



can
big macs
improve reading
comprehension ?

How do we faithfully motivate our students?

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An American fast food chain entered into an arrangement with a school district in the US with the publicised aim of improving student reading. Fast food vouchers were offered to students for each book they read. You might not be surprised to learn that reading rates soared. It was suggested that this non related, contrived reward was a successful motivator and there was much patting of backs and warm feelings of success. However, a more thorough analysis showed that children were choosing shorter and shorter books and testing indicated that comprehension scores substantially decreased during this period. It was also found that student reading outside of school, which was not rewarded, also decreased (Grille, 2002). Would the provision of more interesting books coupled with a promotion of the value and richness of reading have been a more effective motivator?

Treating people as things and animals

It is a widespread practice in society to motivate people with rewards that are unrelated to the desired outcome (extrinsic) and that are contrived (artificial). Many employers, parents and teachers employ these motivators daily. Traditionally in Australia, rewards have been an integral part of motivation in the classroom.

These rewards have ranged from stickers, stars and stamps (and sometimes even lollies or chocolate) to awards at speech nights.

The late 19th century saw the beginning of two influencing forces that have shaped how

western society now understands people and how they are motivated; the Industrial Revolution and the widespread acceptance of behaviorism. The Industrial Revolution and the move from a largely agrarian existence to a workforce of production line factory workers resulted in an urgent need to motivate workers to persist in the demeaning monotony of their place in the production line. Higher day rates for greater quality work and bonuses for those that could produce the most on their shift (putting workers in direct competition with each other) were soon established as efficient and effective forms of industrial relations. A widespread acceptance of this still exists today in many Australian workplaces. As we write, there are plans for a performance based pay model for teachers being negotiated at the federal level.

This move by the Industrial Revolution to treat people as things or units of production, coincided with the branch of psychological research now known as behaviorism.

Christian teachers must be very suspicious of using artificial extrinsic rewards to motivate students

The early beginnings of behaviorism came from performing experiments on animals and observing how they learn. These researchers concluded that there was a mechanical connection between stimulus and response and that all behaviour could be explained by this relationship. All behaviour was just a response to the animal's environment. When applying this to human learning, early researchers suggested that "learning always involved the acquisition of new stimulus response associations; that these were acquired by the automatic effect of reinforcement; and that the thoughts and intentions of the person played virtually no role in the learning" (Birkett, 1999). It was Skinner and his work with animals that established this stimulus response view of behaviour into the mainstream. He lobbied successfully in the public realm that if you control the reinforcer you will control the behaviour. The legacy of this branch of psychology is

still being felt strongly today.

Christian teachers must be very suspicious of using artificial extrinsic rewards to motivate students. This system

of rewards falls far short of promoting unconditional love, dignity and relationships. It is incongruous with grace. It is out of step with the gospel. Rewards promote a spirit of competition and selfishness among students. They demean the activity or learning task. In the end, artificial extrinsic rewards punish the student.

Unconditional love

God's love is unconditional. It is not contingent upon good works. His love is not a reward, but rather grace upon grace. The motivating force in a Christian's life is grace. As the shadow of the cross casts its wonderful pall over our lives, we can only stand in awe, in appreciation and in utter helplessness. The more we understand grace, the more we respond in loving obedience. Grace and the relationships that it involves are powerful motivating forces. By necessity, teaching must declare this. It must not deny it, it must not hinder it, nor must it instill in young minds a contradicting principle.

Children can actually be motivated by the security and confidence that they have in their relationships with Jesus, their parents and teachers. There is trust and submission. These things are not earned, but are graciously given.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

Notwithstanding the above, it seems that God also rewards his people. But it would seem that this reward is relationship with him by virtue of his son's work on their behalf. We are actually receiving Christ's reward. The rewards have to do with enjoying Christ, being like him and one day being with him. Likewise the reward of other relationships resides within the relationship – its joys, its comforts and its challenges. Thus, the reward that a child might experience in seeking to know Jesus is actually the seeking and the finding! But in a curious way, it seems that God is actually rewarding his own work in the life of the child.

God's rewards are not extrinsic, nor are they artificial. They are far greater! They have more to do with love, security, hope, peace and faith. It is not satisfactory to say "If I love, then I will receive a reward." For the reward is in the loving itself. The reward is in the task.

But Jesus makes it very clear that a spirit of working for reward is contrary to his desire.

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. (Matthew 6:1-5)

Indeed if it is Jesus' reward that we shall get, not our own, then our motivation stems from learning about him, submitting to him and pleasing him. The book of Job heralds this perspective. God brings Job to the point where he serves him for nought. God dealt with Job as he wished. Though Job sought to make God's actions contingent upon his own (be this reward or punishment), God answers him with a grand display of his majesty. Job's reward, if it can be called this, was to serve God for no reward!

