and business, and is informed by post-structuralist, constructivist, feminist, and Marxist commentary on classroom power differentials (Giroux, 2000; Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Moffatt, 2006; Shor, 1997).

The debate over the use of external incentives in academic settings has generated numerous studies and commentary over the last 40 years. Most researchers agree that external incentives, if used carefully, can have positive effects on student achievement and behavior; for example, with reluctant learners and those who have low interest in a subject, with the use of verbal rewards rather than tangible rewards, with the use of some token economies, and with rewards that are spontaneous and unexpected (Covington & Teel, 1996; Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973; O'Leary, Poulos, & Devine, 1972; Raymond, 2008).

Although some external incentives may lead to gains in achievement and performance, there is less agreement about their effect on internal motivation, especially with students who are already interested in a subject. Responding to earlier studies on the positive effects of external incentives, meta-analyses were conducted suggesting their deleterious effects on internal motivation (Rummel & Feinberg, 1988; Tang & Hall, 1995; Wiersma, 1992). These generated further meta-analysis and counter-commentary from both sides (Cameron, 2001; Cameron & Pierce, 1994, 1996; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999, 2001; Eisenberger & Cameron, 1996; Lepper, Keavney, & Drake, 1996). These findings have special relevance to classroom teaching,

especially concerning the relationship between contingent rewards and internal motivation:

1. Contingent rewards have the most potential for interfering with internal motivation. (Contingent rewards, as opposed to spontaneous praise or celebration, are those promised in advance if certain conditions are met.)
2. Contingent rewards may create a performance, rather than a process, orientation. (When we are promised rewards for completing a project successfully, we tend to take fewer risks in order to make sure we succeed—even though we often learn more from our mistakes than from our successes.)
3. Contingent rewards may reduce the psychological safety necessary for honest dialogue about personal beliefs and, perhaps, failings. (It is hard enough to share personal doubts at all, let alone with the person who may grant or withhold rewards.)
4. Contingent rewards may diminish the value of a task and thus discourage interest. (If someone has to reward us for doing something, the task must not be very interesting.)
5. Contingent rewards may lose their power when withdrawn. (Rare is the teacher who hasn't heard, "But what's the reward?")
6. Contingent rewards may actually serve as de-motivators when individuals are already interested in a topic. (Some people love their work so much they would do it for free, but most probably would not once they began getting paid for it.)

Eliminating Grades as Incentives: An Informal Experiment

One of the few aspects of college teaching that troubles me is grades. No matter how genuinely most students are interested in the course topic, what they do and how they respond in the course seems inevitably to be shaped by their desired grade.

Like many of my colleagues, after several years of teaching, my doubts about the grading process have increased. First, I have never been

sure that my grades accurately evaluate student learning. Second, I have seen too many students say and write what they think I want to hear. Most importantly, the entire grading process seems to contradict our message about learning for its own sake. Over the years, I had gradually reduced my grading role through strategies such as contract learning, peer grading, and self-assessment. But I still wasn't satisfied.

My growing resistance to grading, coupled with using texts that examine quality schooling, grading, and contingent rewards (e.g., Glasser, 1990; Kohn, 1996), caused an abrupt decision one semester to eliminate myself entirely from the grading equation. Students would assign their own grades.

I was teaching a graduate elective course in classroom management. Its main message was basic and timeless: the need for good teaching, which in turn sets the stage for good learning and good behavior. Most of the students had taught for at least a few years and were earning graduate degrees in education. Their experience included pre-K-12, public and private schools, general education, special education, and alternative education.

These students were seasoned. They knew from experience that many management and learning strategies did not work as magically as touted. Most wanted to improve their classroom environments.

I would like to say that this was a carefully designed experiment. The truth, however, is that my own professional discomfort had simply won out. Yet the course seemed a perfect one with which to experiment.

First, students were already motivated to take the class and improve their teaching. Second, because a large part of the course involved honest dialogue about personal values and beliefs, psychological safety might be enhanced. Third, because a large part of the course involved examining whether their beliefs were congruent with their classroom management practices, performance could take a backseat to process. Fourth, by removing myself from the grading process, any contingent reward aspect of instructor grading would disappear. Most importantly,

the mixed message would be gone when I as professor would urge students to make this course their own—while leading them through syllabus details on how to get the grade I would assign.

