How to support student autonomy and enhance motivation

The extent to which teachers support students’ needs for autonomy has a major effect on the quality of student motivation. Teachers’ motivational styles have been described in research literature as either autonomy-supportive or controlling. Autonomy-supportive styles involve creating relationships that nurture students’ intrinsic motivation. The opposite of supporting autonomy is controlling or pressuring students to think, feel or behave in a particular way. When the learning environment is perceived as controlling, students’ feelings of self-determination and intrinsic motivation are diminished. They become demotivated and less engaged, which lowers both well-being and achievement. Students of autonomy-supportive teachers display more positive learning behaviours and achieve better outcomes than the students of controlling teachers.

Do you have a controlling style?

Research suggests most teachers adopt a controlling motivational style, at least some of the time. Teachers with a controlling motivational style prioritise their perspective over the students’. Teachers often offer their perspective to students when suggesting a strategy or outlining goals. While this is not always controlling, it becomes a controlling behaviour when the teacher’s perspective overrules the students’ through the use of intrusion and pressure. Intrusive approaches show a lack of trust in the student and a lack of patience to allow the student the chance to understand and solve the problem by him or herself. Without inquiring into the student’s perspective — why the student is doing what he or she is doing — intrusions into the student’s learning involve the teacher applying pressure for the student to do it differently. This lack of considering the students’ views is the controlling aspect of the teacher’s style.

Examples of a controlling style

A teacher takes a pencil out of a student’s hands and tells them they must hold it a different way.

A teacher crosses out all the passive verbs in a student’s writing and demands that they replace them with active verbs.

Teachers create a controlling environment when they impose deadlines, emphasise grades and performance, and set solution strategies and processes rather than allowing multiple possibilities for generating solutions. Teachers also indirectly control students by creating internal compulsions to act, through feelings of guilt, shame or anxiety, or the threat of the withdrawal of attention or approval. A teacher might say ‘A good student would revise her essay, wouldn’t she?’ Students feel that the costs of not doing what the teacher says are so high that they cannot choose to act differently. Thus their thinking and acting are controlled.

It can be difficult to avoid a controlling motivational style due to:

• the inherent power differential between teachers and students

• the teacher’s responsibilities and accountability for student outcomes

• possible perceptions of low intrinsic motivation in students.

Most teachers and parents believe that offering rewards (a controlling strategy) would be more effective than providing a rationale for the activity (an autonomy-supportive strategy). However, teachers who are positively motivated to teach (and therefore teach out of interest, enjoyment, a sense of purpose and with an understanding of their importance in students’ lives) tend to opt for an autonomy-supportive style.
What teaching style supports student autonomy?

Teachers with a motivational style that supports students’ autonomy listen to students’ perspectives and integrate these into instruction (rather than ignoring or criticising or dismissing them). They welcome and solicit students’ input into the lesson and support their initiatives rather than intruding into students’ goals and plans. For example, a teacher might say “Here is the plan for today. Does that sound like a good use of our time? Any suggestions?” Teachers might need to actively solicit input, for example, through conversation or using anonymous suggestion cards.

Autonomy-supportive teachers recognise that students’ feelings and ways of thinking and behaving have motivational potential. They understand that students’ interests, preferences and psychological needs fuel their motivation, and by finding out about these they can create classroom conditions in which students’ intrinsic motivations align with learning tasks and activities.

These teachers also share their perspective in non-pressuring ways, by offering information and strategies, and providing their rationales for the importance or usefulness of a given learning activity or task. They take time to listen, provide encouragement and helpful hints, praise signs of progress and hold off on giving advice until they understand the student’s goals and perspective. They provide scaffolding only when it is needed and invited. Students who experience a teacher’s supportive style have opportunities to develop a sense of personal autonomy in their learning, as well as have psychological needs (such as the needs for connection and recognition) met.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What sort of teaching style do you use?</th>
<th>Controlling style</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Autonomy-supportive style</strong></td>
<td><strong>Controlling style</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting the students’ perspective</td>
<td>Maintaining the teacher’s perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming students’ ideas, thoughts, feelings and actions</td>
<td>Intruding into students’ ideas, thoughts, feelings and actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting students’ self-regulation</td>
<td>Pressuring students to think, feel, or behave in a particular way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nurturing students’ intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Relying on extrinsic sources of motivation (i.e. deadlines, rewards, consequences, threats of punishment)</td>
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<td>Providing explanatory rationales for learning activities and tasks</td>
<td>Neglecting to explain rationales for learning activities and tasks</td>
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<td>Using informative and non-controlling language</td>
<td>Using pressure-inducing language such as “should”, “have to” and guilt-inducing criticisms</td>
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<td>Allowing time for students’ self-paced learning</td>
<td>Displaying impatience for students to come up with the ‘right’ answer</td>
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<td>Acknowledging and accepting as valid students’ complaints and negative emotions</td>
<td>Dismissing or overcoming students’ complaints and negative emotions with power assertions (i.e. countering with no-nonsense assertions, or translating the complaint into something more acceptable to the teacher)</td>
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The benefits of supporting student autonomy

