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# **Taking Interest in Students' Disinterest: Best Practices for Mitigating Amotivation in the Basic Course**

**Eletra Gilchrist-Petty**

**Abstract:** As a general education requirement, basic communication course instructors are afforded the unique opportunity to reach a variety of students. Because many students often are enrolled in the basic communication course out of necessity, student amotivation can transform what should be a dynamic and interactive classroom experience into a daunting challenge that stifles the pedagogical process. To assist in engaging students, 10 best practices for mitigating amotivation in the basic course are presented. By following these best practices, instructors can help cultivate a more engaged and interactive classroom experience for both themselves and their students.

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As a student, I was always conscientious and invested in the learning process. However, when I first began teaching the basic communication course as a graduate teaching assistant nearly two decades ago, I quickly learned that not all students have a passion for learning. While I was more than happy to teach the majority of my students who was eager to learn, I was quite troubled by that certain percentage of students who seemed to be apathetic or amotivated. From a lay perspective, *apathy* is generally perceived as not having concern or interest about a particular phenomenon. From a scholarly perspective, *apathy* is related to *amotivation*, which means “without motivation” and refers to “a state of motivational apathy in which students harbor little to no reason to engage in classroom learning activities; it is a motivational deficit that is strongly associated with maladaptive functioning” (Cheon & Reeve, 2015, p. 99). Amotivated students, subsequently, are characterized by exerting nominal or no effort to learn or engage in classroom instruction, and their behavior might be illustrated by sitting passively, sleeping during class, skipping class, or simply going through the motions of learning (Cheon & Reeve, 2015). To prevent amotivation from impeding the classroom atmosphere for both teachers and students (Boice, 1996; Gilchrist-Petty, 2018), these 10 best practices are offered.

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Eletra Gilchrist-Petty, Department of Communication Arts, The University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, AL.

CONTACT: Eletra Gilchrist-Petty [Eletra.Gilchrist@uah.edu](mailto:Eletra.Gilchrist@uah.edu)

### **Best Practice #1: Incorporate Diverse Teaching Strategies**

Traditional collegiate education was once defined by instructors standing before the class and lecturing. These lectures were at times accompanied by chalk or dry erase markers and boards, transparencies, or film clips projected from analog video cassette players (Gilchrist-Petty, 2018), but for the most part, the instructor was considered the main source of knowledge who deposited knowledge into students, known as Freire's (2005) "banking" concept of education. This "banking" concept is defined by one-way communication that considers students as empty receptacles who are filled by instructors depositing knowledge into them. Because this concept stifles critical consciousness and student engagement, basic course instructors should utilize strategies that can ignite student engagement through activities that span behavioral modeling, games, journaling, experiments, peer exchanges, service learning, case studies, authentic projects, and independent work sessions (Educause, 2005). The use of these strategies suggests that basic course instructors have an arsenal of available resources that not only complement the traditional lecture-style classroom environment, but also can reach students across various disciplines and create a more invigorated learning experience. Rattenborg, Simonds, and Hunt (2005) argued that "it is time for communication scholars to develop, test, and share strategies to aid and encourage students to take a more active role in the classroom" (p. 95). The researchers then noted that learning strategies, such as discussions, reading objectives, and participation sheets that require student self-assessment, are prime strategies that promote student engagement.

### **Best Practice #2: Appeal to Different Learning Styles**

Nearly 40 years ago, Barbe, Swassing, and Milone (1979) proposed the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic/tactile learning modalities, suggesting that people vary with their preferred receiving style that is used to stimulate learning. As educators, we often teach the way we prefer to learn, while neglecting to appeal to those students who represent a counter learning modality. As a visual learner, my pedagogy in the basic course always is accentuated with pictures, colorful media presentations, and bulleted lists. However, as I recognize that many of my students are auditory learners, I am mindful of giving detailed verbal instructions, providing chants or rhythmic phrases as memory cues, and being amenable to students' requests to audio record lectures. Likewise, to appeal to students who have a kinesthetic/tactile learning preference, I provide opportunities for students to take detailed written or typed notes, physically distribute paper audience analysis surveys to the class, incorporate presentation aids in their speeches that they can touch, and physically model or demonstrate various points in a speech. By making the basic course an environment that is sensitive to diverse learning styles, instructors communicate to students that they matter, which subsequently, allows all learners the opportunity to become involved in the educational experience, regardless of their preferred learning style (Barbe et al., 1979).

