

WINTER 2026

# LEGACY

**TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION**

**Leaders of the Class: Motivating Work**



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The Worthy Educator

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## Leaders of the Class: Motivating Work

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It is important to foster a culture that is conducive to everyone's engagement in the four foundational leadership practices. This arises organically when all learners engage in the four foundational leadership practices. And yet, without these classwide conditions in place, only some learners will successfully engage in the practices. For this reason, you—the lead leader of the class—will leverage the four leadership practices yourself to foster the conditions that enable everyone to follow suit. In other words, you will regularly reflect on the classroom culture, set goals, experiment with strategies, exchange feedback, and advocate for yourself and others to foster the desired conditions.



In the Launch unit, students will internalize these leadership conditions, reflecting on how they look, sound, and feel. But before doing so, it is worth first reflecting on these conditions yourself.

### MOTIVATING WORK



“These kids aren’t motivated!” It’s a sentence we’ve heard—heck, it’s a sentence we’ve said—many times. It implies that the students are the underlying issue. But what if we added one word? “These kids aren’t *being* motivated.” That shift likely does not feel good. After all, you are already doing so much to motivate students. You deserve recognition for your commitment, creativity, and skill as a teacher. Plus, you know that if students are going to grow as leaders, they need to take responsibility for their own motivation.

This is all true. But it is not the full picture. In the Motivate unit, students will reflect on their emotions and identities to set goals that they are motivated to achieve. At the same time, throughout each unit, it will be your responsibility as the lead leader to ask, “What more can I do to motivate all students?”

Think about it this way: If you hosted a dinner party and a third of the guests didn’t eat the food, you wouldn’t say, “I guess they aren’t hungry.” Instead, you might consider the relationship between the diners and the dinner. Maybe they eat different types of food in their cultures. Maybe they have a sensitivity that makes the meal hard to digest. Maybe the food needs seasoning. Maybe they don’t feel comfortable with the other guests or the host (we’ll dive more into that issue when unpacking the safety to take risks). Dismissing a student as unmotivated is like deciding that a dinner guest just isn’t hungry. That could be true—or maybe you need to serve something different.



The first condition for enabling a class culture of leadership is the presence of work that is motivating, meaning that it is purpose driven, appropriately challenging, interactive, and identity aligned.

#### PURPOSE-DRIVEN WORK

When we visit classes as school leaders and as instructional coaches, we ask students two questions: (1) What are you doing? and (2) Why are you doing it? You might be surprised how frequently they cannot answer that second question, which explains why so many students are not fully engaging.

As humans, we are desperate to know the why behind what we are doing. Psychologist Ellen J. Langer (2023) writes, “In some of my earliest research, it turned out the simple word ‘because’ persuaded people to act even if it was not accompanied by any new information” (p. 142). The phrase “May I please use the copy machine?” yielded a lower success rate than “May I please use the copy machine because I need to make duplicates of this worksheet?”

For many students, it is easy to identify what are called *surface* motivational purposes: getting good grades, passing the test, earning a reward, or staying out of trouble with their parents. But while these types of motivations may work in the short term, they have zero positive impact on learning in the long term (Hattie, 2023).

To ensure sustained classwide growth, we need to help students connect with a deeper sense of purpose. Without such purpose, our pedagogical skill and interpersonal care can only take us so far. Psychology professor David S. Yeager (2024) finds in his deep research that “even exceptional teachers struggle to support students who haven’t identified their purpose for learning yet” (p. 205).



#### APPROPRIATELY CHALLENGING WORK

An inherently motivating task is one that presents the appropriate amount of academic challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Imagine Goldilocks finding the three bears’ homework spread out on the table. She picks up a task that is too difficult and becomes overwhelmed. Then, she picks up one that is too easy and becomes bored. Finally, Goldilocks grabs an assignment that is just right. She can maintain momentum toward her learning objectives, yet there is enough resistance to require her to really work at it.

The interconnected competencies of leadership cannot grow without resistance. Thus, we must offer academic endeavors that push students out of their comfort zones and into what psychologist L. S. Vygotsky (1978) calls the *zone of proximal development*. Within this zone lies “the sweet spot” of productive struggle “in between scaffolding and support” (Blackburn, 2018). Too often, some students engage independently in appropriate academic challenges, while others either never attempt challenging work without scaffolding or never encounter challenging work, period. Without appropriate challenge and support, the student who is below grade level will remain below grade level. Simultaneously, without appropriate challenge and support, the student who is above grade level will stagnate, slowly sliding toward the center. If we want to increase equity, we need to give every student academic resistance that will spark growth (The New Teacher Project, 2018).

How do we know if the academic challenge is appropriate? Our prescribed learning standards provide a helpful guide, as do the following questions.

Is everyone in the class experiencing frequent success?  
Is everyone in the class experiencing frequent failure?

From our successes, we learn what is working and come to see ourselves as capable of the task at hand. From our failures, we learn what is not working. If we let these lessons fuel future experimentation and achievement, we come to see ourselves as capable, not just of the task at hand, but of any task. For this reason, we hope that every student fails. (We bet you didn’t think you’d read that sentence in an education book.) When the work is appropriately challenging, they will fail—a lot.

#### SOCIAL WORK

As secondary teachers, it is tempting to perceive students’ social tendencies as a deficit (“I’m trying to teach, and these kids keep socializing! I want them to take notes, not pass notes!”). Here’s the thing, though. Students’ social drives are far from a deficit—in fact, they’re a superpower hundreds of thousands of years in the making. Back then, our ancestors were trying to survive an inhospitable environment full of woolly mammoths and saber-toothed tigers. At the time, our odds didn’t seem great. And yet, look around your classroom; you’ll see wall-to-wall humans and, chances are, not a single saber-toothed tiger in sight.

