Trying to be Practical, Liberally  
*A Theory of Instruction*

Since beginning my study of education at Swarthmore, I have had a few random conversations about educational things with my parents. Usually, these conversations will begin with a casual mention of my classes, transition somewhere along the way to a discussion about what I am studying, and then fall into a mini-debate or mini-lecture about the differences between what they went through as children in Taiwan and what American kids go through today. These discussions usually come back to talking about the intense focus and strictness of the Taiwanese school system, how different it is from the ideals of American liberal education theory, and how effective it is, especially when it comes to the natural sciences and skills competency. In one recent conversation, they pointed out that in their view, the biggest flaw in liberal American educational theory is the fact that much of it relies on students being self-motivated, which in their opinion is very nearly impossible. “Kids just aren’t motivated—all they really ever want to do is play,” they said, “It’s just not practical to wait for them to want to learn things. You’ll never get anywhere if you do.” My parents felt that kids who don’t care about school in the States fall through the cracks too easily and pass through the educational system without being challenged or acquiring basic skills. In contrast, the Taiwanese school system during my parents’ childhood years was extremely strict and competitive, and if a student was unmotivated, the social environment and teachers both made sure to beat (literally and figuratively) “motivation” into him. Whether or not one’s motivation was intrinsic or not was not particularly at issue—skills and knowledge were acquired, and that was the desired result.
I couldn’t help but agree with them at the time of our conversation. Though I could argue with them about the ultimate purpose of education, they seemed to have a point about motivation and putting theory into practice. Who are the successful students in America but those who are motivated to learn (by themselves, their parents, their peers, success, or other factors)? Can students who are not as interested or motivated to learn survive in a class structured around student interests? Can schools be helpful for students who are not motivated to excel academically? These underlying questions led me quite often throughout the course to wondering about practical application of theory. Is the kind of educational theory we learn about at Swarthmore, which values student interest so highly, possible or practical? What would it look like in the real world, where not every student is truly invested in learning? Though questions still remain, much of what we have studied this semester has helped to shed light on these issues of motivation and practice. These two areas will be the basis of my theory of instruction.

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In the non-academic world, the most basic places to start when trying to teach someone something are curiosity, interest, and need. If you are teaching your next-door neighbor how to get online, for instance, you probably won’t get very far if he doesn’t intend to ever use the internet. He may be curious and somewhat interested initially, but in the end, he simply does not need to know how to do it, and he can tune you out, nod politely, and go on with his life without remembering a thing you said. Teaching in school does not seem to be much different. Ideally, kids will be curious about the subject matter, interested in learning more, and understand the
need for learning whatever they are being taught. Ideally, in actuality, it is probably rare that every student sitting in a classroom will be such an inspired, go-get’em kind of learner. Chances are, most of them might be kind of curious in the material, some of them will be a little interested in learning it, and only a few (nerdier or more mature ones, however one might see it) will be able to see it as needed. Regardless of who thinks what, however, the students are there to learn, and it is only when students want to learn (and this wanting may be for a number of reasons) that real learning can take place. The question then becomes how the teacher can engage the students in such a way that convinces them (if only temporarily) that what is going on in the classroom is interesting or useful so that they will actually want to learn it. In other words, how can teachers work toward motivating their students to want to learn?

