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The intricate dance between motivation, goals and success in the performing arts: A guide for teachers

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Summary

All Teachers want motivated students who strive for and reach increasingly challenging goals. But perhaps everybody does not realise that motivation and goals are not something inherent to students.

This info sheet presents motivational climate characteristics that are task-involving and ego-involving and explores the importance of motivational theories in the supporting of young musicians and dancers.

All teachers want motivated students who strive for and reach increasingly challenging goals. But perhaps everybody does not realise that motivation and goals are not something inherent to students; instead, they are the product of student characteristics and teacher influence. As a result, there is much one can do to nurture healthy, long-term motivation and goal setting among performers. Psychologists have long been interested in what makes people tick, and in recent years we have seen a huge increase in the amount of research attention given to motivation in particular; for the purposes of this article, I draw on theories and findings from dance, music, and sport. In particular, I focus on the teacher-created motivational climate. A motivational climate is the psychological atmosphere of a training or performance situation, and reflects what you value as an educator. Are you primarily interested in success, or improvement? The two are related, but the distinction turns out to be fundamentally important.

Checking in: What do you value?

- >> John's main aim is to identify talented children and make them competitive – that is, be successful in competitions and auditions to conservatoires. The best students get the most time on stage at the end of year show, and he is particularly proud of students who have gone on to have successful careers, displaying pictures of them on the walls of the school.
- >> Jeanne's main aim is to help students be the best that they can be. Being better than other students is less likely to earn praise here than improving in relation to one's own previous standard. Those who have put in the most effort may be rewarded with more time on stage at the end of year show, but students get equal attention regardless of their standard.

Which one is more like you?

Although both John and Jeanne have students' best interests at heart, the ways in which they teach and interact with students will differ in line with what they value. For example, a teacher like John with a main interest in objective success is typically interested in "natural" talent, and believes that effort will only take you so far. Because excellence is the name of the game, mistakes are unwanted and students will wish to appear at their very best at all times. At times, they may be encouraged to compete with each other. Positive feedback is given when students do things "right" or excel in relation to others (e.g., pick something up faster than their peers), while mistakes yield negative feedback in an attempt to eliminate them. Such teachers are known as ego-involving. A teacher like Jeanne with a main interest in personal progress is typically less interested in the "natural" talent of each student,

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instead believing that working hard is the key to success. Because improvement in relation to oneself is emphasized, students are encouraged to help each other learn instead of comparing. Positive feedback is given in response to individual progress or sincere effort, and mistakes are seen as an integral part of the learning process. Such teachers are known as *task-involving*.

You are probably beginning to see how differences in what a teacher values translates into their class structure and feedback. Even more important is how these interactions impact on student goals, motivation and well-being. In fact, motivational climates exert powerful effects on performers (and, presumably, on the teachers themselves!). Here is a brief summary of such effects.

Motivational climate characteristics ¹	Apparent effect	Explanation
Performers who perceive the motivational climate as more task-involving...	...set goals and choose tasks which are suitably challenging for them...	...because they know that everybody is different, yet needs to work hard whether “top” or “bottom” of the class.
	...have higher expectations for success...	...because success is defined in terms of progress, which is always possible.
	...are better able to concentrate and are less anxious...	...because they know that what is most important when training and performing is them, the piece, and perhaps the audience – not other performers’ capacities.
	...feel more creative...	...because they know that their individuality is valued. ...and because they are encouraged to collaborate, not compare, with others.
	...feel better about themselves...	...because they can see that progress (and therefore success) is within their control, giving a sense of security.
	...find their teachers more supportive...	...because all students are valued equally and attention doesn’t depend on performance.

¹Research focuses on perceptions of the motivational climate rather than some objective assessment. Still, this is appropriate because we react in response to what we perceive is going on – whether that is in full agreement with the perceptions of others or not. Note also that, in reality, there tends to be aspects of both task-involving and ego-involving motivational climates in evidence, because teachers behave in varied and complex ways. Nevertheless, the predominant climate perceptions still make a big difference to performance & well-being.

