It is impossible to motivate students . . . all a teacher can do—is work with students to create a classroom culture, a climate, a curriculum that will nourish and sustain the fundamental inclinations that everyone starts out with: to make sense of oneself and the world, to become increasingly competent at tasks that are regarded as consequential, to connect with (and express oneself to) other people . . . You can tap their motivation but you can’t motivate them (original emphasis).

—Kohn, 2010, p.16

Creating a Classroom Culture that Taps Motivation

Luke, (all names are pseudonyms), entered middle school with a label attached—“reluctant learner.” By the ripe age of eleven, Luke had already tallied multiple school infractions, experienced very little success academically, and carried a smorgasbord of emotional scars. The faculty and administration spent inordinate amounts of time discussing Luke, planning “interventions” and making every effort to “motivate” him to want to be successful in school. Nothing seemed to work: Candy, pizza coupons, homework “passes”—those extrinsic rewards with which middle schools are filled—all failed to motivate. As June approached, the sixth-grade language arts team decided to take a fresh approach to the summer reading assignment. Every sixth grader was asked to write a letter to an incoming fifth grader (names were provided) suggesting a book to read before they entered middle school in the fall. The students could suggest any book they deemed worthwhile. They were given time to write the letters in class and the freedom to compose the letter in the most persuasive style they desired.

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you notes in the fall), this assignment created the right mix to tap students’ intrinsic motivation. Luke wrote two full pages without stopping, carefully addressed the envelope, and asked if he would ever hear back. He had used writing in an authentic and meaningful way in school, and his letter was engaging and persuasive. No stickers, no Jolly Rancher candy, no extra points were given—students were motivated by the authenticity of the assignment and the prospect of connecting with another student in the coming year.

Based on Street’s (2007) suggestion to expand our thinking about literacy beyond “cognitive skills and educational measures” (p. vii), Leslie and I agree that the context of reading and writing assignments has a profound effect on the literacy learning that takes place within it. Street’s (1995) ideological model views literacy as inseparable from context—the social, cultural, and emotional forces at work in literacy learning. This grounds our thinking about teaching reading and writing as a deeply social activity. We view reading and writing not as a set of discrete cognitive skills to be mastered and measured by standardized tests, but rather as socially constructed, and therefore inextricably linked to context. So how do we create motivational contexts?

**Right from the Start: Learning to Connect with Others**

If connecting with others taps motivation, then it makes sense to create a classroom culture of respect that encourages that—from the micro-acts, such as having desks arranged so students see each other, to the macro-acts of collectively defining what is meant by mutual respect. What does respect mean to a middle level student? What does it look like, sound like, feel like?

In Leslie’s room on day one, the desks are arranged in a circle so that students can see one another. Sara, a tiny blonde girl, has taken a seat to the side of the circle (students select where they wish to sit) and stacks her notebooks and pencils neatly on one side of the desk. When the students are asked to write a response to a question about respect, she diligently does so but covers the paper with her hand, clearly uncomfortable with others seeing her thoughts. There are several boisterous boys and girls who enjoy the limelight, and it is a challenge not to have the attention of the class focused on them. “Who would like to share their first thoughts?“ is the starting point. Rather than calling on the very first hand up, we sit and let silence settle in for a few minutes. Some students review their writing during this time, scanning over the page, others gaze into space, perhaps thinking more deeply about what to say. This is a different kind of quiet than when students fidget in confusion in an attempt to guess what the teacher wants to hear. This kind of quiet encourages us all to reflect for a moment and become comfortable with thinking. It sets the stage for what respect looks like in a large group—we listen to ourselves think as a preparation to listening to others.

