Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher

Motivation Requires a Meaningful Task

The authors closely examine methods and rationale for creating effective group assignments that motivate and challenge students.

Motivation has long been viewed as a key element of learning (e.g., Guthrie and Wigfield). A study of over 300 high school juniors and seniors demonstrated that motivation was at least as predictive of achievement in a subject as was intelligence (Steinmayr and Spinath). Among younger students, motivation is a linchpin to learning, even at a time developmentally when overall motivation for schoolwork is in decline, bottoming out at the seventh-grade level (Wigfield and Eccles). While there are many factors that might explain this decline (i.e., changes in the structure of the school day, developmental changes regarding affiliation and belonging), as a result teachers too often find themselves assigning less-rigorous tasks designed to placate disenchanted students.

However, differences between children and adolescents are pronounced, especially in the ways they interact with one another. In particular, adolescents increasingly turn to their peer groups for validation and support. The interplay between motivation and development provides middle school and high school English teachers with the unique ability to capitalize on this. In our high school English classrooms, we do this daily through collaborative learning. The energy and motivation that occur when students are engaged in productive group work result in meaningful learning. Students, even those who routinely drag themselves through the school day, find reasons to read, write, discuss, and create when in the company of like-minded peers. However, we have also learned through experience that motivation doesn't occur simply because we've moved the desks together. We need to create meaningful tasks that are tailored to the developmental, academic, and social needs of students.

The Value of a Meaningful Task

Without question, adolescents favor group work as a tool for learning and socializing, but only when particular elements are in place. A useful device for ensuring that all are present is the TARRGET framework (Ames): Task, Autonomy, Recognition, Resources, Grouping, Evaluation, and Time. *Task* refers to the nature of the learning activity itself, designed to be interesting and challenging, and paired with useful *Resources. Autonomy* also plays an important role, as adolescents are motivated when they have a voice in decisions and choices. *Recognition* and *Evaluation* are related to one another and refer to the opportunities students have to both offer and receive each. Finally, adolescents in the Carole Ames study preferred working with others in *Groups,* with the teacher's *Time* devoted to providing help and encouragement.

The task challenge is central to creating a motivating environment. While there is a certain intuitive logic to reducing difficulty in order to keep students motivated, the evidence among adolescents is quite the opposite. Developmentally, a mark of adolescence is the pleasure one takes in approaching a challenging task (Hektner and Asakawa). Even the seventh graders in Patricia O'Connell Schmakel's study said they wished that they had been assigned "harder work, more work, and mental work" (743). But classroom tasks must

be accompanied by the elements described in the TARRGET framework if they are to be used to increase motivation. These factors—the task design, social constructs, teacher role, and resource supports—together add up to increased rigor. These can be witnessed by observing the students, teacher, and the physical environment of the classroom. The indicators of successful productive group work that emanate from collaborative learning include attention to the complexity of the task, the interactions of students with the materials and one another, the language and teacher supports, and the group composition. A rubric of these elements can be found in Figure 1.

Complexity of Task

To capitalize on the usefulness of productive group work as a key to motivation, attention to the complexity of the task is necessary. A major purpose of collaborative learning is that it is an opportunity for students to consolidate their understanding about concepts they are learning. Therefore, while some aspects of the task might be new to them, others are not. The task should be novel in the sense that it is not an exact duplication of what the teacher has previously modeled for them, as dutiful task replication does not result in student interest. Instead, the collaborative task should require students to utilize previously learned concepts in a new way.

In addition, the task should offer the possibility of productive failure (Kapur). By this, we don't mean that the task should be beyond their capabilities, but rather that it is structured in such a way that the outcome is not a given. Therefore, tasks are somewhat ill-defined in the sense that it is not simply a matter of mindlessly following a series of steps. Our classroom experiences have shown us that when the task is sufficiently difficult, students must work together. In fact, a good gauge of task difficulty has to do with the way the group approaches the task. If students merely divide it up and agree to meet again later to assemble the final product, it's likely that the task was not challenging. Our overall goal for them—to interact with each other and the concepts—never comes to fruition.