Dignity

It is essential that we maintain the dignity of our students. To immediately assume that they need carrots dangled before them to make them work is only to assume the worst about them. It assumes that children have no relationship

with Jesus and a willingness, albeit immature, to serve him. It assumes that they have no intrinsic interest in aspects of God's world. It assumes that they have no desire to trust their teachers. It assumes that they have no desire to please or help others. It assumes that they have no sense of challenge to overcome a difficulty. It assumes that they have no desire to pursue excellence. In short, rewards assume selfishness and, indeed, perpetuate selfishness. Rewards diminish intrinsic motivation. The assumptions that they are based on can become self fulfilling prophecies.

Artificial, extrinsic rewards can seem superfluous and confusing to the students. To give a young child a star, sticker, stamp or certificate can distract them from the rich rewards that are intrinsic to the task. To experience joy in learning is the reward. The satisfaction of a job well done is a powerful motivator. The struggle to conquer difficulties is the reward. When children already have their rewards within their tasks, it seems odd to distribute stars, stickers, stamps or certificates as rewards. One can understand children's response of derision in such situations.

As Christian teachers we must seek to minister, rather than manipulate. Inspiring the desire in students to learn is paramount. This must be done by asserting their dignity, not by robbing them of it. Though they do many wrong things, they are people made in God's image, not animals to be conditioned by appealing to their selfish ways or units of production that require certain inputs to achieve the required behavioural output.

Expectations and success

We deal with young people who are at times fickle, afraid, mischievous and lazy. We must have a true sense of how to motivate them...of what works. We need to have expectations of them that are real, achievable and firm. Dignity and high expectations in the context of relationship will be more successful at motivating students to learn, to behave and indeed to be more Christ like.

We do need to consider what will happen when the supply of Minties dries up. What will keep the graduating student motivated when she leaves the learning institution that was offering the awards and prizes at speech night? Are extrinsic, artificial rewards successful in the long term? It is a popular myth that rewards are effective. There is a plethora of educational studies showing that when students are expecting a reward

they will actually perform more poorly (Kohn, 1993). Notable studies in both America and Israel found that reward systems 'suppress student creativity and generally impoverish the quality of their work' (Grille, 2002). Reward systems crush creativity, reduce risk taking, plunder perseverance and instill in students a minimalist approach to effort. Students tend to give the minimum required to achieve the reward and motivation passed this point diminishes (why read at home when big macs are being offered for reading at school?).

The power of praise is substantial. However, it too can be manipulative when it comes with the covert expectation that the child continue in the praiseworthy act (Grille, 2002). When feedback comes in the form of spontaneous expressions of appreciation and acknowledgement, in the context of genuine relationship, children can have a very high level of motivation. They do not need to receive an artificial, extrinsic reward for their success. The genuine feedback of affirmation is motivating.

Avoiding manipulative praise does not mean we need to avoid authentic expressions of love, delight and encouragement. To avoid using praise as an external manipulator, we can use our words to: focus the child on their

own intrinsic pleasure in achieving a task ("you look as if you really enjoyed that"), explore their feelings about the task and build relationship ("was there something that happened in your life that helped you come up with such a wonderful storyline?"), speak of your own response to the child's success ("I love the colours you have used here, they are some of my favourites"), acknowledge the behaviour and not make value statements about the child (instead of stating what a good musician they are, you could highlight aspects of the piece that you quite enjoyed).

Interest, meaning and context

It is essential that activities are interesting and meaningful for students. It is important that students learn in context. This means that learning phonics must be placed in the context of reading a book. It means that literary skills must be placed in the context of writing for an audience. Students need opportunities to have an impact on their world. It should be our desire to enable, not disable. Decontextualised learning (and life) characterised those in Jesus' time who heard, but did not do, whose faith was devoid of works.

Students who are engaged in meaningful, achievable and impactful learning activities are already motivated. To deflect their attention from their tasks and from the impact that these can have on them as

they serve God and others in the shadow of the cross, by dangling selfish carrots in front of them or providing artificial, extrinsic rewards is unhelpful.

Conclusion

Imagine for a minute that we had opened this article with a promise of \$50 sent to the best reader. This would have declared instantly that this article was not worth reading for its own sake. It would have reduced the dignity of the subscribers of the *Christian Teachers Journal*. It would have reduced the motivation to continue reading the article once it was realised that it was a promise that was only going to be fulfilled for one reader. It would have distracted readers from engaging fully with the content as it would have channeled attention to one's own gratification etc. Our eyes would have been deflected from the cross and its layers of reality in our lives.

Enacting our Christian faith in the educational arena is distinctive. A distinctive approach to motivation is essential, especially in the area of rewards. We ought to be declaring unconditional love, upholding the dignity of the individual, maintaining warm relationships, ensuring that learning is authentic and meaningful, providing non manipulative feedback and affirming each student. We do this in seeking to glorify God and in working out how to live, teach and learn in the shadow of the cross.

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