

**Design Project: Motivating Sam**

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**Learner**

Sam is a talented 17 year old high school junior who possesses high academic abilities. He is a well- behaved student who follows rules and pays attention even when he acts if he isn't. Sam receives good grades and almost always scores very high on tests and quizzes. He is competitive to the fact that if he perceived a challenge worth taking, he would work relentlessly to and give best effort to do the best in the class. He never turns in incomplete work, and almost always turns assignments. Sam really relies on his ability to learn by recall and by last-minute cramming studying habits. He usually puts off homework assignments until the day it is due, sometimes he even completes the class before. He has claimed to admitting to copying other friend's homework just because he doesn't feel it is important to spend time doing. He doesn't read anything for class except when he knows he will be tested on it. He crams for quizzes and tests at the last minute, using his strong ability to memorize answers just long enough to complete the assessment and then forgets much of it. In class, especially with his peers, Sam acts as if he doesn't care about school, and tries to create the impression that it is "dumb" to try. Hence, he hardly participates in any class discussions or asks any questions. Ironically, he does care about his grades and performance in class although he would not allow that to be known publicly in front of his peers. Sam never knows the true boundaries of his talents and abilities because he never gets out of his "comfort zone" academically. For someone who enjoys school, at least the social part of it, he doesn't take advantage of the great value that is available.

**Learning Activity**

The learning activity is an introduction lesson to start the American Civil War which includes some teacher-led lecture and collaborative discussions and activities. The teacher begins with

Bell Work where the students are asked to write in their notebooks five things they know about the Civil War. The students get five minutes to write down the most details they know including what they know or thought they knew caused the Civil War and any other facts or details. After five minutes the teacher asks students to share what they have written and opens up discussion. After that, the teacher starts into a PowerPoint slide show that includes pictures and videos showing different famous people and events of the Civil War. At periodic times, he tells the students to join with the students around them to discuss certain questions about what it would be like if there was Civil War going on today and what issues might the country be fighting over. After small group session is over, the teacher asks each group to share some of the things they came up with. The teacher closes out the lesson by going over the objectives and learning expectations that the students will be responsible for the unit.

### **Learning Setting**

The classroom consists of thirty students and one teacher. The students' desks are arranged in a big "U" with four traditional rows occupying the middle of the "U" to create a discussion themed classroom environment. Whole class instruction is typically delivered from the front of the room where there is a projector and Smart Board. There are multiple posters that consist of social studies and in particular history figures and other motivational quotes on the walls. There is a space on the board that displays the goals and objectives of the particular lesson or unit that the students will be learning. There are multiple lamps in the room that are mostly used for lighting instead of the ceiling florescent lights that are typical in most classrooms. The "soft" lighting creates a more relaxed "at home" feel than the florescent lights. A large United State flag hangs from the ceiling at the front of the room.

### **Observations of the Motivational Problem**

Sam was seated in the back of the “U” configuration. The expectation at the beginning of class was for the students to write down everything they knew about the Civil War including why they may have thought it started. Sam sat in his desk, leaned back and slouched in his chair with his hand holding his head, and looked disinterested in participating in the activity. After a few minutes the teacher singled out a few students including Sam and reminded that they should be participating, including “write whatever may come to their mind, even if they have no idea.” With reluctance, Sam jotted down a few sentences before time was up for the activity. The teacher then asked students to share what they had written in which a few students raised their hands. Sam did not volunteer and seemed disinterested in any of his classmates’ contributions. The teacher then led a whole class presentation using PowerPoint showing pictures and a couple of videos, while engaging the class with questions about what they thought about the pictures or the videos. Again, Sam sat in his laid back demeanor just staring at the teacher with no expressions on his face. When the teacher told the students to get into groups of 2-3 and come up with ideas of how they might think it would be like to be involved in a civil war today, Sam didn’t seem interested and chatted with his group about non-school related things. When it came time for the groups to share what they had come up with, the other two members of his group spoke and Sam just sat back letting his partners take lead. As the teacher closed the lesson with what the learning goals and objectives were for the students to learn, Sam again appeared non-responsive and just copied down what the teacher had on the PowerPoint slides only because he was instructed to.

