

How can teachers help their learners to find motivation?

In December 2021, we caught up with Dr Paul Tully, Professionalism Manager at the ETF for an interview. An expert in education with over 20 years' experience working in colleges, teacher training and management within the FE sector, Dr Paul Tully shared with us the ways in which teachers can work with learners to help them find motivation, and stay motivated, at a time of year when motivation itself can be absent.

Here, we collated five tips from our chat with Dr Paul Tully to help maximise motivation to kick-start the year.

TIP 1: Go 'off-script' and make the first two weeks really engaging

After Christmas, our brains will take some time to re-engage with work. Be gentle. Consider both yourself and your learners. Avoid plunging into mock exams or formal assessments at the start of term, instead, use the time to re-engage learners returning from their holidays. Don't be afraid to deviate from your scheme of work to help motivate your learners, but equally, be clear what you want to achieve with them at the start of term. Be creative, only your imagination will limit these things.

With Covid restrictions still in place you will need to consider your options. If you can't organise a field trip, or a trip to the library, try WebQuests, in-class treasure hunts or small project groups. Use debates, topical discussions, investigations, or interesting stories to get learners' buy-in at a time when learners can feel vulnerable and course retention rates can drop.

TIP 2: Think of the bigger picture

Do not lose sight of the bigger picture and ensure sessions following the first week or two begin to focus on what learners need to achieve, including their assessment outcomes. Whilst the first couple of weeks might offer learners a gentle re-introduction to the classroom after their Christmas break, they are likely to become anxious if sessions do not eventually begin to link back to preparation on passing their course. This is often their passport to new career and progression opportunities. Learners will want to know where and how their sessions contribute to this objective.

Once the learners are settled into their routine again, switch their focus back to their assessment needs. Ensure the sessions deal with their questions and anxieties around assessment and exam performance as well as broader aspirations around work goals or further/ higher education requirements. When training learners can measure themselves against the assessment criteria, it means that they have the potential to become experts in self-monitoring. This is a key ingredient to supporting their development.

TIP 3: Prioritise pastoral education

The period up until and just after the February half-term is a time when learners can feel particularly vulnerable. In the period leading to exams, learners can lose self-confidence in their ability to complete the course or progress into work or higher education. This is even more relevant now when there are full cohorts of learners who have no experience of sitting an exam.

As emotional difficulties rise to the surface, extremely important pastoral work must take place. This will ensure learners have the confidence to go forwards and plan their work, so they are ready for the upcoming period of assessment. As hard as it can be, try to factor in one-to-one time with learners, to set targets and address concerns they may have over their work. This time will help learners to overcome any fears or doubts they may have and re-motivate them to keep going.

TIP 4: Anticipate obstacles when planning

When writing up schemes of work, reflect on the times of year where obstacles may arise, where learners may, as mentioned in tip three, feel vulnerable and need extra attention, or when exams are around the corner. It's best to factor-in times when learners are likely to be on work experience and avoid delivering the most important content on these weeks. Plan out an engaging curriculum which links back constantly to the assessment criteria. In doing so, your own confidence will increase, as you know exactly what is coming up in the next few weeks, and learners have confidence that you are in control. A lesson can be as interesting as possible, but if it does not link back to the bigger picture, to exam and assessment outcomes, learners will begin to lose confidence in you as a teacher.

TIP 5: Collaborate with colleagues

Working as part of a small team can boost your own motivation, and that of colleagues. Take time out to have a coffee with a colleague or your team about their approach or solution to a problem you may be experiencing. The post-Christmas period is often an excellent time to kickstart those peer-to-peer conversations. Share with them your ideas, get their views, and feedback, and take an interest in how other colleagues are approaching similar challenges, all of which can lead to vastly improved sessions and a boost to a teacher's confidence.

A conversation with the team about a topical issue or current news item can spark discussion and conversation with learners, especially when learners are also encouraged to share their own 'hot topics'. When a learner feels their views matter, and that there is a forum for these to be heard, it can be an empowering feeling. Making education relevant, in this way, allows the outside world to be brought into the classroom, which contextualises and demystifies the process of learning, so that it is grounded in real, personalised stories that learners can relate to.

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