**Designing Lesson Plans to Motivate and Achieve**

**Susan Labadi**

**Genius School, Inc.**

Abstract

For all grade levels, lesson planning is the cornerstone, after establishing a congenial class climate. We will consider motivation of teacher and student; for if you are not enthusiastic about your curriculum, how can your students be also? Next, we delve into the balance of skills and content as we design a lesson, and wrap with doing a little practice on your own lesson. It’s a model you can master.

Biography

Susan Labadi develops teachers, administrators, counsels boards for private parochial schools, and designs curriculum content for the Halal industries through her company, Genius School, Inc. She earned her M.A.T. in Secondary Social Studies from National-Louis University and a B.A. degree in Psychology and Sociology from Northern Illinois University. A notable instructor, administrator, public speaker, and coach, she is a leader with the ISNA Education Forums in Chicago and LA. She is teaching middle and high school level social studies at Islamic Foundation School, where she previously served 9 years as instructor and assistant principal. She is Marketing Director for DEFINE/LeaderLaunch, an after-school values based program, project coordinator of the American Halal Association, managing their website, social media, and editing and writing for *HalalConnect* magazine. Susan has also written and edited for Thomson Reuters, the American Muslim Consumer Consortium, ISNA’s *Islamic Horizons* and her blog at It’s A Halal Life.

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*That man can have nothing but what he strives for; that his striving will soon come in sight; then will he be rewarded with a reward complete.* (translation A. Yusuf Ali, 53:39-41)

Motivation research presents some fascinating prospects for Islamic schools. For while we typically have fewer technological resources, due to budget and training limitations, Islamic school teachers often have a great degree of autonomy which enables them to favor thoughtful social-emotional development, skills, and content knowledge. In an era of short attention spans and hyper “edu-tainment” models, Islamic schools find alternative strategies to build capacities in students. Confirming research, these challenges actually sustain teachers’ motivation when they are acknowledged for their work by administration, students, and their students’ families. It also bonds teachers to a degree that they realize that they are an integral part of the school’s mission. To use motivational research as teachers design lesson plans is a natural outcome, for which this paper seeks to provide awareness and guidance.

“*The most beloved of you to me and those who will sit closest to me on the Day of Resurrection are those who are best in attitude.” (Sahih Sunan al-Tirmidhi* by al-Albani)

**Teacher Motivation**

*Harvard Business Review* ran an article by Frederick Herzberg, who was head of the department of psychology at Case Western Reserve in Cleveland. He researched employee motivation since the 1950s and 1960s and concluded that people are motivated by challenge, interesting work, and increased responsibility. Islamic school teachers certainly have those in abundance each and every day, but what resonates even more, as cited by Daniel Pink in his book *Drive*, people thrive on autonomy, the chance to develop mastery, and to feel that their work has purpose greater than for themselves. This we call our *amanah*, and it is probably the strongest motivator. It surely helps though when hardworking teachers receive positive reinforcement and demonstrations of gratitude.

What is also found among the best teachers is that they become wholly involved with their role as educators; it becomes their identity, and their work features a type of “flow” whereby they become proficient masters of their craft. “Flow happens when teachers are fully immersed in the process of growth and change. To reach that state of full engagement, the activity needs to be intrinsically interesting and just within the reach of their abilities. If the activity is too challenging, then it is overwhelming and stressful. If the activity is not challenging enough, then it is boring and tedious. The sweet spot-the flow spot-is where the level of challenge perfectly matches the skills, training, strengths, and resources of the performer….,” as described by education and coaching partners Bob and Megan Tschannen-Moran (p. 218). Much research has supported the efficacy of coaching, and it incorporates elements of trust, support, and choice, which coincidentally are correlated as factors in motivation. Yet while teachers’ motivation and enthusiasm is a keystone to school success, the teachers themselves benefit their students by being in tune with what can be manipulated in order to facilitate their students’ motivation for learning and participation.

*Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best…* (translation A. Yusuf Ali,16:125)

**Student Motivation**

Teachers should first establish a welcoming, congenial climate in their classes where mistakes are not considered threatening. A creative, appropriately challenging, and achievement oriented atmosphere primes the students for learning something new each day. Formative assessments should not only reinforce learning, but also give motivation when students can own their progress or realization that they may still need more study and focus to master content and skills. Students favor choice and the opportunity to grow in areas they feel secure that they can be successful, and feedback from instructors can certainly motivate when care and the interest of the instructor is evident to students.

Herein is the key to motivation: emotion. Emotion opens the door to focus and when we focus, we pay attention. We find a reason to learn, work, and do something that will result in a release of dopamine. This can be interpreted by the body as a type of reward, according to John Ratey, author of *Spark: the revolutionary new science of exercise and the brain*. He relates that “motivation is the director of emotions.” “It determines how much energy and attention the brain and the body assign to a given stimulus” (p. 247).