On the first night of the course, I explained in some detail why I had grown uneasy with the grading process. In this course, I announced, students would simply assign their own grade at the end. (Students could retain instructor grading if they chose, but no one ever did.) The only requirement would be regular attendance, because so much depended on class interactions. Even then, however, there would be no grading consequences from the instructor for non-compliance. I needed to remove myself as much as possible.

"What's the catch?" was the predictable, good-natured response. But skepticism subsided as the weeks went on and no other shoe dropped. We read the usual texts and articles, kept learning logs, analyzed other teachers, delved into theories of interest, and reported back. Weekly classroom and online discussions anchored students' activities and generated challenging questions. Student reaction papers were not assigned grades but did receive extensive instructor feedback. At the end of the course, students simply recorded their own final grade—no questions asked.

It is important to note that the point of this experiment was not self-grading itself. Self-grading was simply a way to remove external incentives and allow students to experience their own motivation levels without outside influence.¹

Results

Student responses were so positive that I began administering a survey instrument to examine reactions more carefully. These responses represent more than 100 students over four semesters. Clearly, the experiment was helpful, not only for what students learned about their own motivation but for what this might mean to their teaching.

Overall Responses

Internal motivation. Some 69% reported higher interest in pursuing course topics on their

own with self-grading. Had the course been instructor-graded, 59% said they would have been less motivated. Only 6% said they would have been more motivated.

Gains in knowledge. The majority (51%) said they gained the same skills and understanding with self-grading as they would have with instructor grading. Of the remainder, 35% said they learned more with self-grading. Only 14% said they would have learned more with instructor grading.

Honest expression. Not surprisingly, when asked whether they felt they had to tailor their responses to the instructor's presumed beliefs, 77% said that they were more honest and authentic with self-grading and less likely "to give the instructor what I think s/he wants." With instructor grading, no one reported being more honest, and 79% reported being less.

Effort expended. Although 21% of the students reported expending less effort with self-grading than with instructor grading, 9% reported more effort, and almost 70% reported no difference.

Struggles

Some students acknowledged that the experience showed their weakness in setting personal goals for learning. Others said that they struggled with whether or not they deserved the grade they would give themselves.

- "I didn't like grading myself because I like standards and knowing how much I have to do to get a grade."
- "I felt a little aimless at times. I wanted the teacher to tell me the requirements. I realized that I didn't know how to evaluate myself—which is not good, I know."
- "I want an A, and yet I didn't make any hard efforts to earn such a grade. Do I give myself a B+ out of integrity? I would feel better if I did."

- "I don't intend to give myself a higher grade than I deserve. Well, maybe a tiny bit higher, for example a B+ instead of a B."
- "I will give myself a higher grade than I deserve, but then, all my grades are higher than I deserve."
- "Grading myself was nerve-racking. I didn't want to sell myself short, but I didn't want to grade myself too high. It made me think long and hard about the quality of the work I was doing."

Insights

Most students said that they were forced to examine their role as learners. Some were surprised at how freeing the experience had been and how exciting the new ideas.

- "I honestly signed up for this class last minute because it was available. I never expected to get what I did. It has changed my whole approach. I'm reading books and articles. I was never ever that interested before."
- "This was one of the more useful classes in years! I will take away knowledge of theories we discussed for the rest of my life."
- "I felt I could express myself candidly without fear of not fulfilling the instructor's expectations. We've been pleasing our teachers way too long."
- "The comments on my papers were more meaningful because I wanted to read the feedback, not just turn to the grade."
- "I keep talking about these ideas with friends and colleagues endlessly."

Follow-Up Results

I polled the first three groups at least one year after the course ended. Some 50 teachers commented on how the experience had changed their prior assumptions, improved their classroom practices, and enhanced their overall professional growth.