### **Best Practice #3: Incorporate Student Interests**

When I first started teaching, it was relatively easy for me to relate to students' interests because I was close to their ages. Now, as I fast forward, I realize that I am essentially two decades older than many of my college students, and some of the things that interest me do not necessarily interest them. To combat this somewhat generational gap, I seize opportunities

before, during, and after class to discover what makes this current college-age population tick. Students reveal quite a bit about their interests through their anecdotal in-class comments, selection of speech topics, and casual conversations with peers before and after class. Solomon (2014) identified five key interests that Millennial students share: technology, socialization, community collaboration and cooperation, adventure, and civic values. Based on information I have acquired indirectly regarding my students' interests, I use many examples in the basic course that are based on sports, social media, celebrities, traveling, technology, and political activism. When instructors incorporate students' interests into the basic course pedagogy, they communicate that the content is relevant to them, regardless of whether they desire to pursue the communication discipline further. As emphasized by TeacherPop (2015), making content relevant to students is essential to holding their attention.

#### **Best Practice #4: Give Students Ownership in the Classroom Experience**

Steele and Fullagar (2009) concluded that students who perceive that their professors support autonomy in the teaching and learning process are more engaged in academic work. This research finding, when coupled with the theories of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and Cognitive Evaluation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), stresses the importance of autonomy and self-determination, and, therefore, suggests that basic course instructors should give students opportunities to either work independently or in small groups to not only learn, but also to teach course content to each other. More than exam scores or arguments penned in research papers, I can always tell that my students have truly learned particular course content when they are able to clearly articulate that information to their peers. Hence, along with a number of required speeches, I readily assign students in the basic course the roles of discussion leader, content presenter, and peer reviewer. By playing these roles, students are afforded the privilege of having autonomous ownership in the classroom experience, and I have found that when students feel that they are at least partly responsible for the lesson's successful transmission and comprehension, they are more engaged, work harder, and have a heightened investment in the collective pedagogical process. Perhaps Rattenborg et al. (2005) summed it best: "It is only when students engage with the material through preparation and participation that they will become more competent communicators and fully understand the learning process" (p. 124).

#### **Best Practice #5: Celebrate Student Successes**

More than 70 years ago, Maslow (1943) posited via his hierarchy of needs that individuals have an innate need for self-esteem, whereby individuals acquire and maintain a sense of value and worth when others praise, appreciate, and acknowledge them. Maslow's position has endured over the years and offer segue to understanding how to minimize student amotivation. Holistically speaking, students generally participate in a myriad of academic and nonacademic activities. Whenever I learn that one of my students has excelled in any area, I purposefully "shout out" their accomplishments in class. Throughout my tenure in academia, I have recognized a wide span of student successes, including marriages, homecoming king/queen elections, athletic championships, campus leadership positions, publications, and community awards, just to name a few. Many times after I took a brief moment to celebrate these milestones, students have said that they appreciate me acknowledging their accomplishments. Some students have even mentioned that I was the only professor in that semester who took an interest in their involvement and success, suggesting that acknowledging even small successes may be a big deal

for students (TeacherPop, 2015). The basic course is an ideal learning space to recognize student accomplishments because it introduces students to the activities of other students from various degree programs. Furthermore, when basic course instructors recognize student achievement, they communicate a vested interest in *all* students. Titsworth (2000) confirmed that students in the basic course reported significantly higher levels of motivation and affect when they were praised by their instructor, which speaks to the importance of celebrating student success and subsequent course engagement.

