

MOTIVATING STUDENTS



Applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

One of the more frustrating challenges teachers face is lack of motivation in their students. Teachers put years into their own education and hours into lesson plans in efforts to connect with their students and to spark a curiosity that drives knowledge acquisition and retention as well as personal growth. In most parts of the world, teachers enroll in professional-development courses and

workshops for training in how to be better teachers, to improve instructional practices, and to convey knowledge more effectively. Governments invest billions of dollars annually in training programs and private consultants,¹ as do entities that supervise instruction in Seventh-day Adventist schools.² In many parts of the world, professional development is tied to promotion and salary increases.³

Yet, even with all this effort, teachers still encounter students who are unmotivated to learn. Parents,

politicians, and educational leaders are sometimes quick to blame teachers for struggling students. However, there is a difference between students who are truly struggling because of cognitive challenges and ones who are simply unmotivated. Most teachers do everything possible to make the classroom a “motivating” environment, but sometimes these approaches fail to motivate certain students due to factors beyond the

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teacher's control (i.e., the child's health, peer influences, the environment at home or in the community, war and/or civil unrest, the child's psyche and disposition, etc.). Not only can this frustrate the teacher, but it can also lead to discouragement and questions about his or her professional effectiveness and career choice. And, beyond the impact on the individual teacher, students' lack of motivation can affect the reputation of the school and the credibility of instruction being offered.

Motivation

According to Lo, motivation is an "internal state that arouses, directs and maintains behavior."⁴ Many factors influence children's motivation, some of which are external (or in the child's environment), while others are internal and originate within the child's psyche. Lavoie maintains that no one is truly unmotivated; people are always motivated by *something*. Teachers can discover reasons for lack of motivation by asking questions such as these: "What is motivating this behavior?" or "What is getting in the way of motivating these students in the direction that I want them to be motivated?"⁵ Asking questions can help uncover extrinsic and intrinsic factors that are affecting motivation.

Extrinsic Forces Affecting Motivation

Extrinsic motivation is "created by an external force such as a reward or a punishment."⁶ Rewards can include a privilege or change in classroom status or may be monetary. Academic rewards may include high grades or a grade-point average that results from the student's hard work to achieve and succeed in school. In some religious traditions, the "reward" is for behavior that is "work-" or merit-based.

In the religion classroom, students may believe that their good behavior can gain them favor with God, and this can be a strong motivator for students to behave in ways that the religion prescribes.⁷ As students learn the

religious expectations, they generally strive to attain those standards in their own lives. However, the desired outcome in religion classes is that students will perceive their grades as indicators of their mastery of the content and not as a measure of their spirituality.

Extrinsic motivation can also include the concept of punishment. Some religious traditions place a strong emphasis on fear of punish-

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ment in attempting to maintain a desired behavioral standard (i.e., good behavior is rewarded; bad behavior is punished). Regardless of how accurate the theology behind the coercion, inevitably some adherents behave only to avoid punishment.

Other extrinsic motivational forces include parental pressure and social or academic competition. Students usually desire to please their parents and will strive for success to make them happy. This is often a cultural

factor. Some cultures place a lot more emphasis on success than others. Likewise, social competition can be a cultural factor. Students can be motivated to succeed or may make the decision not to try based on how well their peers are doing in the class. Teachers should be aware of the various aspects of extrinsic motivation so that they can help students achieve success.

Intrinsic Forces Affecting Motivation

Intrinsic motivators are forces that come from within oneself, and include the desire for fulfillment, personal satisfaction, and finding a moral value in something. According to Deci, Koestner, and Ryan, intrinsic motivation is more effective than extrinsic motivational reward. Their research indicated that:

"Tangible rewards—both material rewards, such as pizza parties for reading books, and symbolic rewards, such as good student awards—are widely advocated by many educators and are used in many classrooms, yet the evidence suggests that these rewards tend to undermine intrinsic motivation for the rewarded activity. . . . Rather than focusing rewards for motivating students' learning, it is important to focus more on how to facilitate intrinsic motivation."⁸

Studies show that the best motivators are the ones that come from within the students themselves, not from external forces.⁹ The challenge for teachers is how to create that curiosity and inspire the students to want to know more. In the religion classroom, some of these goals can be accomplished by focusing on the natural wonder contained in the study of religion; however, to ensure that the class provides a wholistic educational experience, the teacher will need to skillfully manage classroom discussions and provide a variety of relevant experiences.