After what feels like ten minutes but is closer to two, Sara raises her hand. She reads in a whisper, but the entire circle of students leans in to listen. When she is done, others respond to what she has shared. Students may offer comments and add their ideas to a classmate’s response, but they have to notice and mention something that the reader/writer did well or something that the speaker said that got them thinking. This technique encourages listening, as they have to really focus on what is being shared if they want to comment afterward. We stay away from comments such as, “I liked when . . . ” Instead we use words such as, “I noticed that as a writer or reader you . . .” After several responses, Sara suddenly sits up taller in her seat and cracks a brief smile. It is a good start to the school year for her.

Once the students have an understanding of mutual respect, we create a huge classroom banner with the words, “Mutual Respect Practiced Here.” Each letter is two feet high and divided into odd-shaped sections that resemble stained-glass pieces so that students can color a section of a letter in the days that follow. Their first homework assignment is to write a paragraph or two describing how mutual respect can be helpful in creating our learning community. Having a quick
discussion with each student as they are writing independently begins to establish a personal relationship with each of them. Acknowledging each student every day, whether a simple “hi” to “what are you going to write about?” are part of the micro-acts that foster connections to a classroom culture, creating an interconnected space in which collective respect is motivating. By the end of the second week of school the banner is complete, a kaleidoscope of colors with all students’ “signatures” scattered across each brightly colored section.

“What matters is not what we teach; it’s what they learn”
(Kohn, 2010, p. 21)

Come with me for a visit to Leslie’s classroom one day last spring. The room is crammed with color, furniture, student work samples, word walls, photos, drawings, and shelves and shelves of books. There are tall windows looking out to the teachers’ parking lot and a sunny swath of new green grass. Though she has her interactive whiteboard turned on and uses it intermittently throughout the class, she does not shut each window shade, as is the case in so many of the rest of the classrooms. She does shut off the overhead fluorescent lights, but there is still plenty of natural light in the room.

The desks are situated in a large circle, the teacher poised on a wooden stool at one side. This is a deliberate arrangement to encourage face-to-face dialogue. Leslie’s room arrangement is ever changing and dependent on what the literacy work of the class entails: some days it is comprised of small clusters of desks, other days two or three circles, and sometimes, when a test is being given, desks are arranged in rows. The key is that the arrangement of the desks matters and is deliberately linked to the teaching and learning she has planned for that day.

All the students appear eager and excited to listen to Leslie read aloud from Sharon Creech’s (1994) novel, *Walk Two Moons*. Each holds a variously battered copy of the book, tapping their feet, shifting in their seats, whispering to each other, generally acting like any sixth-grade student might. The story details a cross-country trip a young girl takes with her grandparents as they go west to seek her mother. In this short section of the story, they have stopped to attend a powwow for an afternoon and Sal, the main character and narrator, has drifted apart from both her grandparents and is looking to find them. Leslie reads:

The Indians had formed two circles, one inside the other, and were hopping up and down. The men danced in the outer circle and wore feather head-dresses and short leather aprons. On their feet were moccasins, and I thought again about Phoebe’s message: *Don’t judge a man until you’ve walked two moons in his moccasins.*

Inside the circle of men, the women in long dresses and ropes of beads had joined arms and were danc-

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**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK**

Through haiku, students learn to slow down and become mindful of their natural surroundings, enabling them to capture experiences vividly through description. In this unit from ReadWriteThink.org, students read and listen to examples of haiku, and learn about the history and structure behind this Japanese poetic form. They engage in both outdoor and classroom activities that encourage mindfulness and the exploration of sensory imagery. After writing, illustrating, and pairing their haikus with instrumental music, students collaborate with classmates in creating movements to their poems. The final project is a student compilation of choreographed haiku performances put to movement and music.

http://bit.ly/1RM1Bmv

Lisa Storm Fink
www.ReadWriteThink.org
ing around one older woman who was wearing a regular-cotton dress. On her head was an enormous headdress, which had slipped down over her forehead.

