

# Maintaining Students' Motivation for Learning as the Year Goes On

Neuroscience can suggest ways to keep students working toward their learning goals after their initial excitement wears off.

By [Judy Willis](#)

September 30, 2019

It's likely that your hard work orchestrating the first weeks of school enhanced your students' connection to the school community and their enthusiasm for the learning to come. However, as the semester goes on and you seek to sustain that motivated momentum, you may not be able to find the same amount of prep time that you dedicated to the start of the year.

Yet even when your students' bubbles of excitement fade, you can reboot their connections, engagement, and motivation with the help of insights from [neuroscience research](#).

## THE NEUROSCIENCE OF MOTIVATION

Motivation is a desire to learn, try, work, and persevere. I'm a neurologist and former teacher, and one of my focus areas is the neuroscience of learning—especially motivated and successful learning. Students' levels of intrinsic motivation—the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself, rather than an outside reward—directly correspond with [increased effort](#) and with seeing the effectiveness of their behavior, choices, focus, and performance.

Intrinsic motivation is promoted by dopamine, a brain chemical that gives us a rush of satisfaction upon achieving a goal we've chosen. When dopamine levels rise, so does one's sense of satisfaction and desire to continue to sustain attention and effort. Increased dopamine can [also improve](#) other mental processes, including memory, attention, perseverance, and creative problem-solving.

### **THE VALUE OF CHOICE**

Dopamine release is promoted by meeting desired challenges, interacting with peers, movement, humor, and listening to music, among other things. Knowing what boosts students' dopamine levels can help you in your quest to maintain or reboot their motivation. One dopamine booster that I've found especially effective is choice, which appears to [increase students' levels of intrinsic motivation](#), supporting their sustained effort and persistence in academic tasks.

Choice shifts responsibility for their learning to students and builds their judgment and decision-making. Some students may feel anxious about having too much freedom, fearing they won't do the right thing. By starting with small choices first, you can help your learners develop skills of evaluating, selecting, and following through with good choices. As you offer more opportunities for choice and expand students' boundaries as self-directed learners, you'll see further increases in their confidence and motivated effort toward their chosen goals.

### **SOME CLASSROOM EXAMPLES**

Here are some ways to provide choice to invigorate students' motivation, engagement, and effort in their learning beyond the first weeks.

**World languages:** As students learn vocabulary in the target language, you can offer them choices regarding how they build mastery and self-assess their progress. Curiosity and personal relevance for this type of task can start with your showing a short humorous video in the target language. Look for clips that show positive emotions, laughter, and people and places to which your learners will relate. Their goal is to explain—in a manner of their choosing—why they think the clip is funny. You may allow them to use dictionaries, provide guidance to the appropriate textbook material, or have them work in flexible groups with you or peers.

You can give them guided choice in demonstrating their achievement: Allow them to write or speak about the humor they found, to draw a cartoon strip reflecting something in the video, or to make their own videos on the humorous topic emphasized in the video.

**Language arts:** To motivate students to learn the essentials of punctuation, have them choose a book they love, which will become a punctuation learning tool.

Ask students to choose a favorite section of their chosen text and have them copy it without the punctuation. You then make anonymous copies of these unpunctuated documents and place them in boxes labeled with the level of challenge (as you determine it). You can add information about the

topic to guide the new “punctuators” to select a topic of interest. You can also allow them a choice in the level of challenge—they can progress at their own comfort level through increasing levels of challenge.

The students’ job is to make the chosen text understandable by adding punctuation. You should note that the original author’s punctuation choices are not the only valid ones, and when students make different choices the class can discuss those differences. Your students will get feedback that they’re building mastery as they use punctuation to make sense of increasingly challenging texts.

After you’ve done this once, you’ll have samples of student work you can share in subsequent years—ideally examples showing a progression from a text with no punctuation to one with incorrect or incomplete punctuation, and then on to a readable text with appropriate punctuation.

Math: Metric system boring? Let students choose something that interests them, such as recipes they want to make or sporting statistics, and have them convert the standard values involved into metric measurements.

Look to help learners recognize the pleasurable emotional experiences that occur through their learning and sustained effort. Remind them of these experiences—you may want to show students photographs of themselves smiling during such experiences—when they need a boost of motivated enthusiasm and effort for subsequent goals.

Motivation has a major impact on students' effort, academic success, and joy of learning. Providing choices for your learners to engage with new learning and to progress through achievable challenges, with feedback on their progress toward their chosen goals, will make a difference in sustaining their motivated effort throughout the school year ahead.