

Motivating the unmotivated student



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“Contrarians are different. The more obvious and deliberate your efforts to motivate them, the more you activate the contrarian switch. The more you can unwittingly demotivate them.”

Barb Oakley speaking at the HMC Annual Conference 2017 in Belfast.

As instructor of the world's largest massive open online course, Learning How to Learn, I speak all around the world about learning. One of the questions I'm most often asked by both teachers and parents is "How can I motivate an unmotivated student?"

I'm a good person to answer this question. As a youngster, I was hopelessly unmotivated, at least when it came to maths and science. My chemistry teacher threw up his hands at my pugnacious attitude, which amounted to: "Come on – I dare you – just try to put that idea in my head." Being called to the principal's office for reading in maths class didn't deter me. The next day, I'd be back flaunting a novel. Was I hopelessly derailed by my lack of early motivation in maths and science? Nope – today, I'm a professor of engineering.

There are many reasons for a student's lack of motivation. Some, such as a death or difficult circumstances in a family, are pretty tough for any teacher to get past.

But I've come to discover there is one fairly large group of students who are unmotivated for the same reason I was unmotivated – they are contrarians. The kind of kids where, if you tell them to go left, they'll go right. Want them to excel? They'll flunk, just to spite you. Children who've had it rough are especially likely to be contrarians. (They've found agreeableness didn't work so well for them.)

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Here's an example from my past. There was one time when I actually performed well in high school maths. That was when the teacher left us alone to go at our own pace. Without someone constantly urging me onwards, I discovered my own interest in the material. My progress began to accelerate.

Until the teacher one day discovered me taking a break and reading a novel. "No other reading is allowed," he said. "This is maths class and you must work on maths." I couldn't study in my own way even when I was performing well? That was it. My contrarian hackles arose. I put the novel away. I'm not proud of it now, but from that day on, whenever I got to maths class, I simply

stared at the wall. The teacher's well-meaning and direct efforts to motivate me backfired.

Only in my later twenties did I realise that my lack of maths and science was limiting my career choices. This caused me to go back and learn the lessons I wouldn't learn when I was young. If you've got a contrarian on your hands, look for indirect ways to let the child blossom. If you respect and have a sincere interest in a child, they will learn lessons. Eventually, they may even learn the lessons you want. Even if they don't, they can still succeed.

After all, if there is one common thread in many highly creative superstars in life, it is this. As kids, they were "unmotivated" contrarians. ■

Barb Oakley's books include *A Mind for Numbers* and the upcoming title for teenagers *Learning How to Learn: How to Succeed in School Without Spending All Your Time Studying* (Penguin-Random House)



Insights into learning, delivered by Barb Oakley.



The young Barb Oakley and friends. Image courtesy of Barb Oakley.