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What is Motivating? A Personal Reflection From the Lens of a New Teacher

by Erika Richardson

A Stark Realization

I've always considered myself a good student: engaged, confident, and most of all, eager to learn. It wasn't until my junior year of college that I was confronted with the fact that the image I had painted of myself was not entirely true. We were assigned the task of writing a 40-page research paper with only two guidelines. First, it had to be on an evolutionary event. Second, it had come from scientific research that was published in the year we were born. The lack of teacher involvement, and the unprecedented amount of freedom associated with this hefty assignment, motivated and inspired me. However, as I would quickly realize, the aforementioned would lead to confusion, tension, and an overall lack of interest and motivation.

I was excited to delve into the assignment, but also strangely worried. It was the first time a professor had given us so much freedom and responsibility; this paper would ultimately decide my fate in the class. As I began, I was bombarded with hundreds of journals and research that had been published in 1992. Unsure of how to proceed, I began to procrastinate for the first time. This process had me questioning my ability to “make it” in the real world, which was just around the corner. It shattered any confidence I had in myself.

Looking for Guidance

What I had hoped would lead to a moment of clarity turned out only to lead to more confusion. I scrounged up the courage and met with my professor, who was vague at best. He restated that the purpose of the assignment was to allow us to stretch our wings, and get a real feel for navigating an assignment of this magnitude. The only bit of tangible advice he gave me was to pick a topic specific enough that the brevity of it would limit and tailor my research.

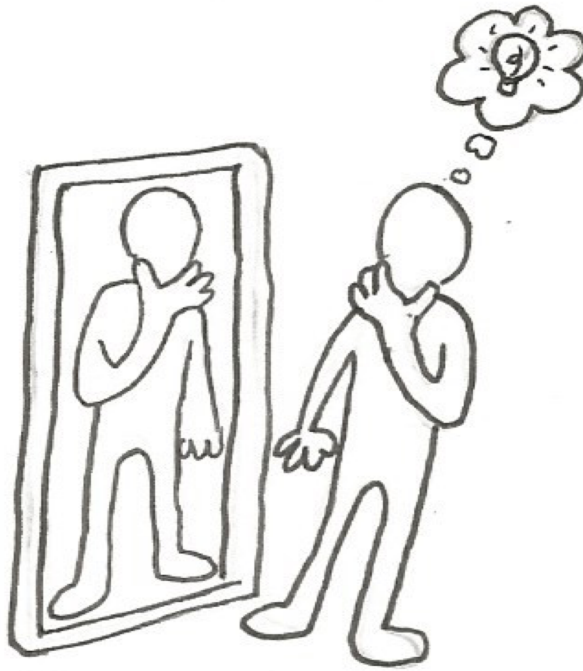
A Moment of Reflection

As I continue on my journey of becoming a teacher, I find myself reflecting on this moment of tension more and more. The significance behind that moment of frustration is not only illustrated by what it taught me about myself as a learner, but more importantly, the insight it gave me into the minds of my future students. As a learner, I need a basic level of understanding and comprehension with an assignment, structure within the assignment itself, and a general level of interest in order to remain inspired. At first, it was motivating to tackle an assignment of this magnitude on my own. The freedom to write about whatever topic I wished and the lack of teacher involvement was at first inspiring, but this lack of teacher involvement and instruction impeded on my ability to fully demonstrate my strengths as a writer.

Now looking at this situation from the lens of a future teacher, I understand the importance of freedom and student choice within an assignment, but that freedom needs to be associated with structure, informal and formal checkpoints, examples, and above all, support. Teachers must emphasize and encourage their students. We need to instill in our students the idea that they have the ability to succeed and that no task is too difficult if they put their minds to it. It is our responsibility to provide our students with a positive learning environment embedded with assignments and activities that generate a passion for learning while promoting self-growth and self-esteem.

As educators and motivators, we need to have positive and long-lasting impacts on our students. We need to challenge our students academically, but these challenges must be attainable and embedded with support. It is essential for us as we stand in front of today's students to remember that collectively it is the experiences we had as students that should shape our teaching practices and philosophies in order to help build the educators of tomorrow.

Erika Richardson graduated from the University of Delaware in May 2015 and is currently pursuing her Master's Degree from Fordham University in Adolescent Biology. She strongly believes there is much promise in teaching science through creative writing and literacy and plans to implement this type of curriculum into her own classroom next year.



Artwork by Izzy Boyce-Blanchard