In our high school classrooms, we read target texts with students as a class but reserve student choice for related reading. Both the target text and the student selections are organized according to the schoolwide essential question (Sizer). To address the essential question "What is race, and does it matter?" the eleventh-grade English teacher read *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry) as the in-class target text. In addition, students selected from a list of fiction and nonfiction to read independently. Groups were formed based on the texts selected. Four students chose to read the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (Yang). They met several times a week as they read the book, with the essential question serving as the guideline for their discussions. After making some decisions about the pacing of the discussions, the group chose to focus on the parallels between the two texts and the ways in which the genres (a play and a graphic novel) dictated the story. One of the students later wrote in his essay addressing the essential question:

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> The characters of Jin Wang and Beneatha Younger had very different experiences, but would probably answer this question the same way. Yes, race does matter. Each tried to overcome, even deny, their race, but in the end their racial and culture experiences made them who they are. The metaphor of the Monkey King in *American Born Chinese* could be a lesson to both: the path to self-awareness begins with self-acceptance. Only when you understand who you are can you then decide who you will become.

Joint Attention to Tasks or Materials

Although this indicator might seem obvious, it is representative of the social and intellectual interactions that should be seen and heard during productive group work. Most classroom teachers know at a glance what is occurring in a group, quickly taking in the body language and joint visual gaze of the members. Students should be regularly leaning in, shifting attention from speaker to speaker, and actively using resources. In addition, the conversation that occurs within the group should serve as evidence that students are listening to one another.

FIGURE 1. Indicators of Success—Productive Group Work

Indicators	4—Exemplary	3—Applying	2—Approaching	1—Limited
Complexity of task: *The task is a novel application of a grade-level-appropriate concept and is designed so that the outcome is not guaranteed (a chance for productive failure exists).*	Task reflects purpose and what was modeled. The task allows students an opportunity to use a variety of resources to creatively apply their knowledge of what was modeled. Students have an opportunity to experiment with concepts.	Task provides multiple, clear opportunities for students to apply and extend what was modeled. Students have an opportunity to use a variety of resources to creatively apply their knowledge of what was modeled.	The task is somewhat reflective of the purpose of the lesson, but there is little opportunity for student experimentation or innovation.	Task is an exact replication of what was modeled, with little or no opportunity for student experimentation with concepts.
Joint attention to tasks or materials: *Students are interacting with one another to build each other's knowledge. Outward indicators include body language and movement associated with meaningful conversations, and shared visual gaze on materials.*	Students ask critical questions of each other, developing and forming personal opinions and conclusions. They are able to evaluate and synthesize information, as well as independently use a variety of resources to acquire new or unknown information.	Body language, visual gaze, and language interactions provide evidence of joint attention to the task or materials by all members of the group. Students can explain their contributions and the contributions of other group members.	Body language, visual gaze, and language interactions provide some evidence of mutual attention to the task or materials by most members. Students are not holding each other accountable for purposeful contributions.	Students divide up the task so that they can work, then meet near the end to assemble components. Body language, visual gaze, and lack of language interactions provide evidence of independent work occurring within the group.
Argumentation, not arguing: *Student use accountable talk to persuade, provide evidence, ask questions of one another, and disagree without being disagreeable.*	Students reach a better understanding or consensus based on evidence and opinions provided by others. Students hold each member of the group accountable by using questioning strategies and evidence to persuade or disagree. The conversation is respectful and courteous.	Students ask for and offer evidence to support claims. However, members continue to maintain initial beliefs or positions about a topic without considering the arguments of others. The conversation is generally respectful but some members may not participate.	There is a process in place for accountable talk. However, student dialogue is limited and there are minimal efforts to support the product. The conversation is generally respectful but is often dominated by one member of the group or veers off-topic.	No clear process is in place to facilitate accountable talk. Lack of structure is evident as students are off-task, in conflict, and/or unable to complete product.
Language support: *Written, verbal, teacher, and peer supports are available to boost academic language usage.*	Sentence frames are differentiated based on students' proficiency and need. A wide range of frames are available for students and students use the frames independently in academic language and writing. Teacher modeling includes the use of frames as well as academic vocabulary and high expectations for language production.	Students use one or two sentence frames from the variety that are available in a structured setting. A set of target vocabulary is available and used. Teachers model the use of frames. Students are encouraged to use the language support in guided instruction and productive group work.	Academic language related to the concept/standard is present. A frame may be provided. The teacher models at least once using target vocabulary or language frame. Students are encouraged to attempt using target vocabulary without opportunities for guided practice.	Vocabulary is posted but its use is not modeled. Students are simply told to use words. Language frames are not provided.
Teacher role: *What is the teacher doing while productive group work is occurring?*	Teacher is purposeful in scaffolding using prompts, cues, and questions and checks for understanding regularly. Evidence collected during this time is used to plan further instruction.	Some scaffolding and checking for understanding occurs but there are delays in corrections or changes to the instruction. There is a link to further instruction.	Scaffolding or checking for understand occurs but is not used to plan further instruction.	Teacher manages but does not interact with groups to scaffold conceptual knowledge.
Grouping: *Small groups of 2–5 students are purposefully constructed to maximize individual strengths without magnifying areas of needs (heterogeneous grouping).*	Groups are flexible and change based on students' proficiency, academic need, and/or content area. Productive group work occurs throughout the day.	Purposeful heterogeneous grouping occurs, which is fluid in response to students' proficiency.	Some heterogeneous grouping occurs, but homogeneous grouping practices dominate. Decisions based on assessment are not apparent.	Grouping practices are solely homogeneous and are done primarily for scheduling convenience.