### **Motivational Analysis**

Using the TARGET framework, the teacher is introducing a large unit with finding out what the students already know about the Civil War. He seems to be trying set up a base or starting point

to relate to what the students know or want to know about the Civil War and how such of an impact of a country divided and going to war against each other would feel in their present time. He attempts to engage the students and make the subject matter come alive. This falls under the Task factor. For Authority, although the teacher shares thinking and reflection with the students through writing and group discussions, he sets the goals for learning himself and provides what they are going to learn or at least be expected to learn. For Recognition, the teacher seems to provide a fair amount of praise for the students who volunteer to share their thoughts but only asks those who want to volunteer to become involved. The teacher also provides an avenue for cooperation in the small group activity but allows for the students to choose their own groups, based on proximity of their seats. He doesn't emphasize competition between groups and attempts to allow a safe environment where only one person per group is responsible for taking charge of the group's findings. For Evaluation, students are not really evaluated on individual performance but more as an informal group performance. Emphasis seems to be on those who volunteer to share and take lead into discussion. Everyone is not held personally accountable. Last, for the Time factor, the teacher gives ample time for students to ask questions or create ideas to share. The teacher is also flexible in terms of using individual, small group, and whole class lead activities during the class period.

### **Conclusions**

Being that the lesson is an introductory one, the teacher attempts to motivate the students to think in their own terms about the idea that the United States once was at war with itself and asks the students to draw into their own thoughts of how that would affect themselves today if the country was at war. The students are given individual time to collect thoughts that other students won't have to see or hear if they don't want to, creating a safe environment to come up with ideas. The

teacher also allows for discussion of ideas and inquiry into whatever they would like to say. Collaborative activity is offered for the students to talk to their peers to share. At this point, Sam seems to be unaffected by these efforts for he doesn't care to want to participate in the value of sharing ideas or showing interest in what is being introduced. So far, none of these attempts by the teacher work with Sam. Possibly, the teacher should go around individually to each small group or even each student to ask questions and encourage thought provoking questions or ask what individual if they can conceive fighting a war against possible family members to spark further interest. Also, the teacher could probably address why would we want to learn about the civil war and why it is important to analyze its causes so that a tragic event like this wouldn't happen again. Sam's reluctance to engage in discussion and the topic of the Civil War itself may suggest that he doesn't see the value in giving effort, although it is expected that Sam will grasp concepts and succeed in completing work and doing well on assessments.

In designing an appropriate motivational strategy for Sam, a cognitive approach is better suited than an extrinsic reward one due to Sam's high level of ability and committed performance in classroom tasks but underachieving in effort put forth to gain mastery level. Sam likes to play it safe and dislikes challenges because he doesn't see the value in the extra effort due to his own self-efficacy that he has the ability to achieve expected performance goals in the class. Furthermore, Sam is preoccupied with this self-worth in a social acceptance context by focusing on social goals of wanting to look like he doesn't give high effort in classroom and learning related activities. He needs help in realizing that these behaviors are contrary to his own long-run best interests. Sam's case in terms of motivation is a rather unique one given that he possesses high ability and is performance-driven but he is uncomfortable being seen as giving effort to do so in the classroom and therefore underachieves in terms of his academic potential.

According to social cognitive theory, students can shape their own experiences in an academic context by learning to take control and responsibility for their own learning.

By assessing Sam's performance in class and observing his behavior, it is evident that Sam doesn't see or respect the value in the process of meaningful learning and mastery. He attributes his high performances exclusively to his high ability to achieve good grades with little effort. He routinely exhibits procrastination in regards to work and assignments and does not regularly participate in learning activities in the classroom. Sam's behavior reinforces his low value for these effort-based activities to cause good grades. Rotter's Social Learning Theory comes into play here because Sam consistently doesn't work hard because he believes that the rewards (good grades) aren't contingent on effort (Stipek, 2002, p.59). It is likely that Sam places a high value on his competencies and abilities to procrastinate and "cram" because he has experienced high achievement in doing so. He views his achievement of getting good grades as part of his high ability and doesn't tie effort to his high performances. Therefore, he views effort in the classroom as something that doesn't control performance. This perception is referred to by Stipek as a causal attribution. He ties his high performances in class to having more ability and less effort. Since he has consistently been able to perform well with low effort and high ability, he is working within the internal stability dimension of common attributions of achievement outcomes (Stipek, 2002, pg. 64). However, attributing success solely to ability can have negative effects on behavior in achievement situations. When students succeed without trying very hard, they may come to believe that effort is not needed for success. Therefore, they do not try very hard on future tasks, and, as a result, they perform at a level below their true capability (Stipek, 2002, pg.68). This coupled with Sam's preoccupation with self-image and worth around his peers proves that his perception of the effect of effort and ability aids to his underachieving in

the classroom. In Juvonen's (2000) research involving the judgments of older students, particularly eighth graders, he found that they rated the students who were high in ability and low in effort as the most popular. This study is an example of how important age differences in students' values and perceptions of social approval has on behavior...and one that creates conflict to choose behavior that would win peer approval with high ability and low effort (Stipek, 2002, pg 73). In Sam's case in being a older adolescent, this suggests that cognitive approach is not only concerned with a student's view of himself and what he values, but also to that of his environment in which he performs.

