

# What Keeps Students Motivated to Learn?

Katrina Schwartz, KQED News  
March 13, 2014

1) Educators have lots of ideas about how to improve education, to better reach learners and to give students the skills they'll need in college and beyond the classroom. But often those conversations remain between adults. The real test of any idea is in the classroom, though students are rarely asked about what they think about their education.

2) A panel of seven students attending schools that are part of the "deeper learning" movement gave their perspective on what it means for them to learn and how educators can work to create a school culture that fosters creativity, collaboration, trust, the ability to fail, and perhaps most importantly, one in which students want to participate.

## INTEGRATED PROJECTS

3) Project-based learning is the norm among these students, but they also have a lot of ideas about what makes a good project work. Students want projects to be integrated across subjects, not separated by discipline. "When it's integrated, each student can find something they like and everyone can get into it," said Erina Chavez, a junior at High Tech High North County. "I love when projects are integrated so you can find so many different aspects," said Daniel Cohen, also a North County junior.

4) "Treat students like adults. If the students feel like they're worth it they'll act more like adults."

5) Students described an integrated biology and art project that asked them to research the origins of a disease that had significance for them, and to create



an art project around it. They took drastically different approaches to researching an illness that ran in their family — from interviewing family members about the experience for a video, to investigating whether stubbornness is genetic.

6) At first Chavez wasn't excited about the project, but she ended up enjoying it because she loves art. "All of us found our own solution to the problem and our own answers with the guidance of our teachers," said another North County junior Paris Gramann. "It was a struggle because we didn't really know where we were going, but I always find those are the best ones."

7) Students were also excited that this project resulted in a real product that they could display. Their work was recognized and displayed at the University of California at San Diego art gallery. "It got really real at the time it moved up to the exhibition," said Chavez. "It wasn't something we were just turning in for a grade, but it was something that we could do well and beautifully."

8) Middle school students also appreciate those projects where different subjects are integrated. High Tech Middle Chula Vista seventh grader Ana de Almeida Amaral described an integrated humanities and math/science

project, when students read Sherlock Holmes, wrote their own versions, and became experts in one aspect of forensics. Together they created a crime scene in their classroom and then taught everyone assembled about a part of the forensics process through a stop animation video.

### **INTEREST-BASED AND RELEVANT**

9) Students like to know why they're learning something and they want to access that information through a lens that interests them. "If teachers give broad guidelines for the project and then have students do something they're interested in it will bring students along the whole time," said Gramann. "Treat students like adults. If the students feel like they're worth it they'll act more like adults."

10) Projects can often last for several weeks, so students need motivation to stay engaged and committed to deeply engaging a topic. Authentic choice is one aspect of allowing that to happen. Students on the panel described real choices they make about their education on a daily basis, from which book they'll read in Humanities to the different topics they want to research. And even though these students sound like natural learners, many of them haven't always been. They need teachers to show them why they should care about each learning goal.

11) "If you really let them know, and use real life problems, it will help them understand it and they will feel like it's worth doing," said de Almeida Amaral. "The biggest thing that's necessary is making sure the projects connect to the students," said Gibran Huerta, a junior at Envision Academy in Oakland. "Teachers tend to give projects and benchmarks and

create topics around things that students don't really connect to." He was adamant that learning how to connect a topic to oneself is the key to learning.

"Throughout middle school you have to develop skills of how things connect to yourself," he said.

### **MAKE IT HANDS-ON**

12) "If you get hands-on and they're really interacting with what they're doing, it's really helpful," said Trey Lewis, a junior at North County. He's had teachers that lecture a lot and much prefers doing the work to being told about it. He says it also adds a challenge since most hands-on projects at High Tech High North County are group projects, requiring collaboration, a leadership skill that all students agree isn't always easy.

13) "Collaborating productively is a leadership skill at this school," said Dora Aguilar, a junior at City Arts and Tech, part of the Envision network. She says that while it can be hard, it can also be very rewarding because working with other people allows her to see the project through the eyes of her peers. Other students talked about difficult collaborations too, emphasizing that it runs more smoothly if one group member agrees to keep everyone on track. They also said it gets easier over time as students begin to understand one another's needs and motivations and can begin to operate as a cohesive group.