### **Best Practice #6: Require Participation Grades**

According to Vallade, Martin, and Weber (2014), many students feel “grades should be the primary focus of higher education” (p. 512). Given that students tend to be consumed with earning grades, basic course instructors would be prudent to require course participation grades that assess students’ active and voluntary pedagogical engagement. Traditional means of assessing participation include course attendance and the quantity and quality of content-related comments made in class. However, basic course instructors should be mindful of calculating participation grades through a mix of measures, including those that do not require oral contributions. As argued by Meyer (2009), silence is an active form of communication that underlies an understanding of communication. Thus, classroom communication consists of both oral and silent behaviors, and student engagement should, therefore, be regarded as “encompassing a continuum of participation behaviors ranging from silent to oral forms of expression” (p. 278).

Li Li (2005) stated that the “absence of speaking can be invaluable to facilitate reflections of human communication” (p. 74). Hence, basic course instructors should assess participation through students’ reflection papers of course content or readings. Students could also attend a campus or community speech and connect the speaker’s main points to course content. Other options that would work to the advantage of reticent students include written speech evaluations, homework assignments (e.g., outlining speeches), and group involvement during small group activities. When basic course instructors provide a variety of opportunities for students to earn participation grades, a clear message is sent to students that their lack of interest will be penalized with a lower grade, but their meaningful contributions will be rewarded with a higher grade as corroborated by Christensen, Curley, Marquez, and Menzel (1995), who found that students are more willing to engage in course content when participation grades were used.

### **Best Practice #7: Promote Experiential Teaching and Learning**

Experiential learning is defined as hands-on learning or learning by doing. Basic course instructors can motivate students to actively engage in the course content by applying academic learning to the real world. As argued by Gray (1991), “experiential activities seem especially appropriate in a communication class in which a focus is on developing communication competence, because becoming a better communicator involves active practice and evaluation” (p. 1). Hence, experiential learning must be at the forefront of basic course pedagogy, so that students can make clear connections between what they learn in the classroom and the transference of that scholastic knowledge to the workplace. To do so, basic course instructors can invite former students to come and share how they are using the speaking skills they learned in the basic course on the job or assist students with obtaining internships where they can

immediately apply their communication competencies to the workforce. Students can even participate in communication labs that provide opportunities for one-on-one interactions or small group sessions where a peer facilitator works with students to help enhance their understanding of communication (Bran-Barrett & Rolls, 2004).

Regardless of the strategies used, an experiential approach to teaching and learning is essential to unearthing the long-term applicability of basic course content. As argued by Wallace and Yoder (2007), “The teacher needs to emphasize the necessity of good communication skills . . . until students believe that the classroom experience is important to them *personally*, motivation will not improve” (p. 3). Additionally, researchers have found that college students experience optimal academic engagement from experiential learning initiatives, which assist in promoting lifelong learning (Sibthorp, Schumann, Gookin, Baynes, Paisley, & Rathunde, 2011).

### **Best Practice #8: Cultivate Diversity and Inclusion**

Today’s typical basic communication course reflects a sea of diversity, with students representing not only various majors and professional aspirations, but a mix of identity markers that vary widely based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and nationality. Despite this sea of diversity, higher education curricula have been largely homogenous and reflective of mainstream cultural ideologies shaped by colonialism and whiteness (Hussain, 2015). When basic course instructors incorporate readings, theories, and examples into the learning environment that only reflect the hegemonic mainstream experience, systemic oppression is reinforced and traditional domination is allowed to prevail. To cultivate diversity and inclusion, basic course instructors should select required and supplemental readings written *by* and *about* diverse populations, give students opportunities to share unique lived experiences during class discussions, and encourage students to select speech topics that examine macro and micro cultural aspects. Furthermore, instructors should require (if applicable) a mix of domestic and international students when forming and working in groups, as the assimilation and academic adjustment of international students is enhanced greatly through cross-cultural communication opportunities (Young & Schartner, 2014). hooks (1994) proclaimed that “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy;” thus, instructors must “teach to transgress” (p. 12). By transgressing the basic course into a haven that celebrates diversity and inclusion, instructors communicate to students that all perspectives matter and are worthy of academic exploration.

