Rewards and Recognition Spark Revision Writing

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If extrinsic rewards will spark student engagement with tasks of limited intrinsic motivation, such as writing revision, we owe it to the principles of best practices to draw forth curiosity and passion by every means possible. Including motivational situations such as contests, rewards, and recognition events to spark engagement in low interest tasks may tempt initially indecisive students, while driving students who are willing participants to perform at a deeper level. To revitalize the valid use of external performance motivations, more teachers can promote strategic activities tying core academics to student-oriented gains.

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Extrinsic rewards spark student engagement with tasks of limited intrinsic motivation, such as revision writing, and we owe it to the principles of best practices to draw forth curiosity and passion by including motivational situations such as contests, rewards, and recognition events. Sparking engagement in low interest tasks tempt initially indecisive students, while driving self-motivated students to perform at a deeper level. To revitalize external performance motivations, teachers can promote situations tying core academics to student-oriented gains.

Teachers know students are people, not devices. They cannot be programmed to achieve outcome standards, they must feel motivated and engaged, just like all other people; and, incentives trigger responses. Our social marketing exploits this concept everywhere we turn. In Education, schools have in the past successfully used extrinsic motivation and they are ever-so-slowly making a comeback. Decades ago academic contests, clubs, awards, and recognition events, existed alongside extra-curricular clubs, sports, and trophies. Intrinsic motivation without doubt, is fabulous learning, for students naturally wired that way; but one cannot help wondering what of the learning of those less self-motivated, perhaps their motivation may be sparked by extrinsic reward. Further, would students who already excel in the classroom experience heightened motivation through extrinsic reward?

How many of us belong to Kroger Rewards, points in store = cents off gasoline at their pump? How about Papa John’s Free Pizza Points, earn points per pizza order & receive a free large pizza? Office Depot/Max Rewards program?—Teacher rewards program? Has there been anything you’ve purchased lately and not been asked to complete a satisfaction/improvement survey? And the classic “for a chance to win”, “to enter our drawing”, “you could receive a…”; the strategy of motivation using extrinsic reward incentives have moved from appealing to casual retail customers to anyone who provides any public service—banks & loan providers, hospitals & health care, mail & merchandise delivery. Many of us opt to engage in the nuisance of completing a survey to be entered in a drawing for a chance to win. Sometimes, without being told “a chance to win what”?

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Conversely, maybe some of us are not motivated extrinsically; maybe we’re just naturally helpful or like to take surveys—did we decline the drawing entry? Do you think students who already excel in the English Language Arts classroom will decline the extrinsic reward situation?

Extrinsic motivators were proven effective in several meta-analysis studies (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000), which is sufficient cause for me to consider the usage as a valid strategy to motivate students into attempting undesirable tasks with the aim of attaining proficiency goals. Students cannot achieve learning goals if they are not engaged; if their attention can be attracted in the first place, the next hurdle can be confronted of keeping them engaged and moving forward in their learning. In the interest of re-energizing the use of extrinsic reward, the author set out to discover if offering rewards and recognition was still an effective method. To do so, the author designed and launched a teacher-led research experiment to spark students’ revision writing. To initiate the project, the Growing Writers’ Circle for the school year and solicited student volunteer participants to write a three-piece portfolio with revising conferences, a project that would include two extrinsic rewards.

While tangible rewards, such as money prizes may motivate some, others may be influenced by fame and glory. Lacking actual money, a writing contest offering cash rewards was selected. Hundreds of writing contests are available, many of which offer cash and scholarships. The contest of choice was the Letters About Literature contest hosted by the Library of Congress, structured for K-6 graders and awarding winners in every state. For the lure of recognition, an Authors’ Celebration was incorporated, hosted with refreshments, photos, and the praise of families, with plaques from the school board. Concluding first semester would be the letter contest event and the celebration event would conclude the school year.

It was asking a lot of students to create a portfolio: Their time, commitment, and effort. Beyond that, their efforts would be voluntary and they would not receive a speck of credit toward their grades, in fact, they would be out of the classroom during revision conferences and would have to work harder in those subjects during which they were absent. Also, these students would be new to portfolios and conferences, and, from researcher’s experience, revision writing is a task least-favored by students. However, a least-favored task was desired to most rigorously test the effectiveness of extrinsic rewards, and to further safeguard the integrity of the test, purely volunteers were wanted, they would benefit by nothing except the extrinsic rewards.