### **KNOWING TEACHERS CARE**

14) The number one thing that students on the panel said makes them want to try hard and succeed is knowing that teachers care about them and are part of the learning journey with them. "I am not the perfect student," said Aguilar. "What really helped me was the teachers and staff here who showed me that they

cared about me. Students can feel that." She described hating math for most of her life until a good teacher described what she could do with strong math skills in the future. "It got me motivated to learn more and I showed my potential as a student, which I never knew I had," she said.

15) Every student reiterated that high expectations and strong support from teachers are crucial. "I feel motivated because the teachers make me feel worth it," said Gramann. "I feel that I have responsibility and credibility."

16) Cohen actually transferred out of High Tech High North County at one point, thinking the school model wasn't for him. But he quickly came back. "The teachers really do care about us and I think that's something that makes our school really unique and special," he said. Others reiterated that feeling connected to school is important to them. "It's that strong connection between teachers and students that makes students feel like they are at home," said Huerta. Envision Academy only has 400 students and teachers know all the students by name, contributing to the feeling of "being known."

### LEARNING FROM FAILURE

17) Every student on the panel had a story of big failure on an important class project. But because the culture of their schools encourage them to learn from mistakes, they can clearly articulate what they'd do differently next time and even laugh about it. Lewis described a solar oven he made that was working great up

until the day of the exhibition when it started falling apart. "When we have projects that go wrong last minute and we have to think on our feet and fix it, I definitely think that's a mistake that's going to help me in the future," he said.

18) Cohen described presenting a project expecting his group mates to be well prepared and have the correct information. But one student's research was faulty and Cohen hadn't seen it until the presentation, putting him in a difficult position. "I know now to check over all my work, always revise, make sure all the work is accurate," he said.

### EVALUATING WORK

19) Project-based learning affords many opportunities for feedback both from teachers and from peers. "Some of the most meaningful feedback I've gotten is from students," said Lewis. Students get used to giving and taking critique daily with each other and hearing it from educators as well. Their ease with it comes from practice and with the awareness that feedback isn't the end of the process, it's a part of improving their work.

20) One tip students offer to educators: When evaluating student work, frame feedback in terms of the learner's goals instead of referring to the standards. "Goals are more motivating for students to hear," said Aguilar. While the education policy world may be obsessed with standards, students don't care about them. They'd rather hear how the skill connects to their lives and interests.

**Source:** <http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2014/03/13/what-keeps-students-them-motivated-to-learn>

## Because I'm Happy

An intriguing study notes a correlation between a student's level of happiness and GPA

By Victoria Jones, March 26, 2015

- 1) As policymakers, administrators, and teachers, we want the children in our classrooms to be happy, of course. But how much does their happiness really matter when it comes to learning? According to a new study by HGSE lecturer Christina Hinton, Ed.D.'12, the answer is clear: It matters a lot.
- 2) Hinton examined the interplay of happiness, motivation, and success in a K-12 setting, and she also looked at the school factors that support student happiness.
- 3) Using both quantitative and qualitative measures, she found that from elementary school to high school, happiness is positively correlated with motivation and academic achievement. She also found that the culture of the school and the relationships that students form with their teachers and their peers play an influential role in their happiness.
- 4) In order to conduct the study, Hinton collaborated with the St. Andrew's Episcopal School near Washington, D.C., which educates students in grades K-12. "We developed surveys to collect data on students' happiness and motivation," Hinton says. "We also collected qualitative data on happiness and motivation to dig more deeply into the construct. In addition, we collected data on students' grade point averages. We then analyzed this data to explore the relationships among happiness, motivation, and academic achievement."
- 5) Her analysis found several key associations that open the door to further research on how schools can optimize students' learning experiences. Among them:
  - 6) Happiness is positively associated with intrinsic motivation (a personal drive to learn) for all students, and also with extrinsic motivation (outside sources like rewards, praise, or avoiding punishment) for students in grades K-3.
  - 7) Happiness is also positively associated with GPA for students in grades 4-12.
  - 8) Happiness and standardized test scores did not seem to be related, but further research is needed to confirm this.
  - 9) Happiness is predicted by students' satisfaction with school culture and relationships with teachers and peers.
  - 10) The finding that happiness is positively correlated with GPA is significant, Hinton notes, because GPA provides a broader picture of academic achievement than standardized test scores, encompassing multiple types of abilities and the influence of social dynamics.
  - 11) Moving past quantitative scores, the study examined the relationship between happiness and achievement from the students' perspectives, as well as the source of the happiness that students report feeling in the classroom. "We asked the students what supports their learning, and then we coded the responses for themes," says Hinton. "Students often reported that happiness, or positive feelings like enjoyment or fun, promotes learning." They cited many reasons for their positive feelings, including feeling safe and comfortable at school and having secure relationships with their teachers and their peers.
  - 12) These findings set the stage for important future research, Hinton says, as well as for exploring interventions that can successfully boost students' overall happiness — and their performance in the classroom.
  - 13) "In this study, we found that a network of supportive relationships is at the heart of happiness," Hinton says. "If schools want to support student well being and achievement, they should take seriously nurturing positive relationships among teachers and students."