Intrinsic motivation can be challenging to develop in religion classes. Oftentimes students have been immersed in their beliefs since birth and have lost the curiosity and wonder

that a lot of new believers experience. Thus, the religion teacher faces the challenge of keeping students engaged and interested while he or she works with the same beliefs and stories that many of them have heard throughout their lives.

Motivation in the Context of Religion Classes

In most Adventist schools, religion classes are taught by certified teachers. At the primary and elementary level, religion is usually taught by generalists—teachers who also provide instruction in other subject areas such as language arts, science, mathematics, history, etc. At the 9-12 level, although individuals teaching religion are usually certified to teach the subject, they may have majored in other subjects, or may have experience as a pastor or chaplain but no formal pedagogical coursework. At the college and university level, religion teachers are specialists who have at least a Master's degree and additional credits in religion or theology and training in how to teach religion.¹⁰ This article is oriented toward educators who teach religion classes at the high school and undergraduate levels.

Within the religion classroom, there is an additional axiological emphasis, and teachers are faced with additional motivational challenges—specifically, the ethical moral pressure that comes from the school's religious tradition. While teachers in all disciplines encounter challenging topics and need to consider how to address them, religion teachers face these types of challenges more often, since this is the class where questions more readily arise regarding how to interpret what the Bible says.

In the religion class, students may “turn off” if they disagree about the decision for the course to deal with a challenging topic or with the teacher's presentation of the subject. This “turning off” is even more likely if the student feels strongly about or has a strong moral objection to the subject. Conversely, depending on the atti-

tudes and beliefs held by the students' parents and community, students may be more motivated to delve into questions they may have about challenging topics. These attitudes are examples of why identifying motivating factors in the religion classroom is paramount to effective teaching.

Maslow and Motivation

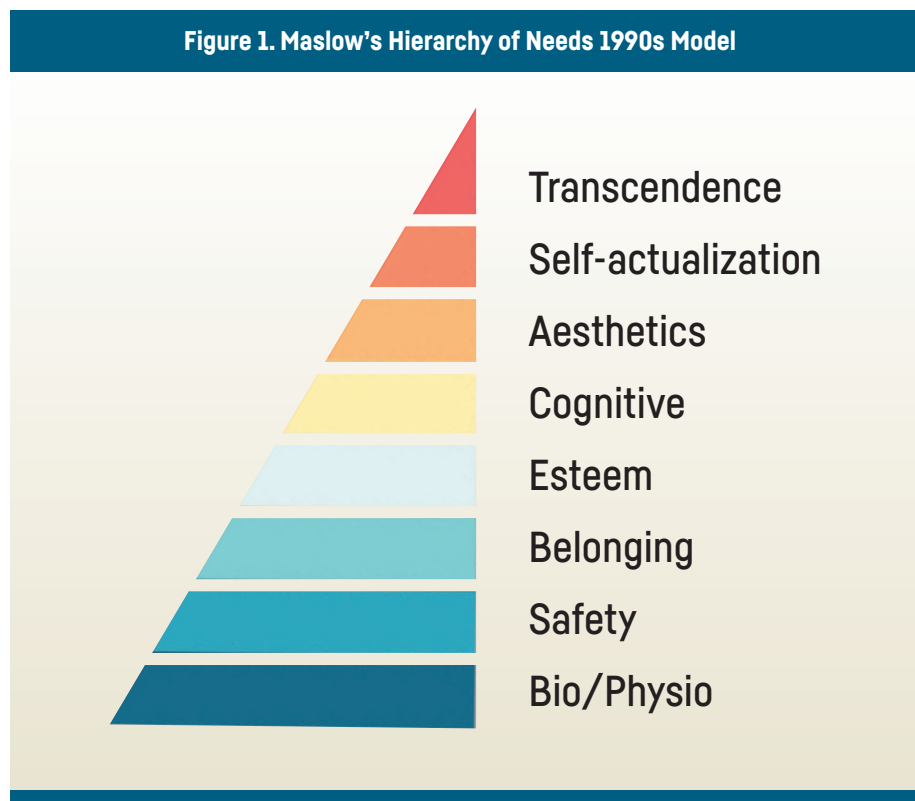
Abraham Maslow, often considered the leading scholar on motivation, posited that human beings need to feel safe in order to learn. In his original work, Maslow identified five basic needs that drive motivation in every human being (biological and physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization). As time went on, he added cognitive, aesthetic, and transcendence needs to his list, making a total of eight needs (see Figure 1) that influence and shape motivation in a person.¹¹ When these needs are fulfilled, a person is more likely to become motivated. Maslow pointed out that these needs are interrelated and build upon one another in a hierarchical structure. If

