



Why Student Motivation Keeps Changing

A student can be motivated or disengaged depending on what happens in between.

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Research in Brief

A systematic review examined 80 empirical studies of situational motivation in academic learning. The researchers found that motivation is shaped by the learning context and can vary both between students and within the same student over time.

Three broad findings emerged. First, the learning context matters: the subject, task, learning environment, instructional design and social interaction can all affect motivation. Second, students' motivation can change from one moment to the next. Third, motivational factors such as self-efficacy, task value, effort, emotions and engagement interact in complex and time-dependent ways.

The review found particularly strong evidence that motivation can fluctuate within individuals. For example, self-efficacy may be more important early in a task, while situational interest becomes more important later. Peer support and classroom engagement can also influence momentary engagement.

This changes the practical question for teachers. Instead of asking, "Why isn't this student motivated?", it may be more productive to ask, "What is happening in this learning situation right now?"

✓ Try Tomorrow

- Notice when students' attention or effort drops during a lesson.
- Change the task, interaction, example or level of challenge before concluding that students are simply unmotivated.
- Ask students occasionally: "How confident do you feel about this right now?"
- Use feedback and small successes to rebuild motivation during a difficult task.

★ One Key Takeaway

Don't treat motivation as a personality trait. Change the learning situation and motivation can change with it.

Keywords

Situational motivation, momentary motivation, self-efficacy, task value, engagement, learning context, motivation dynamics



Original Research

Törmänen, T., Ketonen, E., Lehtoaho, E., Turunen, M., Zabolotna, K., Shubina, T., & Järvenoja, H. *Situational Motivation in Academic Learning: A Systematic Review*. Educational Psychology Review, 37, 56.