**Source:** <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/15/03/because-i'm-happy>

## Work Your Mind

---

Figuring something out on your own may be the best way to learn

By Annie Murphy Paul and Stephanie Kraus, Time For Kids, April 25, 2012

1) Here's something to think about the next time you ask your teacher for help: struggling with schoolwork on your own can help you learn. According to a recent study, the more you struggle while you are learning new information, the better you can remember it later.

2) This theory might surprise you. When teachers are presenting new information, they often give students lots of help. But a new study shows this may not be the best way to support learning. "Don't be too quick to get help when learning something new," education expert Manu Kapur told TFK. "Try to work on it yourself even if it means trying different ways."

### How to Learn

3) Many teachers give extra help to students learning new information.

4) Kapur came up with the idea that struggling can lead to better learning. Then he tested it out on students in Singapore. He separated students into two groups. In the first group, students were asked to solve math problems with the teacher's help. In the second group, students were asked to solve the same problems by helping one another, instead of



getting help from the teacher.

5) With the teacher's help, students in the first group were able to find the correct answers. Students in the second group did not solve the problems correctly. But they did come up with a lot of good ideas.

6) The students were then tested on what they had learned. The group without any help from a teacher scored much higher than the group who had help. Kapur said working to find the answers helped students understand the process, not just the solution.

7) Kapur's advice for kids is to put a lot of effort into learning something new rather than going to your teacher for help. "Simply doing a little work or nothing at all won't work," says Kapur. "The struggle needs to be a genuine attempt to figure out or solve a problem in as many ways as possible."

**Source:** <http://www.timeforkids.com/node/37186/print>

## Video game vets to students: 'Fail fast, fail often'

By Marco Santana  
**Orlando Sentinel**  
(TNS)

Two video game artists who have worked on video games like "Halo" and the "John Madden" football series were in Orlando recently to talk with some up-and-coming video game developers at the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy.

The hour-long chat with senior character artist Mike Pavlovich and senior technical artist Luiz Kruel, both of Austin-based Certain Affinity, brought out several lessons for the students.

Here are a few lessons they shared.

- Fail fast, fail often

They say that failure on a project is inevitable so it's best to get as many iterations out of the way as quickly as possible to figure out what is not working.

- Run as fast as you can at whatever you are good at

Kruel said there is nothing wrong with specializing in a particular area of expertise and being the best at it.

- Work with other people

Kruel said working in a team enhances the end product. "Both of us combined can do stuff neither of us can do alone."

- Stay ahead of the industry

With online tutorials and other tools on the Internet, people can teach themselves just about anything they want, Kruel said.

- Keep that ego in check

The more you advance, the more likely you will be asked to contribute to small projects. Kruel said he once did artwork on NFL coach Tony Dungy's jacket.

- Play bad games

Pavlovich said: "Playing bad games is just as important as playing the good games because you see what not to do."

---

©2015, *The Orlando Sentinel*. 6-18-15.

*Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.*

---

*Marco is a business reporter covering technology, banking/finance and defense for the Orlando Sentinel. He previously covered technology for the Des Moines Register in Iowa, education for the Galesburg Register-Mail in Illinois and local government for the Daily Herald in suburban Chicago. Marco has taught at various journalism conferences in the Midwest and every year helps lead a workshop teaching high school students about journalism and reporting in Illinois.*