The first task for teachers is that of making learning in the classroom a real and relevant endeavor. Like the neighbor who did not intend to use the internet, most students will not be invested in learning things like algebra if they do not see themselves using it. In Heath and Roach’s study on after-school arts programs, they observe that counter to popular belief (my parents’ views included), kids “crave experience and productivity… young people expect to play many different roles, help make rules, and to be able to take risks by trying something new, taking inspiration from unexpected sources, and creating new combinations of materials, ideas, and people” (2000). They want to be able to do things, to produce things and create, and they will likely be invested in learning if they see the end goal as relatively immediate and tangible. The programs in this study allowed students to take part in real projects, such as neighborhood block parties and drama workshops to raise money, and these real projects required them to make real decisions, which rewarded them with real results. They became engaged in what Hull refers
to as “authentic tasks” (1989) and were able to see a greater purpose for what they were doing. The “authentic tasks” Hull discussed specifically were related to writing, an act which, like most others, is “a process that is by its nature embedded in context” (1989). Learning things out of context essentially results in studying inaccurate representations of them, and it does not make sense to teach things in such a disconnected way. Teachers should present material and structure classes in a way that lets students see whatever they are studying within real-world contexts. Project-based learning seems to be one of the best ways of practically doing this. Whether using math to build desks and chairs or using the pilgrims as a model for a class’ financial endeavors (Levy 1996), projects give students an obvious reason to need what they are studying. Promoting students to see purpose beyond the classroom is an essential part to getting them engaged in learning.

Another way to increase interest and motivation is to capitalize upon the social and community aspect of learning. According to some theorists, it is important to “[view] cognitive functioning as socially shared or distributed” and learning as “a process of transformation of participation… how people develop is a function of their transforming roles and understanding in the activities in which they participate” (Herrenkohl and Guerra 1998). Learning is essentially a communal activity, and how students take part in a group is intimately related to their learning. As students participate and engage in group work and discussion, they learn the processes of “constructing, monitoring, clarifying, and challenging perspectives within the classroom” (Herrenkohl and Guerra 1998). Vygotsky also talks about the social character of learning, emphasizing most importantly that each student’s ability to grow and learn is high contingent upon the environment, of which both other students and the teacher are an essential
Students have the potential to achieve intellectually, and it is only with the help, guidance, and prompting of others that this can happen. Thus, not only is learning communal by nature, learning in community is highly beneficial to students. Learning in community also helps increase motivation to learn in students. A large body of research shows that students become more productive and involved when working with peers and often feel “a sense of empowerment and strong interest” when doing so (Hidi and Harackiewicz 2000). When students work together, they are (in optimal cases) held accountable for contributing to the group’s effort. They are able to see their learning as both beneficial for themselves individually, but also as helpful to their peers. Group work also lets students interact with friends, thereby allowing education and socializing to exist together and thus decompartmentalizing the learning experience. Teachers should recognize the social and communal nature of learning and use it to foster motivation in their students.

A third important factor to incorporate when trying to get kids motivated and interested in learning is student agency over that learning. For most people, including students, having agency—in other words, feeling that one has control over certain things or situations—is extremely helpful and perhaps even necessary to nurturing a person’s sense of self. A person who is completely without agency, controlling nothing and only being controlled by others, is likely to feel powerless and discouraged, and that kind of discouragement often results in unwilling effort. A classroom setup that does not permit students to take control of their own learning will not inspire them to be invested in the educational process. They will feel like they are merely being told what to do and learn, and what Freire calls “banking education” will result (1970). Banking education is “based on a mechanistic, static, naturalistic, spatialized view of
consciousness, [and] it transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power” (1970). Rather than being able doers, students become passive recipients unable to act on their own learning. Logically, then, how will students want to learn or even be able to see the point of learning if they cannot exert any measure of control over classroom activity? Freire exhorts that rather than engaging in this passive system of banking education, teachers ought to perform “problem-posing education,” “adopting instead a concept of men as conscious beings, and consciousness as intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world” (1970). By viewing students as beings intent on being in critical relationship with a changing world, it is easy to see how important giving them control over their learning is. In Stigler, Fernandez, and Yoshida’s study comparing elementary math instruction in Japan with that of the United States, for instance, they found that the key difference between the two classrooms was where the focus of activity lay. In the Japanese class, student thinking was the mediating force behind classroom activity, and the teacher made lesson plans that explicitly anticipated student response and allowed time for reflection, questions, and discussion (Stigler et. al, 1996). The American class, on the other hand, did not allow as much student questioning and thinking to be behind the classroom flow, relying instead on what the teacher had planned to say and present (Stigler et. al, 1996). Since math instruction in Japan is generally more effective than math instruction in the United States, this study seems to support Freire’s concept of problem-posing education. By allowing students to truly think and question the world and therefore take control of the classroom, teachers can foster effective learning. Students will become actively engaged and
invested in their education because they feel respected and valued enough to be allowed control over it.