Changes in Prior Assumptions

- “Initially, I thought, ‘What is a classroom management class going to teach me?’ I had taught several years and I’m not inexperienced. That was then and now is now. I am so thankful for this experiment.”
- “I’m an administrator now, but I’m so much more aware of the reward systems we try to use to motivate people. I’m becoming frustrated that so many people, even teachers, are taken in by rewards.”
- “A wonderful experiment—it really made me think about the impact of grades and rewards and honors. It made us experience what motivates us—which is the best way to learn.”
- “I have always enjoyed my job, but what helps now is that I can see things from my students’ perspectives because I have experienced it too. The experiment made me realize that I really learned only when I really wanted to.”
- “I find myself constantly thinking differently about quality work and student motivation. I look more closely at my lessons to see if they are quality in my mind and how relevant they will be for all my students.”
- “I’ve become so frustrated now with students who request a grade or percentage equivalent for their work as if the grade determines what they actually know. Just today my principal said grades were a student’s paycheck—it is so ingrained.”
- “I will never again offer rewards or use grades as an incentive. The other day I was in another teacher’s classroom, and she was giving smiley-face tokens for answering a question or getting out the right books. She came over and said, ‘I know this looks corny, but it works.’ I wanted to scream and yell out, ‘No, it doesn’t work!’”

Improvements in Classroom Practice

- “I have taken so many little things back to my first grade room that certain days I feel like a whole new teacher. I am so aware of comments I make to students that I almost cringe inside (‘if you do this, you’ll get that’). The best thing

about the grading experiment was that it didn’t tell me how to do things. I experienced what it felt like.”

- “I started keeping a reflective log when I was in the class, and I kept it up for quite a while. The more I wrote, the more I saw ways I had changed—the way I talked to, disciplined, and responded to students’ work. I was giving them more choices, looking for ways to be more collaborative, and I spent more time working to improve the content of my lessons.”
- “I have been more motivated and am truly having lots of fun. I’m seeing more enthusiasm and sparkle in the eyes of my students. It’s exciting to ask them, ‘What do you think? Can we do this a better way?’”
- “The best thing I learned is how much real feedback means. No more praise stickers when I return papers. I make specific comments when I praise kids or have a suggestion on how they can improve. It takes more time, but it’s much more meaningful.”
- “I’ve started speaking with students about what motivates them. I’m trying to help them see if they see any intrinsic value in what they do in life. The experiment definitely changed my outlook on how I teach, and how I talk with students and staff.”
- “Now I try to make things more fun and interesting. I don’t know why this never occurred to me before, but now kids will really get into a math lesson because when I have a really good lesson planned, I tell them all morning that I can’t wait until math in the afternoon.”
- “I find myself grading less work this year but having students assess themselves more. They are very honest and open to asking for help when they know I’m not going to judge them.”

Overall Professional Growth

When asked about the effects of the experience on their overall professional growth, some respondents (10%) reported limited effect or uncertainty.

- “Unfortunately, I’ve tried allowing students to grade themselves and allow them more choice.

Most students give themselves A's, whether they deserve them or not. Maybe I need to explain things better."

- "The fact that I struggled so much with my own need for incentives made me realize how far off the mark I had gone. The ideas and concepts continue to churn within, but right now I haven't made many changes in my classroom."

The remaining 90% reported overall positive effects on professional growth from the experience.

- "The experiment supported ideas I have always had in my head. This class reawakened some of my ideas and gave me the gumption to give it a second try."
- "I am more critical about my own work and whether or not I am teaching a quality lesson. Self-assessment has been crucial for me in getting to know my own strengths and weaknesses."
- "I have gone through tremendous change since the experiment. I now see assessment as a tool for instruction, rather than to motivate students. The experience has been a wonderfully positive influence on me as an educator."

Discussion

Comments from over 100 students during four semesters demonstrated that this informal experiment in removing instructor grading allowed graduate, in-service teachers to examine their motivation and reflect on possible parallels to their own students.

Removing Contingent Rewards

Within the context of an experience in internal motivation, the findings align with the literature on contingent rewards. The learning process took priority over performance concerns. Most students reported being more authentically involved in their own learning and able to explore topics that truly interested them, rather than tailoring their work for a grade. Students experienced

greater psychological space and safety. Most reported that they could voice personal beliefs and values without wondering how the instructor would receive their comments. Finally, most reported that their interest in the topic had been enhanced. None said that they had become less interested, and most spoke of experiencing a new sense of freedom. Some, in fact, seemed almost startled by the experience.

Questions for Implementation

For educators who may be interested in extending this experience to their own classrooms, I offer some reflections on its design, how it might be received by others, and how it affected this instructor.

