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# THE RELUCTANT LEARNER

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**Behavior Science Press**

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## A Tale of Two Students

Educators from elementary to secondary levels have met Bill Bright and Sam Slack, both of whom are typical students. We recognize their traits. The first student, Bill Bright, comes to class on time, has his homework done, eagerly raises his hand to answer questions, volunteers to go to the board, and does his work neatly. His teachers say he is a "motivated" student, and they love having him in class. The other student, Sam Slack, comes to class tardy (when he comes at all), seldom completes his homework, sits in the back row, and daydreams. His teachers say he is an "unmotivated" student, and it is difficult to get him interested in anything.

Bill Bright made A's and B's and passed easily to the next grade. Sam Slack made D's and F's, failed, went to the principal's office, became a behavior problem, and is now on the "dropout track." Sam Slack may well be lost as a member of the student community and possibly as a productive member of society – a society that places a high value on formal education as the entry ticket to most jobs and careers.

## Myths of Motivation

Why are some students motivated and some not? Educators have often said, "Some have it, and some don't," as if motivation were genetically imprinted. This view is the "innate ability fallacy" – the false belief that performance is mostly a function of innate abilities. Such quick and easy answers do not tell us much about the nature of motivation, about what can be done to increase motivation, or even why so many people become **unmotivated**.

Motivation for learning is not always tied to basic ability. Many students with apparent ability are not motivated for study, and many students with more limited ability are highly motivated for study. We cannot correlate motivation with cultural advantage or deprivation because some children with every advantage become dropouts, and children from deprived backgrounds become Rhodes Scholars, though these are often the exceptions to the rule. We often characterize motivation as a mysterious source of energy, but how it is created and how it evolves seem to defy understanding.

Some educators and psychologists believe that the source of motivation is an **inner drive**, the inner desire to achieve and get ahead. Others maintain that motivated people commit themselves to purposes, goals, and ideals; and this **commitment** spurs their achievement. However, these statements simply describe what we call motivated behavior; they do not tell us how and why "some have it and some don't." Nonetheless, many people – professional and laypeople alike – hold fast to the notion that motivation is an energy or drive that emanates from

**within** a person. If we really believe that, then we might as well stop trying to increase Sam Slack's motivation; perhaps he is doomed because he does not have that "commitment," or that "inner drive." This conclusion presents us with a rather bleak picture; fortunately for Sam Slack, it is a false one. We **can** motivate our students to learn. We can help them succeed. But how should we do this?

The most typical approach to motivation assumes that each student has within him or her, if we can only find it, a spark, however faint, that can be fanned into a flame for learning. But sporadic efforts to fan this hypothesized interior spark may or may not help the student to any great extent. We may also tend to underrate our influence on the student, or shift blame to the student when our efforts do not seem to work. In fact, motivation is not an "inner spark". Rather, students become motivated to learn primarily as a result of outside influences. The better organized and directed these outside influences, the more likely the student is to succeed.

## The Negative Approach to Motivation and Why it Will Not Work

Often, unmotivated students exhibit behavior that competes with the teacher's efforts to teach. Frequently, such students do not attend to instruction, nor do they participate in regular classroom exercises. Being "off-task," they will wander about the class, talk inappropriately to other students, and engage in a variety of disruptive behaviors.

Naturally, a teacher will make every attempt to control such incompatible behavior. After all, how is it possible to talk about positive motivation without first getting students to focus and attend to instruction? The use of aversive measures becomes the "treatment of choice" for misbehavior. The teacher might take away points, embarrass the student, send the student to the principal's office, take away privileges, or perhaps isolate the student.

The use of aversive consequences for undesirable behavior has a long history in education – all the way back to antiquity (Marrou, 1956). Education and corporal punishment existed as much with the Hellenistic Greek as it did in early Jewish and Egyptian cultures during the time of the Pharaohs. "To hold out the hand for the cane" was an incisive way of saying "Study!" With the introduction of public education during the 1800s, control of student learning and behavior was managed largely by punishment and the threat of it. Punishment took the form of correcting disruptive behavior. Sometimes this correction was a mild admonishment or sarcastic belittling. Other times, teachers used the cane, the strap or, in the case of younger children, simply a spanking. This sort of discipline reached its peak in many parts of the U.S. during the 1930s and began to wane after World War II. Laws and regulations were instituted to control student abuse in modern times; and benign alternatives to physical punishment were adopted, such as referrals to mental health centers or to substance abuse programs.

Caning and paddling of students by school officials for any reason is not allowed in most schools in the U.S. today. However, the teacher and administrator are permitted to use other forms of punishment, such as threats, sarcasm, more homework, suspension, and the ultimate punisher, failure.

However, the power of aversive practices has eroded over the past thirty years – they simply do not work like they used to. Sam Slack still cuts class, avoids studying, and disrupts other students. Repeated verbal beratings that are not followed by other more powerful consequences may, over time, elicit only a shrug of quiet acceptance from students like Sam. Such reactions follow the psychological principle of extinction, which states that a stimulus loses its power when repeated without any sort of consequence, be it negative or positive. In addition, parents may not support the school's punishment measures; and this further weakens the power of whatever consequences might be implemented.

