Motivating World Studies Students in Mixed-Ability Classrooms

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Introduction

As world studies teachers, our goal is to not only teach our students about the people, places, and events from the history around the world, but also how history affects future events and the world as we currently know it. This grand idea may overwhelm some students, or on the other hand, other students are able to see relationships between the past and today. Some students have the mentality of *Who cares what happened 2500 years ago?*, while other students are showing a desire to learn even more details about that time period. These varying thoughts and motivations create our classrooms of mixed-ability students that range from very low to very high motivation to learn about world history. The goal of this paper is analyze theoretical perspectives of teaching, learning, and motivation in order to apply strategies that will help our students to learn the content, as well as develop an intrinsic desire to learn.

For this paper, we will be analyzing students from two world studies classes. The first class (Lauren’s Class) is at Norton Middle School in Norton, Ohio. The class takes place in the morning and students attend *every other day* (they attend science on the off-days). The curriculum series used for this class is *History Alive!*, which is a program that claims to have been created using theory and research-based active instruction, including theories of multiple intelligences and spiral curriculum (Teacher’s Curriculum Institute, 2012).

The second class (Dawn’s Class) is at Revere Middle School in Bath, Ohio. This class takes place in the morning and lasts for about 43 minutes each day. The curriculum series for this class includes the McDougal Littell book, *World History: Ancient Civilizations* (2006), as well as enrichment materials (websites, library tools, and other multimedia resources) that apply to the curriculum.
Both classes are made up of mostly Caucasian students, with an even distribution of boys and girls represented in each class. The socioeconomic levels vary greatly in Lauren’s class, but most students would be considered in the low to middle level. Dawn’s class, on the other hand, has most students in the middle to upper level. Both classes have varying levels of student abilities, including students who are on Individualized Education Plans and students who have been labeled as gifted. As mentioned earlier, students from both classes show a varying degree of motivation during class.

We have chosen these two classes to analyze because they are the same grade, subject, and they mostly have the same characteristics. With two different teachers and two different curriculum series, though, we can make conclusions for each of our classes after we analyze theoretical perspectives and apply teaching, learning, and motivational strategies. One theoretical perspective that we will research is the attribution theory with a focus on how attributions affect cognition and behavior and how a teacher’s response can help change a student’s perspective and motivation. A second theoretical approach we will research is teacher influences, or more specifically, how teacher feedback affects student motivation.

Theoretical Analysis

Attribution Theory

The attribution theory examines attributions and their influence on student behavior and cognition. The attribution theory is based on two assumptions: 1) individuals are motivated by a goal of understanding and mastering the environment and themselves, and 2) individuals seek to understand why things happen and why people say and do things (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). When applying the attribution theory to a school or classroom setting where achievement
is measured, the most important thing that students try to understand is academic success or failure. Attribution theory states that the reasons individuals give for their successes or failures (attributions) have a large impact on motivation.

When using the attribution theory in terms of motivation, attributions have three dimensions -- stability, internality, and controllability. The stability dimension is the idea of whether the cause changes over time or remains the same. The internality dimension deals with where the cause is located for the individual, whether internal or external. The controllability dimension is the individual’s perception of whether the cause is something the individual can change or if it is uncontrollable.

Research has shown that an attribution made to a stable cause will increase the expectancy that the event will occur again. An attribution to an unstable cause will result in the expectancy belief to remain the same or decrease. As Dawn evaluated her class, she applied the attribution theory to help answer some questions about the students’ performance and expectations.

The class that was evaluated was made up of a variety of levels of student abilities as well as a variety of achievements. The variety of abilities and achievements correlated to the variety of reasons students gave for their successes and failures. Dawn found that the students who were successful often attributed their success to reasons such as “I studied hard” and “I paid attention in class”. Students who had not been successful often attributed their failures to reasons like “Social Studies is boring” and “I didn’t have a good social studies teacher last year” and “I’m not good enough at memorizing the material”.

