

# Exploring Links between Learning and Motivation

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## Research question

Might a Learning about Learning Unit help college freshmen assert positive control over their own attitudes and motivation for learning in a freshman writing class?

## The problem

College freshmen often find themselves at a loss for motivation. For many, this problem is particularly acute in a freshman writing class that is loaded with in-class collaborations and workshops as well as assignments that require preparatory study, planning, practice, trying new things, and making mistakes—all activities known to generate learning from a writing teacher's perspective but not from the perspectives of many traditional freshmen, who seem unaccustomed to the many ways of class learning as well as the role they must play in understanding and taking responsibility for their own motivations for learning.

## The Context

The intervention and data-gathering phases of this Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research project took place at the University of Wisconsin—Superior in fall, 2014. Participating were a total of 23 students enrolled in what was, for them, a required class. Seventeen were enrolled in a section of College Writing I and six were enrolled in a section of First Year Seminar (FYS) 116, a General Education core equivalent to College Writing I.

## Intervention

A three-week Learning about Learning Unit was created in order to provide students with explicit opportunities to read about, discuss, understand, and take control of their own attitudes toward class as well as their motivations for class learning. The unit, featured the following activities:

- Reading excerpts of two books—*The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* by educational psychologists Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton, and Richard A. Swanson, and *Brain Rules* by neurologist John Medina. Both texts are about what learning is and how it occurs.
- Writing about major concepts presented in the reading assignments, and, for the unit's Major Essay Assignment, writing a narrative-descriptive essay about each student's favorite, out-of-classroom learning activity. The essay assignment was designed to generate mindful awareness of the many contexts and ways in which students have engaged in the joys of learning.
- Whole-class and small-group discussions, during which students shared ideas about motivations for learning. For example, former high school football, tennis, and soccer players explained that grueling practice drills are not done for pleasure or for love of the sport; they are done for extrinsically motivated purposes such as pleasing the coach in order to play in games. Such conversations helped students discover how practicing a sport as well as other out-of-class learning activities are similar to working hard on major assignments in order to win good grades.



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## Three-Method Data Gathering

John W. Creswell's three approaches to data gathering—qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods—were used for this project.

*The qualitative approach* consisted of one-on-one interactions with the instructor/researcher as well as the in-class Quick Write assignment, which was administered at Time 1 and again at Time 2. The Quick Write asked students to spend 10-15 minutes writing about the extent to which he or she felt capable of investing time and effort in class learning as well as the extent to which he or she had taken on responsibility for class learning.

*The quantitative approach* featured a survey that students took at Time 1 and again at Time 2. Questions were from the motivation section of the "Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ)," which seeks Likert-scale ratings of students' motivations. Designed for class-specific as opposed to whole-campus use, the survey was developed at the University of Michigan by Paul R. Pintrich et al. According to Teresa Garcia Duncan and Wilbert J. McKeachie, the MSLQ is often used by various researchers studying student motivations, including many who used the survey to assess class interventions.

*The mixed methods* included gathering both qualitative and quantitative data and, in the case of this project, identifying convergences where data from the two types of approaches verify one another.

## Discussion

The MSLQ, according to Garcia and Pintrich, has two parts that assess motivation. One part measures motivation in terms of expectancy or the extent to which students believe that they can "accomplish a task." The other part measures motivation in terms of both commitment and value regarding "the reasons why students engage in academic tasks" (11).

Self-efficacy, one of the MSLQ expectancy components was THE key to understanding motivation among the students who participated in this study. As defined by Pintrich, self-efficacy consists of students' beliefs about "their capability to do course work" (397), and it provides an explanation for the many individual gains and losses that characterize this study's survey data.

The idea that self-efficacy is crucial to understanding changes in students' motivations is consistent with what other researchers have found. Jody E. Jessup-Anger, for example, suggests that students who focus on their ability to perform are extrinsically motivated and see their own intelligence as "fixed." When confronted with a difficult assignment, these performance-oriented students may "respond in a helpless manner by trying to avoid challenge or save face" (103). Similar ideas are expressed by British psychologists Mercè Prat-Sala and Paul Redford, who have found that students with low self-efficacy adopt "worse study strategies over time" (296). Pintrich uses the term "self-handicapping" to explain how students who are low on self-efficacy might fall into a downward spiral of decreased effort and procrastination (396).