Examples include interjections that affirm the speaker ("I see," "OK"), restatements ("If I understand you correctly, your idea is . . ."), clarifying questions ("What did you mean when you said . . . ?"), reflective statements ("When you said that, I thought of . . ."), and summarizations of key ideas ("So your three main points were . . ."). These are more than just social niceties, as they provide evidence that students are building conceptual knowledge of one another. In addition, these interactions are motivating to individual members, who are encouraged by the others to participate and are valued for their contributions.

Tenth-grade English students used the schoolwide essential question "What sustains us?" to explore the role of silence as a barrier to communication. Using a variety of texts, including *Silent to the Bone* (Konigsburg), *Speak* (Anderson), as well as the target text *The Color of Water* (McBride), students addressed the question by developing a multimedia presentation with a partner. Chris and Robert worked together to create a short video entitled "The Burden of Secrets." While sitting together at the computer one day, we overheard them talking:

Chris: I have these pictures, but I'm not sure what order to put them in.

Robert: Let me see them. You talk about each one and why you picked it.

Chris: Good idea. [Begins displaying images on the screen. The first is a girl with tape over her mouth.]

Robert: Wow. Why'd you pick that one?

Chris: It reminded me of the cover of *Speak*.

Robert: OK, but it's got to be more than that.

Chris: Well, I also liked the way her eyes looked. Like she was scared to say anything.

Robert: Like trying to keep a secret.

Chris: Exactly.

Robert: I'm thinking about a song we could use. That picture made me think of the lyrics. It says, 'No matter how hard you try to / you can't make the clock unwind to / The moment that you lied to yourself' [(Pillar)].

Chris: Cool. Can you play it for me?

While the exchange may initially appear to be ordinary, what's underneath it is a conversation between two students who are closely listening to each other and building an understanding of one another. The task itself required interaction, and the students worked together to develop a presentation that made it necessary for them to jointly focus their attention on the matters at hand. Their motivation was obvious. From across the room, the body language and visual gaze were evident; up close the conversation further reinforced the shared attention to the task.

