

Critical Analysis of Rewards

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The use of rewards in the classroom is both common and controversial. While the use of grades, honor rolls, praise, and token economies are found in many classrooms and educational settings, research suggests that using rewards to motivate learning can be ineffective and can even damage a student's motivation. Even scholars who assert that rewards have their place in a classroom, like Cameron and Pierce (1994), acknowledge that rewards have their limitations and their drawbacks. After a review of the course texts, I conclude that in order to maximize student motivation to learn in meaningful and lasting ways, the use of rewards to promote learning should be minimized and limited to informational praise and private, after-the-fact celebrations of accomplishments.

Perhaps one of the reasons that rewards are so often used in classrooms is because they can be a simple and effective way to control behavior and “get students to do what they are supposed to do” (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014, p. 42). More specifically, Wentzel and Brophy (2014) found that rewards are most effective in “increasing the intensity or duration of effort,” and can improve performance of “routine tasks” that do not require innovation, discovery, or creativity (p. 49). Further, for tasks that are uninteresting or not initially valued by students, rewards—especially verbal praise from parents and teachers—can enhance intrinsic motivation or function as secondary reinforcers that generate motivation where there was none before (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014, p.46; Stipek, 2002, pp. 26-32). Educators can use rewards to accomplish more than mere behavior control; rewards can be used to affirm the behaviors that educators value and encourage students to value those behaviors. By making rewards contingent on high but achievable standards of performance and/or growth, educators can communicate to students that the task is valuable and that their estimation of the student's abilities is high (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014, p. 46). In sum, rewards have proven to be effective in enhancing performance of basic,

routine tasks, or uninteresting tasks; rewards accomplish this by attaching something of value to a previously unvalued task or by communicating that the task is valued by a trusted adult (the educator or parent that is giving the reward).

Although using rewards can be an effective way to modify behaviors in the specific contexts described above, rewards are ineffective and destructive to student motivation to learn in other contexts. For example, Deci, Koestner & Ryan (2001) found that tangible awards “significantly and substantially undermine intrinsic motivation” (p. 2). Wentzel and Brophy (2014) explained why this may occur: by attaching a reward to a task, the educator may undermine the inherent value of the task and the learner may “infer that...the opportunity to engage in the behavior is not sufficient justification for doing so, and therefore extra incentives must be added” (p. 45). That is, while rewards may communicate to students that the educator wants the student to engage in the behavior and values their compliance, rewards may *devalue* the task and communicate that the learning is a means to an end rather than the end itself. In addition to decreasing existing intrinsic motivation, the use of rewards does not promote motivation to learn when the targeted task requires innovation, “problem-solving or creativity” (Brant & Kohn, 1995). In fact, rewards can lower performance on those types of tasks (Brant & Kohn, 1995). Stipek (2002) summarized several other ways that rewards impede student motivation to learn: rewards can encourage students to avoid challenges, and can “lead to superficial learning behaviors” rather than behaviors that promote deep, reflective learning (p. 28). Finally, any positive effects of rewards on student motivation may be short-lived. Although rewards may be effective in increasing the frequency of the targeted behavior, when rewards are removed, the behavior may no longer occur (Stipek, 2002, p. 29). There is also no conclusive evidence that the behavior that is reinforced by rewards will “generalize to other settings” and

create a broader positive impact on student motivation to learn (Stipek, 2002, p. 25). Ultimately, the positive impact of rewards—especially tangible rewards—seems to be brief and limited in scope.

In light of the minimal benefits and significant limitations of rewards as a motivational strategy, I would suggest minimizing the use of rewards as a method of promoting motivation to learn. As an educator, I am most interested in fostering a love of learning and helping students grow into self-driven, independent, creative thinkers who take intellectual risks. Since rewards have been shown to undermine intrinsic motivation and to be ineffective for encouraging deep, creative, and exploratory learning, rewards do not seem to be in line with my goals and would be inappropriate in my learning environments. My aim is not to control behavior, but rather to teach students to monitor their own behavior and build lifelong learning habits. Therefore, instead of giving a reward for completing a mundane but necessary task, I would rather discuss the relevance of the task and then discuss ways that the student could motivate, reward, and monitor his/her own progress. As Deci, Koestner and Ryan (2001) wrote, my goal is to “facilitate people’s understanding of the importance of the activity...so they will be self-motivated to perform it” (p. 15). By using this approach, students can learn to be responsible for their own learning and develop intrinsic motivation that remains with the student and is not limited to the scope of the activity at hand.

While I believe that the use of rewards should be minimal, I am convinced that careful use of private, informational, post-performance praise is appropriate and can be used to promote motivation to learn. Wentzel and Brophy (2014) found that by praising students after the task is completed, “the rewards are seen as expressions of appreciation of effort or recognitions of accomplishment rather than as delivery of promised incentives”; this, in turn, can support

intrinsic motivation rather than undermine it (p. 49). It is also essential that the praise be informational rather than controlling, since informational praise promotes autonomy and ensures that the focus remains on learning and growth rather than teacher approval (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014, pp. 51-52). Informational praise serves as celebration and as feedback that arms students with the necessary tools for continued learning and growth. As such, informational praise is one reward that I can use with confidence to empower students to be autonomous, motivated, lifelong learners.

## References

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