Portfolios would include three pieces: The first, a letter as contest entry, but what of the other two? Proven strategies of genre choice, meaningful purpose and wide audience demonstrate effectiveness in student writing engagement; it was proposed—students could choose any genre that tickled their fancy for the remaining two pieces; since it wasn’t for credit, it seemed only fair. As to purpose and audience, these were built in: purpose would be the extrinsic rewards, and the wider audience would be contest reviewers and celebration attendees.

By necessity conferences would be brief, but what else? A few formal parameters were necessary because results had to generate from student motivation. Conferences would be 10-15 minutes, once or twice a week maximum, and occur only with the general education teacher’s approval. Initiating and scheduling conferences would be left entirely to the students. The researcher’s interest included revision actions being student-led and believed the best results would be gathered by confining researcher comments to casual suggestions or hints they might adopt or decline, their choices would reveal the depth of their revisions.

For the research data collection, an initial survey was administered to test the level of interest among sixth-grade students: examining reading and writing as a past time, attitudes towards contests, prizes and recognition, and revision tendencies. To this group, was distributed recruitment brochures and flyers to solicit participation in the newly developed project Growing Writers’ Circle (GWC). Two volunteer recruits were
secured, students G. and N. For them, questionnaires were completed before each of the two extrinsic events and interviews were conducted after each extrinsic event to solicit and compare their perspectives, opinions, and practices. A conference journal was maintained to roughly assess their revision moves as either an editing type, such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation, or a deeper type of revision such as organization, word choice, and extension, as well as the quantity of conferences requested by each student. To conclude the research project, a dual-prompted questionnaire was administered to those students who had declined participation in the GWC in an effort to understand the reasons behind their decision. Perhaps, the reasons they had declined were obstacles that may be overcome by adapting elements of the project. If their reasons were oriented around school academics, then extrinsic situations could be created to maximize their involvement.

Extrinsic rewards and events may be the most potentially effective motivation for indecisive students in the initial stage of a task that holds for them merely mild or wavering interest. Indecisive students are also open to persuasion, their indecisiveness is a fertile juncture to leverage the use of extrinsic rewards to spark their participation. Extrinsic motivation could prove to be the deciding factor that sparks their engagement; and once sparked, engagement can be nurtured.

Extrinsic Events

Conclusions from the experiment showed that using extrinsic reward, such as the contest and celebration events, as motivation is an effective practice and did spark revision writing. Effectiveness may vary, sparking and maintaining revision engagement for some, while extending engagement for self-motivated students. Students expressed excitement, satisfaction, and pride with their work and with the attention they received from others. Utilizing strategic elements that students find valuable, such as extrinsic rewards, should be deserving of attention and be re-energized in academic planning.

Both students consistently instigated revision conferences for their artifacts, they were always prompt and worked with dedication, and they were enthusiastic about their revisions and final products. Both G. and N. unhesitatingly participated in research elements such as the questionnaires, interviews, and consent forms. They remained curious about the contest, asking for results about the winners, which were printed for display at the author’s celebration. They both coped well with not being selected as winners or runners-up in the contest.

G. and N. were presented with honor certificates at the honor roll assembly; these were printed early so they could add them to their displays in the Celebration Event. In preparation, G. and N. enjoyed designing the layout for their tri-fold displays and setting up the refreshments for their guests. Families attending the recognition event expressed pride and pleasure, posing for pictures and closely inspecting and reading student’s displayed work. They both coped remarkably well with being the center of attention, and in overcoming any reservations they may have had about having their work publicly displayed.

Researcher Impressions

Experience with this project has been indescribably rewarding. It was thoroughly enjoyed getting to spend time with these students, who were so eager to conference and were so involved in their writing; it was a real treat. As a lucky researcher, despite only two participants being snagged, there couldn’t be a better contrast between them; they are buddies and have some common interests, yet academically, they differ significantly. They both do well academically, but G.’s involvement in writing is considerably deeper than N.’s: he chose longer pieces to write, made more complex revisions, and worked on his pieces when not in school. Also
gratifying was to watch N. overcome his self-perceived shyness; which was never in evidence that could be observed. In fact, this year, it was N. who asked if the GWC project was going to happen; and I realized with a pang, I too would miss it not happening. That’s when it was known how truly rewarding this experience has been and that it would be a treasured memory.