The ability to engage in argumentation and debate is a measure of an adolescent's growing ability to respond with logical and ethical claims to support or defend a position. In addition, he or she learns to channel appeals to the emotions in ways that are more sophisticated and nuanced. These skills do not emerge easily but take continued practice and feedback.

Argumentation, Not Arguing

Engaging in rhetorical language, both in speech and in writing, lies at the heart of the English curriculum. Students engage in persuasion, furnish evidence, ask thought-provoking questions, make assertions, assume a stance, and disagree with one another. In addition, they are asked to consider the position of others and utilize information to confirm and disconfirm beliefs. The ability to engage in argumentation and debate is a measure of an adolescent's growing ability to respond with logical and ethical claims to support or defend a position. In addition, he or she learns to channel appeals to the emotions in ways that are more sophisticated and nuanced. These skills do not emerge easily but take continued practice and feedback.

In response to the schoolwide essential question, "Can money buy happiness?" twelfth-grade students read the novella *Anthem* (Rand). The group disagreed about the dystopian nature of the book and its caution that collective wisdom is always a dangerous thing.

Gabriella: I think she's right. I think it's dangerous when a whole society starts thinking the same.

Shaudi: But shouldn't a society agree about certain things? Like when she talks about

freedom. Right here—"I guard my treasures . . . and the greatest of these is freedom."

Gabriella: [Reading] "My thought, my will, my land . . . ."

Andrew: But isn't that like what's happening now? Like that all the stuff that's messed up in the economy could be 'cause of the same beliefs. People were so much out for themselves that they didn't care what happened to anyone else.

Gabriella: But look at the start of the book. "It is a sin to think words no others think." I think she's telling us right from the start that unless you're going to be an individual, then you're doomed.

The group's overall tone is respectful of the positions of others, but they nonetheless use the text to support their claims. Their use of evidence is becoming more nuanced and they are able to challenge one another without resorting to simplistic arguments. In addition, they are listening to one another and considering the claims of others as they compare them to their own. They are motivated to read more so that they can continue to have these types of conversations with one another.

Language Support

To ensure that all students can engage in meaningful tasks, we provide them with various forms of language support. Without this support, some students will disengage as the tasks become too linguistically complex for their comfort. With this support, students feel successful and complete tasks with their peers. Facilitating students' use of academic English is critical as we recognize that they do not become increasingly proficient by listening to English; they need to produce the language as well. Unfortunately, as Guadalupe Valdés noted, too many high school students sit quietly in their classes and do not use English. When students are motivated, and supported, they use the language of the lesson, becoming increasingly sophisticated in their use with practice.

As noted in the rubric, language support includes the language we model as we read and think aloud as well as targeted vocabulary terms we have selected for specific attention. It also includes the various sentence and paragraph frames students can use when they talk with the members of their respective groups. For example, during a unit on poetry, we modeled using literary devices to unlock meaning. We also provided students with targeted vocabulary terms to use as they discussed and wrote poems, including *tone, ode, symbolism, alliteration, ballad, rhyme, elegy, irony,* and *personification.* And finally, we provide students with sentence and paragraph frames they can use when talking or writing. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein recommend the use of frames (they call them *templates*) as an effective way for developing students' academic writing skills. They defend the use of frames or templates by noting the following:

> After all, even the most creative forms of expression depend on established patterns and structures. Most songwriters, for instance, rely on a time-honored verse-chorus-verse pattern, and few people would call Shakespeare uncreative because he didn't invent the sonnet or dramatic forms that he used to such dazzling effect. . . . Ultimately, then, creativity and originality lie not in the avoidance of established forms, but in the imaginative use of them. (10–11)

During the unit on poetry, Maurico, an English language learner at the early stages of proficiency who barely spoke publicly at the beginning of the school year, was overheard using a frame to say, "I disagree with you because it's more like personification. She make it like trains is alive." While he still has some errors in his speech, he is engaged in the task at hand and is motivated to learn more about the Emily Dickinson poems his group has been analyzing. When asked about the difference, Maurico said, "I don't talk before because I don't got to for the grade. Now, here, I talk to learn more better."

