

# Removing Obstacles to Learning

## Notes

Slide 1 — Ganesha, one of the five most important Hindu deities, is the Lord of success and the remover of obstacles. He is also the god of education, the one to appeal to for help on passing one's exams. Humans seem to need a remover of obstacles when it comes to learning.

Slide 2 — Today I want to share with you some research on motivation and learning, and to try to understand how we, as teachers, might help support students in their learning.

Slide 3 — Peter Senge, in his groundbreaking book, *The Fifth Discipline*, makes this interesting suggestion: "Don't push growth; remove the factors limiting growth." That seems to imply that if obstacles are removed the natural desire to learn and grow will surge ahead. That also suggests that motivation to progress and learn comes from the inside instead of the result of extrinsic rewards or punishments.

Slide 4 — But most of the learning that takes place in American education is extrinsic. That means that teachers are responsible for motivating students—and often feel frustrated in their attempts.

Slide 5 — This is the result we are striving for.

Slide 6 — We ask ourselves how we can motivate students. We try to think of new ways, new tricks. Then we're disappointed when they don't rise to the bait.

Slide 7 — But we should be careful. It's not an either/or choice between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. We learn and grow through a combination of the two, in varying percentages. But what we'd hope is that students will primarily be intrinsically motivated to learn. Why? Because all of us learn better and longer when we really want to.

Slide 8 — Motivation comes naturally to us when it's something we want, when we are trying to accomplish a goal that is important to us.

Slide 9 — Sasha Obama's infectious enthusiasm for life is now front and center.

Slide 10 — Research is supporting the notion that our individual motivation cannot be separated from our context.

Slide 11 — People learn through their interaction with and support from others in the world. "We are more aware that to help a person learn may require understanding his or her thinking and emotions as inseparable from the social context in which the activity takes place." Ray Wlodkowski, "Motivation and Diversity," in *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, #78, p. 8.

Slide 12 — Our emotions are a part of and significantly influence our motivation. In turn, our emotions are influenced by our culture, says Wlodkowski. What inspires us, what discourages us, what compels us to try in spite of difficulties is a result of our cultural values and experiences. Be careful of using ice-breaker exercises for example: Asian, American Indian, and Latinos may find self-disclosure something they reserve for the family and close friends. "Without sensitivity to culture, we teachers may unknowingly contribute to the decline of motivation among our students." Wlodkowski, 9.

Slide 13 — One person working at a task may feel frustrated and stop. . .

Slide 14 — . . . while another might also be frustrated but tries again with renewed determination.

Slide 15 — What brings out that frustration or determination or joy differs across cultures. Cultures differ in their definitions of novelty, risks, opportunities, satisfaction, and gratification (Wlodkowski, 9).

Slide 16 — One of the most common challenges for teachers is disinterested or hostile students. In this situation, knowing how they experience learning is essential. If we can identify the sources of anger or apathy we can design activities that will be as non-threatening—and yet challenging—as possible.

Slide 17 — Stephen Brookfield notes that of all the pedagogic tasks teachers must face, getting inside students' heads is the most difficult—and the most crucial. Students perceive the same actions and experiences in vastly different ways. What is challenging to one is frightening to another; what is funny to one is insulting to another.

Slide 18 — This is the payoff in the classroom.

Slide 19 — In the end, with all our sensitivities alert, this is what we are called to do as teachers.