**Research Strengths and Flaws**

It is significant that N., despite his declining positivity in writing elements, continued to participate in those very same tasks, at the same time as he consistently held high positive perspectives surrounding the extrinsic events. N.’s continued motivation confirms the researcher’s belief that use of extrinsic rewards and events sparked an initial engagement and motivated his perseverance; an interesting dual concept confirming the assertion that using them should be re-energized. It was a pleasant experience to note G.’s unwavering positivity in his perspectives across writing elements and extrinsic events; while he may have been naturally inclined, or self-sparking, to engage in writing and revising, it is intriguing to contemplate to what degree extrinsic rewards and events may have influenced the depth of his engagement in those tasks; especially if more time had been available.

It was both a strength and a flaw that time was in short supply. Having minimal time ensured conferences would be kept short. Short conferences were also a bonus due to students’ genre choice artifacts of differing lengths, contributing to differing quantities of conferences.

It was a good idea to begin the first artifact as a required letter genre because it was the same genre for both participants and of short-length. Beginning the project with the same genre helped oriented them to the idea of what to expect in conferencing, maintained the same short time of conferences, and fueled their excitement of entering the contest. By the second artifact, short time restrictions continued to be a favor, as students now chose differing genres; N. choosing a short-length, one page letter, and G. choosing a five-page story. N. finished revisions sooner and felt no need of further conferences; which provided more time for G. to have more frequent conferences while still on a short time-table.

Time restrictions were unfavorable in light of students needing to be excused from their regular classrooms. This meant students who had the ability to keep up with their regular classroom work and did not perceive the project as just more work to do, could be excused to instigate GWC conferences; potentially diminishing the number of participants from the start.

A resounding lack of volunteer participation in GWC could be considered a flaw, creating a very small study sample. The participation of only two participants did aid in being able to accommodate time for interviews, discussions, and frequent conferences. Having only two participants allowed me the luxury of reflecting deeply into the individual differences and similarities of the two students’ approaches to their portfolio work and to closely analyze their contrasting and complementary views, preferences, and opinions.

Surveying the non-participants did shed light on the reasons for their declining to participate and reasons that would influence their future participation if the GWC were offered again. While extrinsic rewards or events are effective means of sparking or extending student engagement in writing tasks, it may be unlikely to reverse student disinterest or dislike in such tasks.

It could be either a flaw or a strength that the GWC was a voluntary, extra-curricular activity. One non-participant indicated on the prompted survey, that the project not having a grade attached, was a factor in choosing to decline participating. If the portfolio writing project were built into the regular classroom schedule,
time would be assured and consistently given. Including the use of extrinsic rewards and events could also motivate students to willingly engage in the task. Making such an endeavor part of the regular curriculum would necessitate the development of an equitable assessment. In contrast, true student engagement is unambiguous when voluntarily contributed. The assessment/grade free context permits more literary freedoms and solidifies writers’ ownership. Both participants valued having genre choice over two artifacts and it was enjoyable for me to watch their pleasure as the idea of author ownership took root for them.

**Suggestions for Further Inquiry**

Extrinsic rewards and events have proven to be effective methods of motivation and are becoming more frequently employed across many contexts of education. Different extrinsic elements will motivate different students; some students are motivated through competing with themselves for personal best, some are motivated through competition with others, and some students prefer to compete as partners or teams.

A rich area to investigate is to discover how extrinsic rewards and events can be leveraged throughout a project-based task to motivate perseverance and collaboration, particularly a task generally considered by students to be unappealing. While student engagement may begin enthusiastically or satisfactorily, it often wavers, declines, or discontinues. This could be an ideal situation in which to apply a system of extrinsic rewards and events that are desirable to students; offered in a variety and offered for achievement and accomplishments.

Variables of the project were the extrinsic events, which leads to so many design possibilities, what if students were paired with a mentor providing an enrichment context to the writing process as well as develop the collaborative skills sought in academic outcomes. What if I’d been able to conduct regularly scheduled conferences of longer duration, like mentoring situations, would the personal context increase the likelihood of mentor recommendations being implemented by the writers? What if audience had included Internet publishing, or community/school newsletter article, or partnering with other writing classrooms or schools in our state or across the country? What could it mean for language learning students? Extrinsic rewards can so easily be adapted to nearly any situation, and at such little cost, that re-energizing their usage to maximize engagement that targets performance goals, is to me, worthy and valuable. It is hoped more academic competitions and extrinsic rewards will be used by teachers and supported by administrators; a return of debate clubs, spelling bees, quiz bowls, and writing contests, along with their just rewards of honor certificates, community recognition, award prizes, and celebrations for students, families, and communities.

**References**