Teacher Role

While students are working productively on meaningful tasks, the teacher's role changes. Rather than model or question students, the teacher can join groups or meet with specific students to prompt and cue their further understanding. While there is confusion about these terms, we tend to use the term *prompt* to refer to teacher actions that facilitate students' cognitive or metacognitive work and *cues* to refer to teacher actions that refocus students' at-

tention. For example, the teacher may prompt a student using a question such as, "Does that make sense?" or, "What might be a next step in your writing process?" Alternatively, the teacher may cue a student using a gestural prompt, pointing to the word wall, a physical prompt to focus the student on an illustration that was previously ignored, or a verbal prompt such as "You might want to reread the section on page 154."

When teachers guide students, they strategically balance between prompts and cues, only reverting to direct explanations when the student continues to misunderstand. This is motivating as students experience productive success. When they are not with their teacher, they are motivated by the possibility of productive failure. Consider the following exchange between the teacher and a group of students who were stuck in their discussion of "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost:

Nathan: I don't get it. What is he talking about?

Stephanie: Going for a walk and choosing a road.

Graham: He says that he didn't choose the road that most people have taken.

Nathan: So. What does that mean?

Graham: Just that he didn't take that road and doesn't know if it goes to the same place.

Teacher: Think about it as a metaphor. Does that help?

Stephanie: We're all on a road someplace?

Nathan: We gotta make choices?

Graham: You never know what will happen because you have to choose?

Teacher: Look again at the line, "I took the one less traveled by." That's all I'll say now.

Graham: I think he's saying that he stood there trying to decide. And when he did, he decided to go where less people had been.

Nathan: Wait, like trying to be an individual?

Stephanie: Oh, yeah, like making your own way like the book I just read.

Graham: And it was the right thing to do, he says.

Grouping

The final category required for creating a motivating, productive group work task involves the number of students in each group. If there are too many students in a group, some of them are not motivated to complete any tasks as they know the work will be done by others. If there aren't enough members in a group, students begin to feel overwhelmed and give up on the task. Importantly, not every group needs to be the same size to be productive. In a given classroom, we have groups of two (partners), groups of three (triads), and groups of four or five. It all depends on the size that will keep the members of the group motivated to complete their tasks.

The good news is that students welcome a challenging task as they develop a stronger sense of accomplishment for meaningful work. However, the word *meaningful* is critical, as it truly is in the eyes of the beholder.

We form groups using an alternative ranking system. For example, in first period, there are 36 students. We rank them on their reading performance (not simply test scores) from highest to lowest. We cut the list at the midpoint and take some from each list to compose the groups. In the first-period example, students 1, 2, 19, and 20 make a great group. Student 3 works best with fewer students and has had conflict with student 21, so she is in a group with students 22 and 23. This grouping structure ensures that there is diversity in each group and that the groups are not so different that they cannot produce the work expected of them.

Motivation Requires a Meaningful Task

Motivation in learning grows in importance through adolescence, but it challenges us all as we try to locate the key to unlocking it. The good news is that students welcome a challenging task as they develop a stronger sense of accomplishment for meaningful work. However, the word *meaningful* is critical, as it truly is in the eyes of the beholder. It doesn't mean that we as English teachers should abandon what we need to teach; it does mean that we need to closely consider the task demand and the instructional design we use to support it. Students are eager to take on a difficult task, provided they are assured of the

support that comes from peers and the teacher. In addition, the environment must be one that views mistakes or errors as a necessary part of learning. The indicators described in this article should receive the same attention that our curriculum does. By raising the level of challenging work, and further coupling this with the structures and supports needed by students, we can increase motivation through raised expectations.

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Nancy Frey and **Douglas Fisher** are teacher leaders at Health Sciences High and Middle College as well as professors of teacher education at San Diego State University. They are also the incoming editors of *Voices From the Middle,* NCTE's journal for the Middle Section. Email them at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu and dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu, respectively.

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