### **Best Practice #9: Empower Students to Make (Some) Classroom Decisions**

Despite a growing trend in higher education to adopt the customer satisfaction paradigm--which was borrowed from the operating mentality of thriving businesses and assumes that if the academy satisfies students’ needs, the students, similar to customers, will have fewer complaints, be less dissatisfied, and will, therefore, be loyal, engaged, and committed patrons to the academy (Oluseye, Tairat, & Emmanuel, 2014)--it is impractical for educational institutions to “operate under the same pretense as retailers who follow the ‘customer is always right policy’” (Gilchrist-Petty, 2018, p. 69) because professors are trained to be facilitators, researchers, and sources of knowledge for students, not customer-service representatives (Benton, 2006). A happy medium to minimizing student apathy while maintaining a high level of intellectual integrity in the basic course can be reached through instructors empowering students to make some classroom

decisions.

For example, as long as students do not choose offensive or other instructor-non-approved topics, students should be permitted to select their own speech or project topics. Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, and Turner (2004) further suggested that instructors can encourage student decision making in the classroom through three methods: organizational (e.g., choosing group members), procedural (e.g., permitting the use of different forms of media when presenting speeches), and cognitive (e.g., providing opportunities to debate ideas freely and ask questions). By empowering students to make some classroom decisions, basic course instructors not only minimize apathy and promote student engagement, but also “foster a more enduring psychological investment in deep-level thinking” (Stefanou et al., 2004, p. 97).

### **Best Practice #10: Accept That No Matter How Hard You Try, You Are Unlikely to Motivate All Students**

I was confronted with a painful reality about a decade ago when I had a student in my basic communication course who was clearly intelligent and had much potential; yet, he either neglected to submit assignments or earned a failing score on the assignments that he did complete. After many indirect attempts to motivate him, I finally called him into my office to try a more direct inquisition. During our meeting, I told him that I could tell from our class discussions that he was bright and could potentially do well in the course, but he was not applying himself. When I asked him why this was the case, he replied, “I don’t want to be here.” I immediately asked him why he was in college since that was not his desire. His response was something that I have never forgotten: “My parents gave me an ultimatum to either go to college (which was free because of state lottery funds) or work at the local factory where my uncle is a supervisor. So, I chose the least of the evils.” Per this statement, I knew there was nothing I could do to motivate him to excel. As instructors, we must understand that students have an array of motivations, or lack thereof, for enrolling in the basic course. Often times, they involuntarily enroll in the basic course because it is a necessary prerequisite for higher-level courses or it is simply a general graduation requirement. Under these circumstances, students can be “afire with indifference” regarding the basic course and its content (Wallace & Yoder, 2007, p. 1). We must accept that despite our best efforts, we are unlikely to achieve 100 percent student motivation in a given basic communication course.

### **Conclusion**

Researchers have long alleged that motivating students is essential to the instructor’s role (Bolkan, 2015; Wallace & Yoder, 2007), but apathy can birth a range of pedagogical difficulties, especially in the basic communication course where students with different backgrounds, interests, and career aspirations gather to fulfill general education requirements. Because amotivation can stifle classroom experiences for both students and instructors (Blackburn, Lefebvre, & Richardson, 2013; Gilchrist-Petty, 2018), it is important for basic course instructors to take an interest in students’ disinterest. This article has presented 10 best practices for curtailing amotivation and, simultaneously, enhancing motivation in the basic course. Although amotivation is multifaceted and rather complex (Shen, Wingert, Li, Sun, & Rukavina, 2010), these 10 best practices can act as a roadmap for better navigating challenging student behavior.

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