The important thing teachers can do to encourage learning, therefore, seems to be providing an appropriate and nurturing environment for the process to occur. This environment should allow students to participate in and actively take charge of authentic tasks that make the things they learn relevant and necessary, and it should make use of the communal character of learning, allowing students to help and challenge one another as they learn together in community. As Valsiner demonstrates with her high-chair example, shaping the environment is crucial for teachers desiring to see their students grow and develop. Learning is highly dependent on what kids are allowed to do (Zone of Free Movement) and what teachers want them to do (Zone of Promoted Activities), and these “zones” are mediated by the environment (Valsiner 1984). To be more specific, teachers should be providers of an ideal “workplace” for their students, supplying them with the materials, structure, and support that will free them to actively explore and question the world (Lindfors 1991). An important component to this environment is the existence of activities that will inspire situational interest within students. An environment that produces situational interest contains “certain conditions and/or stimuli…that focus attention and [results in] a more immediate affective reaction that may or may not last” (Hidi and Harackiewicz 2000), such as science experiments, field trips, or writing and producing plays. Though situational interest is often looked down on (along with extrinsic motivators) as shallow and even counter to the ultimate goal of obtaining well-developed individual interest or intrinsic motivation, studies show that developing situational interest is extremely important, especially when students do not have pre-existing individual interests in
what is being taught (Hidi and Harackiewicz 2000). Hidi and Harackiewicz conclude from this that “creating environments that stimulate situational interest is one way for schools to motivate students and help them make cognitive gains in areas that initially hold little interest for them” (2000). Another way to promote interest in students for “uninteresting” material is to provide extrinsic reward; though often vilified as fostering only cosmetic interest, extrinsic rewards have been shown to be useful in situations where students have little initial interest. In fact, “a combination of intrinsic rewards inherent in interesting activities and external rewards, particularly those that provide performance feedback, may be required to maintain individuals’ engagements across complex and often difficult—perhaps painful—period of learning” (Hidi and Harackiewicz 2000). Thus, creating opportunities for situational interest is essentially a way to attract initially uninterested students to particular subjects and perhaps pave the way for a more well-developed and intrinsic interest to evolve later on. Including extrinsic motivation is important as well, especially if seeking to maintain prolonged engagement with a subject.

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The theory of instruction that I have proposed above attempts to incorporate the ideals and principles of liberal educational theory (specifically, those that seek to honor the inner desire of every person to learn, explore, and create) while being practical, understanding that not every student ever really displays as much of that inner desire to learn as a teacher might wish. From this course, I have come to see the importance of motivating students, of drawing out and expanding the desire to wonder and learn within people, as well as the importance of using the environment to do that. In order to work toward giving kids motivation to learn, teachers should construct classrooms and curricula that make learning feel relevant, capitalize on the communal
nature of learning, give students agency, and inspire at least temporary interest. Though these efforts may not result in every student being “ideally” motivated, it is still a practical step toward running that dream classroom that is fueled by student initiative.


Addendum  
_Two Years of College and Twelve Weeks of Student Teaching Later_

I wrote this Theory of Instruction during my sophomore year of undergraduate study at Swarthmore. This past June, I graduated from Swarthmore, and just a few weeks ago, I finished a semester of student teaching at a middle school in the Philadelphia School District. Reading over this small treatise again, I am surprised at how little my philosophy and ideals about teaching have changed. In fact, my experience teaching and observing in a Philadelphia public school has confirmed many of these beliefs and concerns.