Was the experiment valid? Legitimate concerns exist regarding the validity and reliability of the venture. I was both instructor and researcher, clearly not the best research arrangement. Furthermore, the student sample was fairly homogeneous, there were no comparison groups, many findings were anecdotal, and all were self-reported.

Will it work in other classes? Not every course or student population is ideally suited to an experiential model. Nevertheless, almost all teachers who initially had doubts about undertaking this with their particular student population reported success in adapting the strategy either wholly or in part.

Is self-grading the right vehicle? It would have been clearer to have no grades, or at least to use student-assigned pass-fail grades. Simply replacing the instructor-as-judge with the student's conscience-as-judge may have muddled the issues. Did students grade themselves "too high"? Grades were slightly higher than in previous versions of the course, although graduate grades tend to be at the high end regardless. Although most were in line with how I would have graded, some were higher, some lower. This begs the question, however, of whether my grades would

have been any more “accurate.” Did students put forth as much effort when they graded themselves? Students reported expending less effort, especially with written papers. Yet given their reported gains in understanding and knowledge, I wonder whether “effort” may simply be student language for work required by someone else, as opposed to “learning,” which is work a student freely chooses?

How much should students be told? Being open about why we were using self-grading enabled students to see more practical application than when I attempted to hide the actual research question about internal motivation. When we could analyze what we were doing, students were better able to see direct connections to their own teaching. Teachers who talked openly reported that students, too, were skeptical about reward-based learning and behavior, and were intrigued when asked if they would be interested in doing things differently.

How will colleagues react? Some educators may fear that colleagues, administrators, or even students themselves will see this experience as a lowering of high standards and rigor. The challenge for them will be to explain their goals well, including the extensive research base about incentives as motivators. Most reported that students understood immediately. Some other teachers said they wished they had the courage to try it themselves. Some university colleagues reported overhearing student conversations about the experience and how it underscored teaching to motivate, rather than rewarding to motivate.

What is it like for the instructor? One benefit of this process has been my own professional reinvigoration. It has allowed me to have forthright discussions with my students about how we *do school*. I also have the unexpected pleasure of writing far more detailed feedback on student papers, without worrying whether the feedback will correspond with the paper's grade. I feel more authentic and more faithful to what teacher education is about.

Conclusion

This informal experiment began as a way to alleviate instructor doubts about the grading process, but it became a way for graduate students/in-service teachers to understand their own motivational factors.

In their roles as students, this one-semester course helped participants experience the limited effect of external incentives on internal motivation. Even negative lessons about their own motivators helped students examine themselves. They were free to be in charge of their own learning—or abdicate it. They had space to explore a subject—or choose not to and question why. They could engage because of their interest rather than because of agreed-upon grades—or disengage because grades were their habitual motivators. All of these variations reinforced the importance of good teaching in setting the stage for good learning.

In their role as teachers, this course helped participants see how classroom incentives might do a disservice to their students. The more teachers can experience what motivates their students—or what fails to—the more they may recognize the negative constraints of traditional accountability and incentive systems. The more that teacher education programs can promote good teaching, the less we may all rely on pizza parties, bumper stickers, behavior points, or grade point averages as incentives. Removing external judgment helped these participants better understand that good teaching paves the way to better learning and better classroom management. Indeed it is the primary road on which students become self-motivated, lifelong learners.

If our goal as teacher educators is to help teachers enhance motivation, rather than try to manufacture it, the simple, relatively low-risk experience described here seems fair exchange for the engagement and enthusiasm expressed by participants such as this:

The main thing that I took from this experience is what it's like to be in the students' shoes. I experienced what's left when you take away all the externals. All that's left is whether the

topic is interesting to you. So my main job is to make things interesting for my kids. It's one of those things I knew but didn't really know until I experienced it. I will never teach the old way again.

Note

1. It is beyond the scope of this article to review the literature on self-grading, although ample evidence points to its benefits in improving critical abilities, knowledge, motivation, responsibility, satisfaction, independence, and ownership (Diekmann, 1999; McCluskey & Parish, 1996; McVarish & Solloway, 2002; Yancey, 1998). Nor is it within the scope of this article to examine whether grades reward learning or simply describe it. Much depends, of course, on how they are implemented by instructors and understood by students (Kohn, 1994; Pollio & Beck, 2000).

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