Dawn’s understanding of the attribution theory in regards to motivation has helped her look at these kinds of statements in order to predict the future behavior of her students. Dawn decided to focus on two students who were not performing well and who made the above (failure)
statements. The first student, Aiden, was an average student who should be performing better than he was. When asked why he was not achieving at his normal level, he answered with that he had a bad teacher last year. This attribution statement takes Aiden “off the hook” for why he was performing poorly. Having a bad teacher last year is something that is external and out of his control.

The second student, Chase, was a struggling student with lower academic ability. He responded by saying that he was not capable of learning the material. The fact that Chase attributed his failure to lack of ability made it more likely that he would continue to do poorly, especially because Chase believed his ability was something that could not be changed. It is important to understand that the idea of stability can often be perceived differently by different students (Schunk et al., 2008). Ability is often classified as stable; however, if a student views ability as something that can be changed based on learning, it can become an unstable attribute.

“There are a number of factors that can influence students’ attributions, but teacher feedback is crucial” (Schunk et al., 2008). Providing feedback to both Aiden and Chase for both successes and failures will help them make accurate attributions for their behavior. As suggested by Schunk et al. (2008), teachers should strive to give accurate feedback to students rather than feedback that is merely designed to boost and maintain self-esteem. It is also important to note that while it is suggested to give feedback that attributes failure to effort, it is imperative that the teacher is sure that true effort was not exerted by the student prior to linking the failure to effort.
Teacher Influences: Teacher Feedback

Attribution theory provides insight to why students feel they have succeeded or failed. On the other hand, theories of teacher influences examine how actions of teachers and interactions between teachers and students impact student motivation and learning. Schunk et al. (2008) asserted that everything a teacher does has a potential impact on students, which includes motivational actions by teachers, organization and instructional strategies, classroom management, and teacher-student relations. One aspect of teacher-student relations that affects student motivation and learning is teacher feedback. Providing feedback to students is a large part of any classroom and it allows the students to learn from their mistakes or successes. Schunk et al. (2008) described four types of teacher feedback: performance, motivational, attributional, and strategy.

Performance feedback was the most common form of teacher feedback in Lauren’s world studies class. Schunk et al. (2008) described performance feedback as, “Feedback on the accuracy of work and may include corrective information” (p. 308). During classroom discussions, Lauren would often provide corrective feedback so that students were aware of their progress. For example, when discussing the contributions that the Ancient Greeks made to modern society, Jessica correctly identified the Greek influence on modern government. Lauren provided feedback (“That’s correct.”) and asked follow-up questions to encourage deeper-level thinking (“What specific features from the Ancient Greek government do you see in today’s government?”). Schunk et al. (2008) found, “Research suggests that teachers should then ask a new question and maintain the momentum of the lesson” (p. 308).

Motivational feedback provides information that is meant to motivate students, not to inform about accuracy, and it may include social comparisons (Schunk et al., 2008). During
simulations or group work, Lauren would provide motivational feedback to encourage her students to stay on task and to feel that they were working successfully. One aspect of motivational feedback is to compare the actions of one student to another in order to motivate them to continue (or begin) to work harder. Lauren typically did not make social comparisons, however. In her experience, she felt that this could have a negative impact (depending on the student) and that the students either would not care about the actions of the other student or would feel negatively about his/her own performance. For example, Carl tended to work slowly and process information slowly. Therefore, it was not optimal to compare his progress to another (similar) student because he would just feel defeated and lose confidence. Instead, Lauren used motivational feedback like, “You are doing a great job completing your portion of the task. Keep working hard and I’ll be back around in a little bit to see how you are doing”. Lauren would like to try motivational feedback that includes social comparisons, though, since Schunk et al. (2008) concluded, “Observing similar others succeed raises observers’ self-efficacy and motivates them to persevere at the task” (p. 308).