children's most basic needs are not met, this increases the challenge of motivating them to learn. Maslow's hierarchy of needs will provide a framework for a large part of the following discussion. Only by understanding and identifying students' fundamental needs can teachers learn how to address the challenges of motivation more effectively.

1. Biological/Physiological Needs

Human beings' physical (biological/physiological) needs include air, food, drink, shelter, sleep, and warmth. If those needs are met, the student is more likely to be receptive to learning. However, if one or more of these needs is not met, the student will have a more difficult time focusing and opening up to the learning process. For example, if a student is hungry or tired, he or she may not be able to focus or think clearly. In many countries, public and private non-profit schools receive government assistance to provide students with meals so that hunger will not impede their learning.¹² Teachers whose classes immediately precede

Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs 1990s Model



the school lunch break need to contextualize student outbursts, conflict, inattentiveness, and other hunger-related behaviors during this time.

2. Safety Needs

Every student needs to feel protected and secure. Safety needs should be met not only at home, but also at school, at church, and within the community. Unfortunately, threats to safety are prevalent in some of these places. In most states within the United States, teachers are mandated reporters for suspected child abuse.¹³

And, within all classrooms, students must feel as though classroom rules and boundaries are firmly in place in order to be motivated to share information or opinions. Teachers and administrators are responsible for ensuring that students are physically safe, and students must be held responsible for following classroom procedures and looking out for one another.¹⁴

However, safety involves both physical and emotional issues. If a student does not feel emotionally safe in a classroom, there is a greater chance he or she will withdraw and avoid sharing thoughts or opinions. Establishing classroom routines that build positive interactions among students, creating an atmosphere that welcomes questions, and modeling ways to agree and disagree are some ways teachers can ensure that students experience emotional safety. This leads us into the third level of needs.

3. Belonging and Love Needs

Maslow's social needs include belonging, love, and acceptance. Author and speaker Leonard Sweet affirmed this human truth when he said that "people want to belong before they believe, if they don't feel like they belong, they won't want to believe."¹⁵ This concept is especially true in a classroom context: If the student does not feel accepted, he or she will not feel comfortable voicing an opinion in class and will be less likely to speak

up or respond to questions. However, if a student feels accepted, loved, and appreciated, he or she is then more likely to be motivated to become involved and engaged in the class. The religion classroom should be a place where students experience a sense of belonging, not only in terms of the environment, but also in terms of being a child of God and belonging to the family of God.

The need to understand is a cognitive need that occurs in every subject area where differences of opinion exist; however, in the religion classroom, unanswered questions can leave students feeling unsatisfied in their quest to "understand" and have a long-term impact on their faith journey.