All right, pop quiz: What evolutionary advantage enabled our survival?  
Our ferocious teeth  
Our brute strength  
Our lightning speed  
Our big, social brains

If you've ever tried to fight a bear or outrun a cheetah, you probably know, through process of elimination, that the answer is D. Our brains evolved to navigate increasingly complex social situations. Those who were socially successful benefited from the connection, protection, and collaboration of communal life (not to mention the chance to reproduce and pass their super-social genes along to the next generation).

We are all social animals, and our social drives are particularly pronounced during adolescence (Knoll, Magis-Weinberg, Speekenbrink, & Blakemore, 2015). Beginning around the age of ten, testosterone increases in the bodies of boys and girls—so, too, does their desire to demonstrate their value to those around them. After all, on the prehistoric plains, establishing oneself as a valuable contributor to the community protected one from being ostracized and losing the safety that comes with community membership.

While this need for acceptance can be disruptive, it can be equally productive if we harness it. “Adolescent brains are so focused on social status,” writes Yeager (2024), “that within that context—when trying to impress peers or help others—the adolescent brain can match that of an adult in activities like advanced planning and making decisions” (p. 43). This means that the most motivating student work is *social* work.

In each unit, we offer ideas for interactive learning experiences that invite students to socialize with each other about academics. In particular, in the culminating Collaborate unit, the leaders of your class will collaboratively engage in a messy, challenging, interdependent, and authentic academic endeavor. Through this collaboration, students will work to earn peer approval by demonstrating their value to each other. What’s more, as you focus on fostering a safe and supportive relationship with each student, they will work to earn your approval as well.

Again, according to Yeager (2024), adolescents’ interest in earning status and approval applies to their relationships with peers, mentors, and members of the broader world that surrounds them: “Give young people meaning and purpose *right now* by asking them to learn skills to achieve something that has a direct impact on the community and on their social reputations” (p. 211). With this in mind, it will be your job to show how your academic discipline connects and contributes to society by offering academic experiences with authentic real-world relevance.

### PERSONAL WORK

*Jaws: The Revenge* (Sargent) might not have been the best movie of 1987, but its tagline—“This time . . . it’s personal”—has lingered in our cultural consciousness for a reason. The most motivating pursuits are those that feel personal. We have discussed the value of academic experiences that are purpose driven, appropriately challenging, and interactive. But these features mean little if the work does not align with an individual’s sense of self. For this reason, in the Motivate unit, we provide support for student leaders to reflect on how they feel and who they are: their group membership, beliefs, values, interests, experiences, and strengths. We will unpack each of these identity elements in The Foundation section of the Motivate unit (page 64) so that you feel prepared to tell your students, “We are going to do some academic work, and this time . . . it’s personal!”

### LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES



If you want a baseball player to learn to hit the ball, you better give them chances at bat. Similarly, if you want a student to learn to lead, you better give them leadership opportunities.

Believe us, they will take whatever chances they can get. Ever ask if anyone wants to erase the board or run an attendance sheet down to the office? It’s wild how many hands shoot in the air. Students are desperate for even the smallest opportunities to lead.

The positive impact is even greater when we build leadership opportunities—in the form of student voice and agency—into our academic coursework. Research shows that the “more educators give students choice, control, challenge, and collaborative opportunities, the more motivation and engagement are likely to rise” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 27). When we amplify student voice, we increase not only engagement but also student purpose and self-worth (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). We cannot overstate these positive effects. According to a Harvard study, student agency may be as critical as basic academic skills in determining student outcomes (Ferguson, Phillips, Rowley, & Friedlander, 2015).



This makes sense, and to prove it to you, we are going to take you on a tangential trip to IKEA (bear with us). In many ways, IKEA provides a productive pedagogical model as we seek to motivate students through academic leadership opportunities. We want our students, like shoppers, to leave our store with something new every day, and the nature of an IKEA consumer's experience can inform how we envision this transfer of knowledge and understanding.

Consumers do not arrive home with a couch; they arrive home with couch parts. After observing an exemplar in the store's model rooms, the consumer constructs their own couch with the support of the assembly instructions. (A little direct instruction never hurt anyone; 0.56 effect size per Hattie, 2023.) Suddenly, the person is more than a consumer; they are a producer, too!

And here's the thing: Because the consumer contributed to the couch's creation, they place immense value on the item. It is a phenomenon called the IKEA effect: *I am not getting rid of that couch anytime soon, because I helped build it. It is mine, and I love it* (Norton, Mochon, & Ariely, 2012).

The same phenomenon occurs in classrooms when educators empower student leaders to co-construct their own learning. If you want students to meet community

expectations, invite them to decide those expectations by collaboratively establishing classroom norms, as they will during the Launch unit. If you want students to achieve classwide learning objectives, invite them to chime in with their own learning goals—a major focus of Motivate—which then resurface in each subsequent unit. If you want students to experiment with strategies for persevering, communicating, and collaborating effectively, invite them to decide—individually and collaboratively—which strategies they think will work for them, as they will do in the framework's final three units.

Like the IKEA shopper, students need to be more than consumers of information; they must also be producers. So, in every unit, we incorporate opportunities for students to take the lead in building the learning that they will take with them. Think of student voice as existing on a spectrum (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). On the far-left side is *expression*—the opportunity to share opinions, objections, complaints, praise, and celebrations. On the far-right side stands *leadership*—co-planning, decision making, responsibility taking, and guiding collaborative processes. Through our leadership framework, students have the chance to express themselves, and increasingly, they will move to the right side of the spectrum, culminating their work with a student-led group project in the Collaborate unit (page 164).

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