## **Design**

The cognitive strategy goal is designed to change Sam's perception of ability with regards to learning and achieving mastery. Sam believes he is competent due to rating his high abilities to the rewards of academic success. Connecting Weiner's attribution theory, Sam attributes academic success to his ability. Couple that with Rotter's locus of control theory, Sam believes he can control this success because he believes he is academically competent. His high value on performance and low value on effort plays a role in his lack of motivation and participation in learning activities and explains his behaviors that fail to achieve his full potential as a student. I hypothesize that a change in Sam's perception of attributing success to not only his high ability and low effort and change his focus to learning rather than performance can aid in his lack of effort and participation in the learning process. As the teacher I can intervene by providing and establishing an emphasis on learning goals (mastering content) vs. performance goals (getting good grades). Furthermore, I feel I can change Sam's personal self-worth in regards to his social acceptance by providing a safe, supportive, and caring environment that



promotes seeing effort as a positive thing that will help Sam in the long run and benefit him. Instead of exhibiting lack of effort and participation and using procrastination, I can encourage that Sam can enhance his social image.

### **Strategies/Rationale**

I feel that some of the classroom interaction between the teacher and students needs to change in order to benefit Sam. Variation in instruction can be associated with higher levels of motivation (Stipek, 2002, p.183). By having the students schedule one-on-one meetings with the teacher once a week, Sam will be put in a more “real world” scenario and have to schedule his meeting much like an adult and have responsibilities. The meetings will consist of conversations between the student and the teacher about certain topics that are being covered in class. Sam will be allowed to discuss and set his goals with me, as well as evaluate his own personal performances in the class. By having an personal conversation with Sam will not be able to copy any of his friend’s assignments and have to put forth an honest effort; which in turn allows me to observe Sam’s learning and effort. Participation will be rewarded to Sam instead of a letter grade.

By talking to the teacher one-on-one, Sam will not have to “show off” in front of his peers and act as if he does not care about school in order to be seen as cool. I am hoping that by having multiple individual conversations with Sam, he will develop trust in myself and we can form bond. The bond will help Sam to develop a deeper sense of motivation in his work, and also will help him transition in the classroom setting with his peers. Sam will no longer focus on his social status with his peers; but rather, will take greater pride and passion in being on the same level as his fellow classmates.

Beyond increasing the communication between student and teacher, I will also target his motivational beliefs by changing his goals. As stated above, many students are too focused on their grades and thus set their educational goals around performance, not the intrinsic or inherent benefits of learning (Brophy, 2010, pg 115-118). Thus, through the dialogue created in the one-one meetings, I can begin to better understand what motivates Sam; thereby, combining those interests to with his educational goal setting (Brophy, 2010, 71-94). As a result of this transition in thinking, I will hopefully be able to systematically change how he views and approaches learning which will help mold his cognitive thinking of his goals and behaviors

### **Expected Outcomes**

The strong link between self-perceptions of academic ability and self worth in our culture can be problematic for all students, even those who perform fairly well. In most American classrooms, rewards that symbolize success (good grades) are based on relative performance (Stipek, 2002, pg 80). This in turn promotes why Sam “self-handicaps” and underachieves in he classroom. Through encouraging learning goals over performance goals, providing a safe and supportive environment, and developing a positive teacher-student relationship, I expect to enhance motivation for Sam’s long-term academic and social goals for the future. This will be measured by Sam’s improvement in participating in the learning process through both performance in class and in one-on-one setting with me. Also, I will measure Sam’s goals and whether or not he achieved those goals frequently on a personal basis, adjusting or creating new goals after ones have been achieved. This intervention with Sam is expected to improve his outlook and approach to the learning process and furthermore his scholastic career for the future.

## References

Brophy, J. (2010). *Motivating students to learn* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Stipek, D. (2002). *Motivation to learn: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.