4. Esteem Needs

The fourth need in Maslow's hierarchy relates to esteem; this includes achievement, self-esteem, and independence. In the Christian classroom, regardless of subject area, students can experience the traditional results of academic success; however, they can also experience feelings of self-awareness in knowing and understanding their religious beliefs. Many project-based assignments can help students fulfill this need, especially ones that involve service-oriented ac-

tivities. Beyond assignments, though, this need is fulfilled by teachers, administrators, and staff who build students up with words of affirmation and acts of kindness, a warm, nurturing environment, and opportunities for students to positively interact with one another.

5. Cognitive Needs

Added to Maslow's hierarchy in the 1970s, cognitive needs relate to the individual's desire to know and find meaning. According to Maslow, humans experience curiosity and a thirst for knowledge.¹⁶ The need to understand is a cognitive need that occurs in every subject area where differences of opinion exist; however, in the religion classroom, unanswered questions can leave students feeling unsatisfied in their quest to "understand" and have a long-term impact on their faith journey. Teachers need to provide opportunities for students to ask questions, discuss ideas, study a variety of sources, and find answers. Too often, teachers pass over hard questions or say, "that is not important right now," or "you should not ask questions like that." Students experience greater safety and security if they feel that their teacher is interested in their questions, even if they do not get a direct answer. The fact that a teacher takes the time to listen and helps guide the student through problem solving, whether individually or within the classroom setting, will mean worlds to that student.

6. Aesthetic Needs

Aesthetic needs are met through contemplation of beauty found in nature, poetry, art, and songs. In the early church, many people were illiterate. To compensate for this, cathedrals were built, and churches were filled with art such as stained glass, paintings, and sculptures. This art, and even song, told the Bible stories using visual and auditory aids. Students today need to be reminded of the beauty that is found in and emerges from religious traditions. The religion classroom should be a place

where students are taught to see the beauty in religion; and this can be done through cross-curricular collaboration with teachers of other subject areas such as music, art, literature, and poetry, and through assignments and worship experiences that incorporate each of these content areas.

7. Self-Actualization Needs

Self-actualization may be one of the most significant student needs in relation to the religion classroom because of the focus on the change the gospel can make in each person's life. McLeod points out an important difference in Maslow's work compared to other theorists of his time: "Instead of focusing on psychopathology and what goes wrong with people, Maslow formulated a more positive account of human behavior with focused on what goes right. He was interested in human potential, and how we fulfill that potential . . . human motivation is based on people seeking fulfillment and change through personal growth."¹⁷ Self-actualization is the quest for personal growth and fulfillment. Maslow wrote, "even if all these needs are satisfied, we may still often (if not always) expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for."¹⁸

In every class, students should be taught to identify and develop their potential. In the religion classroom, one way of doing this is to help students identify their "spiritual gifts," dispositions associated with living the Christian life (1 Corinthians 12:7 and 28; Romans 12:6-8). In teaching students about these concepts, the teacher should provide opportunities for students to develop and use their gifts in ways that are applicable and relevant to real life through opportunities for volunteer service, personal ministry, and community engagement.

8. Transcendence Needs

The final level of Maslow's hierarchy is the need for transcendence. This essentially assumes that a person



who is fully satisfied will help other people reach their full potential. Religion teachers can provide opportunities for students to reach out to share or encourage others through cooperative learning exercises or community-service projects. Religion teachers can provide students with examples of how a relationship with Jesus Christ leads fulfillment and complete transformation—the work of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ezekiel 36:26; Philippians 1:6). However, teachers can only provide *opportunities* for students to reach their full potential; this last goal has to be something that students want to achieve on their own. It is not something that can be forced on them.

Motivational Strategies for Religion Teachers

Religion teachers can use several motivational strategies to engage their students. In addition to demonstrating an interest in each student, creating

practical assignments with achievable goals, and being cognizant of the extrinsic and intrinsic factors that impact student motivation, teachers must be enthusiastic about their students—they need to like working with young people, to be passionate about their content area, and enthusiastic about life in general.