I looked closer. The woman in the center was hopping up and down. On her feet were flat, white shoes. In the space between drum beats, I heard her say, “Huzza, huzza.” (p. 58)

The students begin to giggle at the last line, for they understand that Sal has spied her own grandmother dancing in the midst of the powwow celebration. Leslie pauses now and places the book on one knee. She looks around the circle of expectant faces and asks, “Would you like a friend who might do what Gram is doing?”

No one says anything, but they look shyly at each other waiting, it seems, for someone to raise a brave hand.

“Well,” says Leslie, “I would love to have a friend that might do that if we went to a powwow. She’s having fun and she doesn’t care what other people think. Isn’t that a wonderful feeling? How many of you would like to dance and say 'Huzza- huzza’?” Her tone is sincere; it is clear she appreciates Gram’s exuberance toward life. Before I know it, several students have raised their hands and offered that they would like to dance in a circle and call out like Gram.

“Well, why don’t you?” she asks. Within seconds, three or four students have entered the middle of the circle of desks and are gyrating to their own inner music, others begin to join them, everyone is smiling. It lasts just a few minutes, but the elatedness hangs in the air even after they return to their seats and continue reading and discussing Creech’s book. I get up to leave thinking that this is the kind of class that students never forget, they have collectively read, shared, laughed, and set one more tile in the mosaic of their classroom community. I can hear them in the future, maybe when they are graduating from high school in six years, reminding each other of the time a few of them had the courage to get up and dance in front of everyone, like Gram in that book, Walk Two Moons.

Finding the Energy to Tap Student Motivation

Sitting at Leslie’s kitchen table working on this article, we begin to talk about generating energy in the classroom—how when I visit her room she appears calm, yet active and alive with curiosity. She exudes a curiosity about what the students might say or do that day and is excited to learn from them. Of course her appearance belies the careful planning and revising she has done beforehand, the continual reflecting on what worked and why and how she can improve her practice with the next class. Viewing students as energy givers rather than energy-drains is part of the approach to conserving energy.

In his book, The Energy to Teach, Don Graves (2001), suggests that the classroom environment is an essential way to tap a major energy resource, which in turn will motivate teaching and learning in the classroom. “What educates and releases significant energy in students,” writes Graves, “is not methodologies but carefully orchestrated classroom conditions” (p.34). This does not mean to “put on a show that triggers students into enthusiastic learning” (p. 34). Many of us have tried this approach—trying to keep the students entertained so they will like class and there will be few disruptions. Is it any wonder we are exhausted by the end of each day? Graves writes that building a motivational, energy-giving classroom environment must have “room for joint action and responsibility” (p. 35).

An energy-giving classroom has plenty of rules, but those rules allow for mutual responsibility. A simple example is how to approach the old bugaboo—when students arrive to class without a pen or pencil. Rather than letting this be an “energy-depleter,” (in other words, spending time telling a student she/he needs to “come to class prepared” or that points will be “taken...
off”), students know to go to the goodwill pencil box and retrieve one to use for class. This box is filled with pencils found scattered in the halls after school lets out, so it’s easy to keep it supplied—and kids love to add their own offerings. The pencils may be less than shiny and new, but they serve their purpose. This micro-action saves time as the problem is solved efficiently by the students themselves, and teaching and learning can remain center stage. It’s one more way a collective community is formed, as students add to the box for others, knowing one day they may well be the recipient of the largess of their classmates.

**Final Thoughts**

Tapping motivation, we think, means building an authentic culture of respect—from listening closely to each other, to sharing pencils; it means allowing for choice from where to sit, to what to write about. It means celebrating all our quirky individuality that makes us human, rather than working to tamp it down to fit a prescribed form.

One of the benefits of starting this collegial dialogue is how it has reminded us of how much we can gain from listening to each other and to our students. I wonder how our professional relationships and our classes might be more motivational if we focused less on telling and more on listening. Dennis Shirley (2014) states in his Morning Meditation for Teachers, “There is no greater gift we can give to our students than our full, undivided attention” (“Practice”). Perhaps it is as simple—and as complicated—as that.

**References**


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