Attributional feedback is where student performance is linked with one or more attributions (Schunk et al., 2008). In some cases, students tend to attribute failure to low ability rather than effort. One way the teacher can use attributional feedback is to “train students to attribute their difficulties instead to controllable factors (e.g., low effort, improper strategy use)” (Schunk et al., 2008, p. 309). Lauren would provide feedback that was mostly specific and emphasized effort. For example, Jerry had been absent for a variety of reasons (sick, suspension, other). When in world studies class, he did not find much success while reading or within group work or simulations. His lack of effort was definitely a major issue -- he can read and comprehend at the 7th grade level according to his Language Arts teacher. So for him, outside
factors, which are controllable, were influencing his success in the classroom. Upon completing a task, Lauren would say to him “You worked really hard on this, and it shows! You really understand this section of the text!” This type of feedback is one that Lauren will continue to improve upon.

The last type of feedback is strategy feedback which “informs students about how well they are applying a strategy and how strategy use is improving their work” (Schunk et al., 2008, p. 308). Within world studies class, Lauren has taught different reading strategies so that students could better comprehend the text. Previewing the text, making predictions, and using context clues were a few reading strategies that students were encouraged to use. When Mary complained of difficulty reading the textbook, Lauren reminded her about the reading strategies she has learned. Using feedback like “You have the right idea for answering the question, but why don’t you try to use the section headings and your skimming skills to help you find the answer?” This type of feedback revealed to the student that she was capable of achieving when she tried a different strategy. Strategy feedback was used the least in Lauren’s world studies class in comparison to the other forms of feedback. However, in her math class, strategy feedback was one of the top types due to the variety of strategies and processes found in math.

Practical Applications

Attribution Theory

It is important for students to understand attributions and how they impact the learning and classroom environment. After studying the attribution theory, Dawn realized the importance of attribution theory and how she should apply it to her classroom and teaching strategies. She started to discuss attributions with her students and helped them understand reasons they have
been successful or unsuccessful. She also passed out a simple questionnaire to the students that asked what their current grade was, if that was a typical grade for them, and the reasons why they received that grade.

After evaluating the responses on the questionnaires, Dawn determined which students were making appropriate attributions and which ones were making attributions that would not help them to be any more successful. Dawn also started providing better feedback to her students on assignments and assessments. When giving feedback, Dawn felt it necessary to provide accurate and detailed feedback to the students. In situations where failure has occurred, it was important to provide students with specific reasons for their failure so that they can improve. As previously stated, researchers suggest to attribute all failures to low effort and to encourage the students to make this attribution. The goal is to get students to understand that they can do better because effort is something that is controlled by them and can change (Schunk et al., 2008).

Dawn also started attribution retraining, also known as AR, on a select number of students who she felt would benefit from the program. Attribution retraining is a motivational treatment that helps individuals explain their experiences with success and failure. In this case, it has helped students explain failures, and in doing so, it has helped them to make more accurate attributions that led to more successes. Dawn conducted the AR program by meeting with the students individually on a regular basis to discuss their academics, their success, their failures, and the reasons why. Research has shown that intensive, in-person retraining programs can have a positive impact on students’ perception of control, persistence, and achievement, specifically middle school students (Perry & Hall, 2009).

Dawn met with both Aiden and Chase (and a few other students) during study hall once a week and occasionally more, when necessary. At first all of the students were reluctant to meet,
but as they continued to meet with Dawn they were more apt to discuss their experiences versus Dawn doing most of the talking. Two of the students even requested to come in more often. In addition to helping them change their views on their failures, and hopefully reshaping their attributions, Dawn built solid relationships with those students. They have only been working on the attribution retraining for approximately six weeks, but Dawn has noticed some small changes in those students. She plans to continue the program throughout the year and she is anxious to see the end result.

**Teacher Influences: Teacher Feedback**

Much of what a teacher does within (and outside of) the classroom impacts student motivation and learning. From planning and decision making, to creating a positive classroom climate, to providing effective feedback, a teacher’s actions affect student motivation. Within Lauren’s world studies class, she has provided students with a variety of feedback, including performance and motivational feedback. It is Lauren’s goal, however, to continue to improve her use of both verbal and written feedback across all four types of teacher feedback.