A teacher’s support for student autonomy benefits students in many ways, enhancing their well-being, learning and motivation. Research finds that students who experience teacher support for their personal autonomy also experience greater levels of intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, positive emotion and psychological well-being through increased perception of control. They display curiosity, persistence and self-regulation strategies. They have better conceptual understanding as well as better grades, and are more able to process material at a deeper level. In contrast, students of controlling teachers experience a higher sense of coercion, poorer engagement, little ability to self-regulate, lower well-being and achieve less. The positive benefits of teachers supporting students’ autonomy have been found for primary, intermediate and secondary school students, as well as students with special needs and students from a diversity of cultures including collectivist cultures.

Teachers also benefit from developing an autonomy-supportive motivational style. Compared with teachers with a controlling motivational style, those teachers who use an autonomy-supportive style report a greater sense of personal accomplishment and satisfaction from teaching and markedly less emotional and physical exhaustion.

Does this mean there is no structure?

Supporting student’s autonomy by taking their perspective and adjusting teaching in line with their preferences and needs does not mean an unstructured environment for learning. Indeed, teachers that support students’ autonomy actually provide more, rather than less, classroom structure. Think of structure as involving the amount and clarity of information provided to students about what is expected of them and how they can achieve these expectations. Such structure may include communicating expectations and high standards, establishing goals, introducing strategies and procedures, providing directions, making models available to emulate, and giving feedback. Without structure, students are left with confusion about what they are supposed to do and how they are supposed to perform.

While autonomy-supportive teachers regularly introduce rules, procedures and high expectations to their students, they do so with the inclusion of the students’ perspectives, the provision of explanatory rationales for why following the rules would be personally beneficial, using informative and non-controlling language and communicating acceptance of students’ resistance. In providing structure, the teacher conveys his or her perspective (plans, priorities and goals) on student learning and therefore negotiates a balance between student and teacher perspectives.

How to develop an autonomy-supportive style

Start by working on becoming less controlling, by avoiding controlling language and behaviours. Be aware of the factors (e.g. the pressures of accountability for student outcomes or your low expectations of students) that influence you to adopt a controlling style. Being more mindful of these behaviours can increase your capacity to replace them with more flexible and adaptive behaviours.

Work on:

- **asking for and incorporating students’ perspectives**
- **welcoming students’ thoughts, feelings and behaviour**
- **finding out about the motivational potential of your students**: their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and connections with others, their intrinsic motivation, their preferences, interests, and personal goals and values.

It’s useful to also take note of students’ negative emotions, listlessness, passivity and poor performance or behaviour, using these as constructive information that can help you realign students’ inner motivation with classroom activity.

Work out how you can involve, nurture and develop students’ motivational potential in order to energise students’ engagement with the learning material. For example, you might discover that you can best support students’ motivation by allowing students the chance to realign the activity to correspond with their personal interests, or you could find that the best motivation comes through offering time for independent learning or research, or by providing a challenging ‘problem of the day’ or
personalising the lesson using technology or a choice of reading materials. Note that students’ motivations will vary with the subject, so learning about students’ motivational potential is especially important when introducing a new learning activity or topic.

- **providing ongoing cognitive support for autonomy during learning tasks**, by scaffolding students to be independent in problem solving, prompting students to monitor and evaluate their own work, and encouraging students to collaborate, ask questions and share ideas. These strategies sustain motivation for engaging with the learning material.

- **supporting students’ capacity for self-regulation**

- **providing information, strategies and rationales for learning**. Use flexible messages that are non-evaluative and content-rich. Ensure rationales are informed by your knowledge of students’ existing motivations. Offer hints and encouragement rather than providing solutions or telling students how to do it.

Research shows that teachers who start engaging in these instructional behaviours come to internalise a more autonomy-supportive motivating style, and thus instruct in ways that better support students’ autonomy.