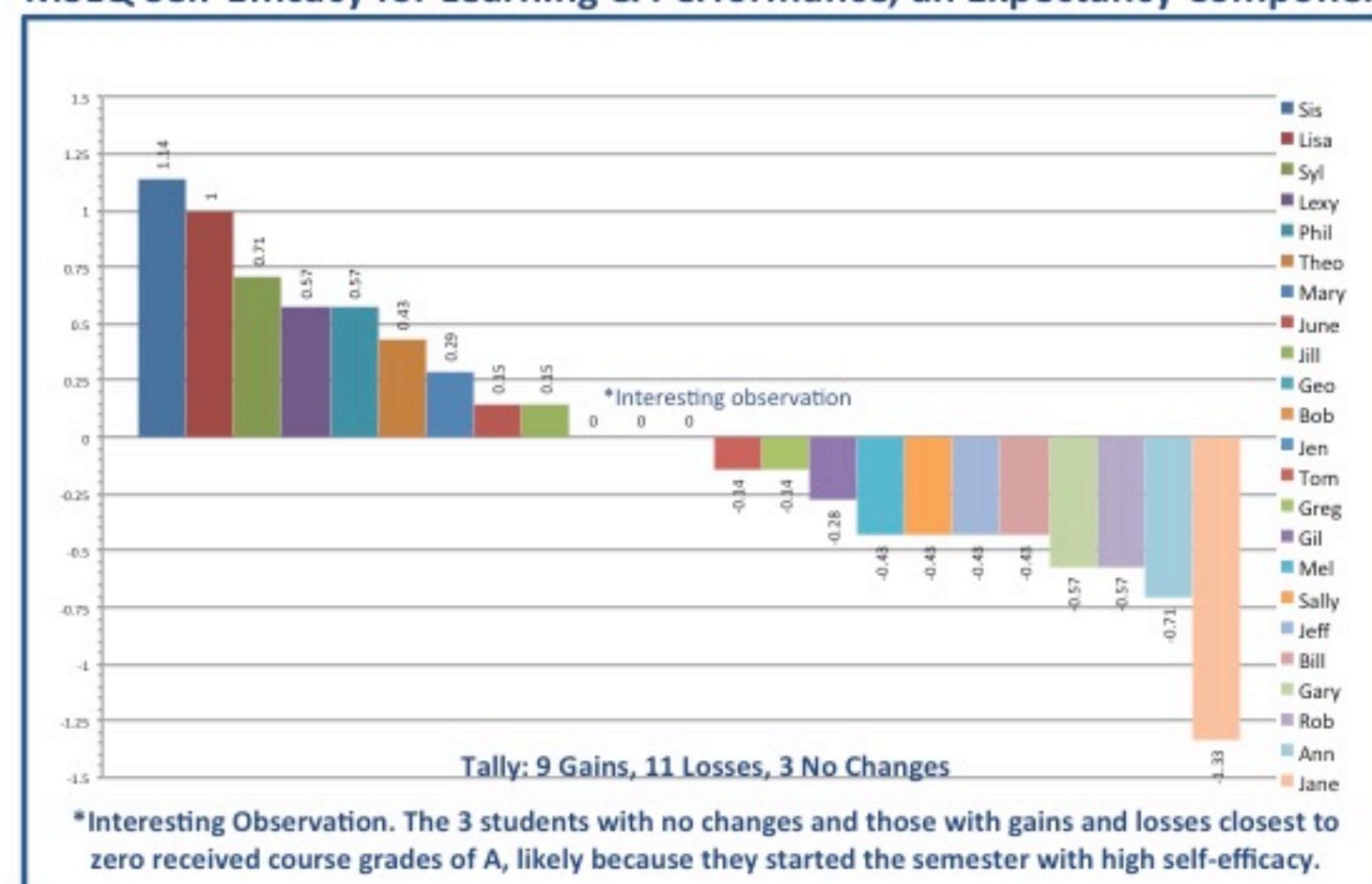
## Conclusion

The answer to this project's initial question is "Yes." Nine of this project's 23 student participants started the Learning about Learning unit as marginal college writers. As one told this instructor, "I've never written anything like this; I don't know what to do." Yet these nine were determined. Each sought help, and, in less than a month, gained in self-efficacy as well as writing ability. It is too bad that others who needed to gain in self-efficacy did not; yet they likely could have. At the end of the intervention unit, when asked how they get motivated for class work, not a single student could suggest a strategy. A question for further research, then, is, "How can an instructor of college freshmen promote learning about and practicing effective motivational strategies for class learning?"

## Quantitative Results

### Differences between Times 1 and 2

#### MSLQ Self-Efficacy for Learning & Performance, an Expectancy Component



### Explanation of MSLQ Self Efficacy Questions

Responses to questions about self-efficacy, as with the other MSLQ components, were sought on a 6-point Likert scale, with the lowest rating meaning "not at all true of me" and the highest meaning "entirely true of me." A one-point change between the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys indicated a change of 16.67%.

Here, from the MSLQ, are the Self Efficacy for Learning and Performance questions used by this research project:

- Q-5. I believe I will receive an excellent grade in this class.
- Q-6. I'm certain I can understand the most difficult material presented in the readings for this course.
- Q-12. I'm confident I can understand the most complex material presented by the instructor in this course.
- Q-20. I'm confident I can do an excellent job on the assignments and tests in this course.
- Q-21. I expect to do well in this class.
- Q-29. I'm certain I can master the skills being taught in this class.

### Tallies for Other MSLQ Components of Motivation

Control of Learning Beliefs, an expectancy component: 6 Gains, 13 Losses, 4 No changes  
Task Value, a value component: 5 Gains, 13 Losses, 5 No Changes  
Intrinsic Goal Orientation, a value component: 6 Gains, 10 Losses, 7 No changes  
Extrinsic Goal Orientation, a value component: 6 Gains, 12 losses, 5 No Changes  
(Test Anxiety, an affective component of motivation on the MSLQ, was not included in this project's survey.)

## Qualitative Data: In Students' Own Words

"Some days I have no intention of even paying attention in class. . . The only thing that I'm lacking is motivation." Time 1

"I often enjoy class learning, so that helps me to stay motivated at putting in the time and effort." Time 2

"I know I can learn! I just need to prove that to myself, my parents, my teachers, and others. I am sick and tired of not getting good grades and what not just because I don't do it." Time 1

"I am not so curious about learning this material. I only took this class for the requirement." Time 2

"Class learning is important to me because it is the only way that I will reach my goal of finding a good career in the future." Time 1