1. Be Enthusiastic Toward Your Students, the Subject, and Life in General.

Author Ellen G. White stated that "an important element in educational work is enthusiasm. . . . The teacher in his work is dealing with things real, and he should speak of them with all the force and enthusiasm which a knowledge of their reality and importance can inspire."¹⁹ When the teacher is enthusiastic, he or she is more likely to be socially accepted by the students and to be able to encourage students to be interested in and ex-

cited about life and about the place religion will have in their lives. This enthusiasm is intrinsic; it should come from within, from a place of relationship with Christ. If the teacher gives the impression that a particular lesson is dull or irrelevant to him or her, the students will likely also share that opinion. A teacher must be excited and enthusiastic about each lesson, even if its content is not particularly exciting.

Also, during each class period, the teacher should be sure that he or she shows enthusiasm in greeting the students and by calling them by their names. This will help students know that they are known, accepted, appreciated, and valued by the teacher. When an enthusiastic teacher shows the students that he or she is motivated about the class and about their education, students will in turn be more inspired to learn.

2. Demonstrate Genuine Interest in Each Student.

The expression of personal interest by a significant adult helps to fulfill the student's need to be known and accepted. Showing interest in each student enables the teacher to connect with him or her on a personal, wholistic level (e.g., Did the student have adequate food today? Does he or she have a safe place to shelter and study? Is he or she getting enough sleep?). Ellen White wrote, "The true educator, keeping in view what his pupils may become, will recognize the value of the material upon which he is working. He will take a personal interest in each pupil and will seek to develop all his powers. However imperfect, every effort to conform to right principles will be encouraged."²⁰

Showing interest can be done in many ways.²¹ For example, teachers can ask students about their day and pause to listen to the response. By starting with surface-level conversation, the teacher can get a feel for how each student's life is going at that moment. After a relationship has been established (often over a period of time, through demonstrating authentic and sincere interest), the teacher is

then able to pursue a deeper friendship with that student for example, by inquiring about his or her family life or hobbies. There are many ways a teacher can take interest in a student's life, but authentic kindness can motivate a student to take what the teacher says seriously and want to learn from him or her.

3. Make the Work Practical and Achievable.

If students see that the classwork is relevant and applicable to their lives, they will be more likely to experience positive levels of esteem and cognitive fulfillment. Many secondary-level religion teachers may also teach other subjects or have other duties at the school. Unfortunately, because of this, some teachers give a lot of "busy work," rather than assignments with authentic purpose. The religion class requires rigorous planning and thoughtful attention. To think otherwise is a mistake. Religion teachers must maintain their professional integrity and commitment to all their duties. When students see that they are able to learn, and have opportunities to apply what they are learning through practical experiences, they are more likely to believe that the material is actually useful, and they will be more motivated to learn.

4. Be Cognizant of the Classroom Environment.

If the environment is not conducive to student safety, attention, or learning, the teacher should change it as soon as possible. He or she should maintain order and classroom structure in regard to rules and boundaries to ensure that all students feel safe to share their input and feel valued, thereby fulfilling each one's safety and belonging needs.

Religion teachers should also consider incorporating technology and the arts to help students fulfill their aesthetic needs. Allowing time for journaling or other personal reflective assignments can help to ensure that students achieve personal growth throughout the school year. This gives

students opportunities to self-actualize. Additionally, religion teachers need to provide students with opportunities to serve their fellow classmates and their community to help ensure the fulfillment of their transcendence needs.

Conclusion

Motivation is an internal state that arouses, directs, and maintains behavior. There are many factors that shape a child's motivation, some of which are environmental, while others are directed from within the child. If Lavoie is right, that "people are always motivated by something," then the challenge of the religion teacher is to identify whatever obstacles to learning might exist in the classroom environment as well as in each student's life. Religion teachers have the privilege of being able to nurture, model, and demonstrate God's love, showing students the joy of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. If the religion teacher has prepared, cleared obstacles to learning, and established that he or she cares about the student, there is a greater chance that the student will not only succeed, but also gain a better understanding of the world around him or her. ✍

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