



How To: Build a Student Motivation Trap to Increase Academic Engagement

Motivating a reluctant student to complete schoolwork is not easy. In a typical classroom, students can choose from a number of sources of potential reinforcement (Billington & DiTommaso, 2003)--and academic tasks often take a back seat to competing behaviors such as talking with peers. One way that teachers can increase the attractiveness of schoolwork is by structuring lessons or assignments around topics or activities of high interest to the student (Miller et al., 2003). In fact, with planning, the teacher can set up a 'trap' that uses motivating elements to capture a student's attention to complete academic tasks (Alber & Heward, 1996). Here is a 6-step blue-print for building an academic 'motivation trap' (adapted from Alber & Heward, 1996):

How to Set a 'Positive Motivation Trap': 6 Steps	
1	<p><i>Choose an Academic Skill-Area.</i> The teacher selects a significant academic-skill area in which the student is deficient--and this becomes the focus for the motivation trap. Examples include spelling, math computation, vocabulary development, reading comprehension, letter identification, writing/text production, and independent reading.</p> <p>The key question to be answered in this step is: <i>"What academic area presents the greatest hurdle to this student's success and requires his/her motivation and engagement?"</i></p>
2	<p><i>Identify a Target Behavior.</i> Within the more general area of academic skill, the teacher identifies specific student academic behaviors that the instructor would like to increase via the motivation trap. Examples include working to acquire basic-multiplication math facts (academic skill: math computation), reading assigned articles without adult prompting (academic skill: independent reading), and writing in-class compositions of appropriate length (academic skill: writing/text production).</p> <p>When selecting specific target behaviors to increase, the teacher should consider starting small: that is, selecting modest academic behaviors that are easy to perform and of short duration. As the motivation trap takes effect and the student shows increased investment in the academic activity, the teacher can always lengthen student sessions or even revise the target behavior to be more ambitious.</p> <p>For example, an instructor might set as an initial behavior goal for math-computation that the student will respond to math-fact flashcards in 5-minute tutoring sessions. Later, as the motivation trap takes effect and the student shows increased energy and engagement, the teacher may lengthen the tutoring sessions to 10 minutes or alter the behavior target to have the student take responsibility for reviewing flashcards independently.</p> <p>When possible, it is also a good idea to select as targets those academic behaviors that can be practiced frequently and have the potential to give the student sustainable, real-world pay-offs (e.g., teacher praise, improved grades, positive peer interactions, etc.).</p> <p>The key question to be answered in this step is: <i>"What specific academic behaviors are feasible, important targets for the student to increase?"</i></p>
3	<p><i>Identify the Motivator: High-Interest Activities or Topics.</i> The driving force behind the motivation trap is an activity or topic that is of high interest to the student, such as a sports team, fashion, music, a career interest. The teacher who is uncertain what motivates a particular student can pick up clues by talking with or observing the student (e.g., noting recurring topics he/she brings up, book or article themes that he/she is drawn to, preferred websites) or by talking with adults with a deeper knowledge</p>



	<p>of the student (e.g., last year's teacher, parent).</p> <p>The key question to be answered in this step is: <i>"What activity or topic is highly motivating for this student?"</i></p>
4	<p><i>Link the Motivator and the Target Academic Behavior.</i> The teacher 'sets the motivational trap' by connecting the motivator (activity or topic of high interest to the student) with the targeted academic behavior (Alber & Heward, 1996). The ways that an instructor might weave together student motivator and target behavior are limited only by the teacher's creativity.</p> <p>For example, the student who avidly follows a baseball team and is working on multiplication facts might be allowed to review a favorite baseball card after every ten correct responses to flashcards. On another day, the same student might draw a 2-column table in her notebook with the names of her favorite team and their fiercest rival at the top of the respective columns. As the student solves math-facts, she records the answers in the table--alternating between home team and rival--and at the end of the tutoring session adds up the 'score' to determine the winning team.</p> <p>The key question to be answered in this step is: <i>"In what ways can the motivator (high-interest activity or topic) be linked to the academic activity to engage the student?"</i></p>
5	<p><i>Assess Improvement in Student Engagement and on the Target Academic Behavior.</i> Before a judgment can be made about whether the motivation trap is effective, the teacher must collect data on the academic skill and student interest-level. While the teacher has wide latitude in determining what kind of data will be collected, that instructor will probably want to know two important outcomes: (1) Has the student's rate of academic engagement increased? (measure of motivation), and (2) are the student's target academic skills improving? (measure of academic mastery).</p> <p>For example, a tutor using math flashcards with a student may rate the student's daily level of participation (measure of motivation) and also keep a cumulative record of mastered facts by day (measure of academic mastery).</p> <p>The key question to be answered in this step is: <i>"Does the data show that the motivation trap is improving student engagement and academic skills?"</i></p>
6	<p><i>Revise and Troubleshoot the Intervention.</i> A positive motivation trap is always dynamic, because conditions are always changing. So the teacher monitors the effectiveness of the trap and is ready to make revisions and corrections as needed.</p> <p>For example, as a student masters a target skill, the teacher will want to replace it with a more ambitious academic behavior goal. Or as a student is able to tolerate 5-minute tutoring sessions, those sessions may be extended to 10 minutes. Or, at different times of the year, a teacher may update the professional leagues used to motivate a sports-focused student to match real-world sports schedules.</p> <p>The key question to be answered in this step is: <i>"What revisions or corrections might be needed to maintain or strengthen the motivation trap?"</i></p>

References

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