

Researchers examine how teachers can increase students' interest and engagement in the classroom

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The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that only 73% of high school freshmen graduate within four years. For those students who continue their education at the collegiate level, slightly more than half (57%) earn a bachelor's degree and over 18% will leave college altogether. Although many factors can contribute to students' academic risk, negative emotions associated with learning—such as a lack of interest and engagement in their courses—could be a vital reason for students' disengagement, withdrawal, and failure in school.

Joseph Mazer's article, published today in *Communication Education*, explored how specific teacher [communication behaviors](#) can influence [students'](#) emotional interest, cognitive interest, and engagement.

Students' interest can be triggered in the moment by certain environmental factors such as teacher behaviors. Students who experience heightened emotional interest are pulled toward a subject because they are energized, excited, and emotionally engaged by the material. This increase in emotional arousal heightens a student's attention, making it easier to encode more information.

Mazer found that teacher immediacy behaviors stimulate emotional arousal in students, which leads to greater emotional interest and engagement. Teacher immediacy behaviors are enacted through verbal and nonverbal behaviors that generate perceptions of psychological

closeness between the teacher and students. Teacher nonverbal immediacy behaviors include the use of eye contact, movement, [facial expressions](#), and vocal variety, among others. Students are drawn to highly immediate teachers because those behaviors facilitate a sense of liking and compel the student to approach, rather than avoid, the teacher.

Students who experience cognitive interest are pulled toward a subject because they possess a clear structural understanding of the course content. Teacher clarity behaviors can increase cognitive interest because they make information more organized and/or comprehensible for students. Those behaviors can occur verbally, as teachers talk about course material, and nonverbally, through teachers' use of PowerPoint displays, handouts, and notes on the board. Mazer found that teachers can utilize explanatory summaries to highlight relationships among lecture content, use clear transitions to help students follow the lesson content, and implement visual materials to make abstract and unengaging material concrete and stimulating—building cognitive interest.

Mazer also found that students who are emotionally and cognitively interested in a course are more likely to be engaged in the learning process. Much like [teacher](#) immediacy and clarity, Mazer found that students' emotional and cognitive interest lead to greater engagement, including silent (such as listening attentively) and oral (such as participating during class) in-class engagement behaviors and out-of-class activities (such as studying for class, talking about the class with friends).

Teachers are communicators, immediately personal symbols of the educational process, and figures that can ignite in students an interest for a particular subject area. Teachers have in their arsenals a repertoire of behaviors that can positively impact students in ways that have immediate and long lasting effects on interest and engagement. Immediacy and clarity are two such behaviors that can have substantive

effects on students and promote a classroom environment where emotional and cognitive interest and engagement can flourish.

More information: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03634523.2012.731513

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