During my many hours in education courses, I quietly assumed that educational theory could hold little weight in the real, messy world of current educational practice. Despite visiting classrooms where progressive educational theory was applied effectively, I still found these ideals suspiciously “theoretical.” I wrote this paper to address that suspicion. Can progressive project-based education reach unmotivated students as well as motivated ones? In short, is it practical and pliable? I concluded that, with a healthy mix of situational interest and extrinsic rewards, it could be. In the back of my mind, however, I still wondered if project-based instruction could work in environments vastly different from the affluent suburban ones I had observed.

The school I taught at is part of the Philadelphia public school system. Because of this, all Language Arts teachers are required (or at least, strongly encouraged) to follow the Language Arts Core Curriculum. This curriculum outlines in a weekly pacing schedule exactly which skills and concepts should be taught from week to week, as well as the stories which should be used to do so. At the end of each eight-week cycle, schools are required to assess students’
understanding of all these skills and concepts on the district-wide Benchmark Tests. During subsequent professional development days, teachers are expected to evaluate this data and shape their teaching accordingly. Technically, this curriculum does give teachers some leeway (the District doesn’t specify exactly how each skill or concept should be taught), but the large volume of skills and concepts, combined with the limited amount of time given to each cluster of skills and concepts, leaves most teachers feeling extremely pressured. In an ideal situation, a Language Arts class would typically read one or two short stories in a week and learn three or four related literary concepts, in addition to covering at least four vocabulary words and a grammatical concept. In reality, not every student will understand the short story. Not every student will grasp the literary concepts at the same speed. Not every class will get a good handle of the grammatical rule at the same pace. It is not surprising to me, then, that most teachers end up pushing their students through the required content with lessons that show little relevance to the students’ lives and are, for the most part, boring. I found myself guilty of this several times throughout the semester. Who has time to develop a project-based learning experience that incorporates all the required skills and concepts when you only have a week to do it? You can argue that any committed teacher would make the time, but realistically speaking, most teachers (even the committed ones) also need to maintain an outside life. For many teachers, the only option is to use the textbook materials they are given and to barrel through each week, hoping that enough of what they’re teaching will stick so they can move on to the next week’s material.

When I think about the way education could look, I am honestly amazed at the fortitude and dedication that students in these situations possess. Even though the lessons are boring and the material seemingly irrelevant to their lives, many of them still do the work. Many of them
will read along with the story about a mongoose in 19th century India and take a multiple-choice test on it at the end of the week. Many of them will still sit through the grammar lesson on subject/verb agreement, even though the speech they hear all around them is rife with verbs disagreeing with their subjects. As for the ones who don’t do the work and don’t care -- well, part of me doesn’t blame them. Why memorize irregular verbs when you don’t see the need for it?

During my time teaching, however, I did see glimpses of the value and strength of bringing project-based learning and relevance into the classroom. I saw how a student who almost never turned in assignments worked diligently to write about an extremely important moment in her own life. I saw another student who also rarely turned in assignments write powerfully and convincingly to encourage her peers not to mess up their lives with drugs and alcohol. I also saw how surprisingly well a small contest, which built situational interest with extrinsic rewards, could encourage students to put effort into an assignment and help them learn something.

I have learned much from my experience student teaching that has further nuanced my “theory of instruction.” Because I have had some experience designing lessons and actually teaching, my understanding of motivation in the classroom is now richer, and I can now think of anecdotes and particular students when people speak of theory. I have come away from this experience believing even more strongly in the importance of fostering a learning environment that creatively motivates students and encourages them to build connections between their lives and the material they are studying. I have seen how dry and trying the alternative can be for both teacher and student. In the future, I hope to build in more projects and assignments that
encourage connections between student and material. I hope to take more risks with the curriculum and to be willing to leave the textbook behind whenever necessary. Rather than delivering distant and irrelevant information to students and trying to pep-talk motivation into them from week to week, I hope to build a classroom where students will be motivated to learn, intrinsically whenever possible and by situational interest whenever necessary.