Therefore, lessons should ideally have an introductory hook or something that elicits an emotional charge. Suggestions may be art, images, stories, puzzles, video clips, props that can engage students into the content. Students will also mirror the enthusiasm of the instructor, so be sure to choose something that is interesting or novel. Popular teachers use a variety of activities.

Teachers have often relied on extrinsic rewards to motivate their students, but these can backfire. Known as the Premack Principle, the strategy may modify a child’s behavior, but will not do much to promote true motivation (Lavoie, p. 11). It may be appropriate on occasion when it is sporadically used, but do not let it become an expected necessity to entice compliance for students’ efforts. The best motivator is intrinsic, where students find an internal rationale for working.

Richard Lavoie, education consultant, writes of the 6 C’s of a motivating classroom in *The Motivation Breakthrough* (p. 52):

* **Creativity**-teachers must inject variety and creativity in their lessons
* **Community**-students must feel they are part of a “community of learners”
* **Clarity**-all members understand the rules and expectations
* **Coaching**-connect with students and develop their skills
* **Conferencing**-appreciate the one-on-one value and listen to students
* **Control**-children need to learn to manage their choices, so give them some

Granted, not all students are the same, nor are they all motivated for the same

reasons. However, teachers who know their students’ motivations can effectively find strategies that will engage and cultivate interest in students. Some may be shy, others outgoing, some may love art, others enjoy sports. Take an interest in your students and they will respond to your efforts. Teachers have so much power to influence their development and acquisition of manners, skills and content knowledge. The teacher is the most critical contributor to students’ success; it is an *amanah*, a trust and noble calling.

**Lesson Planning**

The first decision is to clarify if you are seeking to help students in skill building or in content knowledge. The state standards and assessment data analysis are typically the determining factors in which approach is chosen, and the teacher’s subject area also gives weight to this choice. Once that is established, as the target, teachers decide what criteria will indicate student success and mastery of the target. Next, the teacher will determine the components of performance that must be sequenced to achieve the end result. This will typically mix content with skills, and a roadmap of this will be designed to incorporate elements that will continually fuel the motivation of both teachers and students.

1. What is your priority? Skill or Content?
2. What criteria will define success or mastery? Assessment formats?
3. What sequence of lessons will lead to the target performance?
4. What hooks or emotional motivators can be leveraged to elicit engagement?

**Steps to Learning**

Once a hook or emotion eliciting provocation is established, these are the critical steps in the most elemental form, as postulated by Kevin D. Washburn, author of *The Architecture of Learning: Designing Instruction for the Learning Brain* (p. 60):

1. **Experience**: contains a pattern based reference point for understanding a skill’s steps
2. **Comprehension**: provides the required knowledge and the steps required to learn the skill
3. **Application**: engages students in practicing new skills to develop accuracy and efficiency. For skills, this must be modeled by a teacher.
4. **Intention**: provides widening contexts for students to apply the skill

When applied to content, the following graphic is also from the insights of Washburn (p. 35).

Using a Constructivist approach, teachers expose students to the content to be learned. Comprehension involved understanding how the content connects to prior learning. Additional learning connections are made via a variety of resources and exposures to more fully elaborate similarities, differences, and relationships. Finally, students are expected to interact with the content in order to firmly plant it into their repertoire.

When instructors do assessments, they must match content and mode of learning. Also, instructive feedback is a prime motivator. In fact, researcher John Hattie coined it “the most powerful single modification that enhances achievement” (Marzano, p. 37). This is more than just a grade; it is a process of feedback, student comment with an improvement plan, and it creates an enhanced learning environment. This element of personal connectivity yields a system that Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam consider “the heart of effective teaching” (p.139-148), and it must be part of the planning that teachers routinely execute to keep students engaged and owning their learning. If time is a concern, a suggestion is to do this while students are doing art projects so that conversations may be more private amongst the din of sociable students’ conversations.

While there is a volume of material to contribute to the topic of lesson planning, such as methodology, discussions about homework, and a variety of assessments, let it suffice that these components represent the backbone of what the effective teacher incorporates in the structure of design. It should also be noted that lesson design can be a time consuming and intriguing process, for there are so many resources for every type of lesson that teachers may conceive. It is just a matter of screening and custom designing the best match for one’s students, and it may be that each term a teacher may only be able to truly design a few stellar units. Yet, when students experience a well thought out unit, it makes a lasting impression and fosters a more cohesive class that loves to rise to challenges and feel self-esteem in achievement. This transformation fuels the circle of motivation for teachers and students and is reminiscent of the guidance offered by our beloved prophet (SAW).

“Always his distinctive feature was the combination of strict faithfulness to his principles and human warmth constantly radiating from his presence…That gentleness and kindness were the very essence of his teaching. He kept saying: ‘God is gentle [rafiq] and he loves gentleness [ar-rafq] in everything.’” (Ramadan citing Bukhari and Muslim) as quoted in Revelation: The Story of Muhammad (Mohiuddin, p. 208)

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