In order to enhance verbal feedback, Lauren included several characteristics of effective feedback in which feedback was planned, specific, timely, accurate, constructive, outcome-focused, encouraging, and positive (Konold, K.E., Miller, & Konold, K.B., 2004). One way Lauren evaluated her use of effective verbal feedback was by creating a simple chart of student’s names. Next to the names, Lauren informally kept track of frequency and type of feedback offered so that she could assess the effectiveness of the feedback. For example, when there were several notes next to a student’s name indicating feedback was provided, Lauren observed if that student was motivated to progress throughout the lesson as he/she learned from the feedback.
In addition to verbal feedback during daily lessons, Lauren incorporated student-teacher conferences during the grading period in order to provide significant one-to-one feedback. In his article, “Powerful teacher feedback”, Stephen Dinham (2008) stressed, “One of the most powerful forms of feedback used by effective teachers was the one-to-one interview with a student” (p. 36). Even with time constraints, Lauren provided one-to-one feedback with her students as much as possible throughout the grading period. Again, a simple chart was used to keep track of the students she met with, their motivational reactions, and their academic outcomes.

In addition to verbal feedback, Lauren continued to improve upon written feedback. Previously, she limited herself to the basic letter grade, underlinings and circlings of errors, or the simple phrase “Great job!” In the article “Using Teacher Feedback to Enhance Student Learning”, the authors discussed the importance of written feedback on homework assignments, projects, assessments, or other classroom papers. The authors found, “To be effective, written feedback should be specific and more informative than simply providing a letter grade on the paper” (Konold, K.E. et al., 2004, p. 68). Additionally, Dinham (2008) stated, “Comments and suggestions contained within feedback need to be focused, practical and based on a professional assessment of what the student can do and is capable of achieving” (p. 36). Therefore, Lauren provided specific written feedback on assignments and assessments that went beyond the simple, unfocused feedback. In addition to providing this written feedback, Lauren provided ample time for students to review the written feedback and ask any questions for clarification or extension. In her experience, written feedback was often overlooked by students, so she wanted to also teach the students the importance of reviewing the feedback, learning from it, making
adjustments, and progressing. When students grasped this concept and felt successful, motivation ensued.

Reflection and Conclusion

Dawn’s Reflection

Throughout this experience I have learned the impact that a student’s attributions can have on their performance in the classroom. The belief a student has on why they were successful or unsuccessful plays a role in their future achievement. I took the knowledge I learned and applied it to my classroom and more specifically students who were struggling. I have seen changes and am looking forward to continuing to see their growth. The experience has taught me how important it is to really get to know my students in order to make better decisions on how to guide them to success. What I did not expect was the extra time it would take to implement the attribution retraining. It is hard to find the time to meet with students during the day to discuss their achievements and reasons for them. Now that we have a system, it is becoming more routine and therefore easier to manage. I also did not expect the bond that has been created between me and the individual students I am working with. It has been an unexpected perk of this project. I have thoroughly enjoyed this experience and look forward to continuing it throughout the remainder of the year.

Lauren’s Reflection

Throughout this project of applying theory to practice, I learned a great deal about how providing quality feedback impacts the motivation of my students. Not only was I lacking in providing feedback, but within the feedback I did give, it often wasn’t specific or constructive. I
did find that I gave timely, encouraging feedback, but without the full package of effective feedback characteristics, my students were not feeling motivated to fix mistakes or extend their learning. As Dinham (2008) stated, “In some cases bad feedback can be worse than no feedback” (p. 35). After researching the types of feedback and their value, this statement rings more true.

As I conclude my research for this project, one question persists in my mind: What are the best strategies or techniques for ensuring that my 7th graders review, consider, and understand the feedback that I provide? I now understand the impact that teacher feedback has on my students’ motivation levels, but what are ways to ensure that they are utilizing this feedback so that they do have increased motivation? This is one area that I will continue to research as I apply motivational theories within my classroom.
References


Teacher’s Curriculum Institute (2012). Retrieved from