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Motivational climate characteristics ¹	Apparent effect	Explanation
Performers who perceive the motivational climate as more ego-involving...	...sometimes set goals and choose tasks which are not challenging enough for them...	...because if they already feel like the best in the group, why work harder? ...and because if they feel as though they cannot possibly compete, why “suffer the humiliation of defeat”?
	...sometimes have lower expectations for success...	...because success is defined as outdoing others, which isn't always possible. This gives a sense of insecurity.
	...are less able to concentrate and are more anxious...	...because they worry about whether they appear “better” or “worse” than others.
	...feel less creative...	...because they they fear that their contribution might be criticised for being “wrong”. ...and because they fear being compared with others.
	...feel less good about themselves...	...because they cannot know whether success is within their reach, given that it depends partly on others.
	...may find their teachers less supportive...	...because more time and energy is typically spent on the “best” students and attention may therefore depend on performance.

As summarised above, there is ample evidence to suggest that task-involving motivational climates are far healthier than ego-involving ones. Much of this is because task-involving cues promote a sense of control for individuals, while promoting a sense that they are not alone – that it does not matter too much whether one is the “best” or not because everyone should be encouraged to set goals which challenge them individually. You can tell your students that this applies even if one is the very best in the world – indeed, if such a person compared their “success” primarily with others, that would certainly not encourage hard work or creative exploration of the unknown!

I do not try to dance better than anyone else. I only try to dance better than myself.

>> [Mikhail Baryshnikov](#)

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The person who follows the crowd will usually get no further than the crowd. The one who walks alone is likely to find himself in places no one has ever been before... To be distinct, you must be different, to be different, you must strive to be what no one else but you can be.

>> Alan Ashley-Pitt

A focus on individual challenge and effort also removes the sense of rivalry which can undermine all-important friendships and a sense of support. Instead, it promotes a sense that although perhaps only one person can be the “best” at a given task at a given time, many more can be excellent and successful. The arts are not a race!

Recommendations:

- >> **Set high expectations and encourage students to challenge themselves.** But, one size does not fit all: individualise and emphasise that everyone needs to work hard – just on slightly different things at different times.
- >> **Focus your energy on constructive feedback.** Don't waste your time on negative feedback or punishment, which are more likely to be counterproductive; instead, focus your (and your performers') minds on figuring out how something can be improved. This tells the performer that, even when there is a long way to go, there *is* a way in which they can get to their goal.
- >> **Show that you value your performers as individuals.** Giving everybody equal quantity and quality of feedback shows that they are worth your time and energy. Because development and progress are seldom linear and predictable, it also means that you do not overlook any “late bloomers” by writing somebody off too early.
- >> **Encourage different focuses of attention at different times.**
 - >> For planning, goal setting, and evaluation it is helpful to focus on **long-term goals**. *Where does the performer want to be in three months, a year, five years?* Then help performers break their long-term goals (e.g., getting a job contract) down into logical chunks (e.g., learn particular skills, take particular extra classes).
 - >> During regular practice seasons, before and after classes, it is helpful to focus on **medium-term goals** and individual improvements. *What do I need to do today in order to make another step toward my long-term goal?*
 - >> During actual dancing, singing, or playing it typically does not help to think of the end point or long-term goals. Instead, attention needs to be on **intrinsic factors** such as details of a step, rhythm, artistic intent, or simply enjoyment and being in the moment. Such a constructive focus helps prevent anxiety and promotes improvement in class, creativity and authenticity in performance.

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Conclusion

Teachers are important people who work hard to promote success. Motivation theories help us understand how productive motivation and goals can be nurtured. Far from a quick pep-talk to temporarily inspire lofty goals or boost short-term motivation, the promotion of a task-involving climate will help you and your performers in a more fundamental, long-term, evidence-based way. This entails valuing performers as people with individual potential which can develop with hard work. Nobody knows how far a person can go, but you can help motivate performers to set a goal of finding out by promoting a sense of control over progress – perhaps mixed with an appreciation for their art form as not just something to learn, but which develops in step with its practitioners.

Success depends in a very large measure upon individual initiative and exertion

>> Anna Pavlova

Further Reading

- Quested, E., Cumming, J., & Duda, J. L. (2010). The nature of motivation: a question of 'Why?'. Foundations for Excellence Infosheet 4 available at www.foundations-for-excellence.org/file_storage/thenatureofmotivationaquestionofwhy_1.pdf
- Redding, E., Nordin-Bates, S. M., & Walker, I. (2011). *Passion, pathways and potential: An interdisciplinary longitudinal study into dance talent development*. Trinity Laban research report available at www.trinitylaban.ac.uk/media/573037/laband_report_single_pages.pdf

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