Clearly, aversive measures, or punishments, lose their power to control undesirable behavior (Matson & DiLorenzo, 1984). As educators have seen, punishment has side effects such as student hostility, resentment, and "dropping out" to avoid punishment. Though corporal punishment has in effect been eliminated in the United States, verbal and psychological punishment has expanded to take its place; and this type of punishment is equally ineffective in the long run. Nevertheless, whether the teacher punishes him or not, Sam Slack still sits, sullen and combative, in the back of the classroom.

Often punishment aggravates rather than eliminates the behavior. Obviously, punishment is not a successful or lasting method for controlling behavior, simply because it lacks the power to build new, positive behaviors or to reinforce desirable behaviors that already exist. Even if Sam becomes less disruptive, he is unlikely to embark on a learning adventure without positive consequences.

## An Alternative to Punishment

What we need is a revolution in our thinking about how to manage students' behavior. Sam Slack does not do his work. He has given up. If he has not yet dropped out of school physically, he has dropped out mentally and emotionally. As his name suggests, he has slackened; he has lost the motivation that would compel him to learn. In contrast, Bill Bright can be counted on to be sharp, attentive, and responsible. This is because Bill has received frequent, if not continuous, positive reinforcement for his attention and performance. By contrast, Sam has received punishment upon punishment, failure upon failure. It is therefore a natural consequence that Sam's behavior remains negative or inappropriate.

But what if Sam Slack were given an assignment he could do well? What if there were math problems he could complete rapidly, with a score of 90%? If he couldn't write an error-free paragraph, what if he could write three correct sentences and get an A on an assignment, probably for the first time in months, or even years? What if, for once, he could receive recognition and approval from his teacher for work he could actually complete well? These scenarios would reinforce both Sam and his teachers. Sam would feel that he had succeeded, and his teachers would feel they had succeeded. Sam's attitude toward school might change to one of acceptance, and his behavior would improve with every perceived success. This success will encourage both his attention and learning. If we changed our thinking to emphasize a model of **positive reinforcement** rather than punishment, we could create these kinds of experiences for

Sam. The model based on positive reinforcement is more humane and, most critically for educators, it **works**. It clearly works far better than punishment.

The particular model of punishment used now in schools crowds out the development of procedures that could lead to more effective behavior management and positive motivation. Constant punishment and reminders of failure achieve nothing; instead, they cause withdrawal, promote low self-esteem, and shut down a student's desire to listen or learn. These are the very symptoms exhibited by Sam Slack. Although there are times when firm correction is momentarily necessary to maintain order and control, it is when punishment becomes pervasive and chronic that real harm is done. These practices must be changed. In fact, as the teacher builds positive behavior by reinforcing it, the need for punishment can and should be eliminated.

## Rejecting the Punishment Model

To start our thought revolution, we should begin by rejecting punishment as a regular practice. Here are four good reasons:

1. Most undesirable behaviors can be eliminated without the use of aversive consequences.
2. The results of punishment frequently create undesirable side effects, including increased aggression, resentment, anger, and vandalism. The student becomes sullen, unresponsive, and his rate of learning drops off.
3. For punishment to have the maximum effect, it must be swiftly and surely carried out. However, because of certain cultural, economic, and family changes, school and family backup of punishment may be inadequate or non-existent.
4. Punishment is a poor builder of new skills. Positive reinforcement is far superior.

Once we reject the punishment model, more effective, positive techniques for management of behavior are available to us. Motivation is not a mysterious wellspring dried up in Sam Slack and running freely in Bill Bright. Their motivation or lack of motivation is the result of the ways their environments have responded to them, as well as the ways they have responded to their environment.

## Behavioral History and Early Environment

How do we recognize motivation in students? It is easy to see motivation in their performance and their behavior. Motivated students are usually on task. They are eager to learn and eager to show what they have learned. They are the Bill Brights of any classroom. But how did they get that way? And why aren't the Sam Slacks, also found in any classroom, motivated in a similar fashion? Actually, Sam *is* motivated. But his motivation is for different things, and he is motivated by different people in different settings. Sam Slack may be seeking attention from his classmates, who will laugh at his antics, or admire his defiance of authority. Or, his audience may be the "boy-gang," a quasi-delinquent group on their way to serious misdemeanors and crimes.

If Bill Bright has home support, which is likely, and Sam Slack does not, which is also likely, it is probable that their current behavior patterns began early in their lives. The "behavioral history" of both is important to our understanding of their current educational performance. A relevant study can shed light on this matter. This study shows that students who come from an economically deprived background bring to their first day of schooling only 60 hours of home training and experiences that are related to school performance. Kids from middle-class families, on the other hand, bring 1,000 hours (Adams, 1988).

Of course, poverty does contribute to this disparity; and it is clear that persons deprived economically are frequently behind academically and have many knowledge gaps. Though many exceptions exist to be sure, intellectual deprivation has a terrible and long-lasting effect upon the child living in poverty. He or she is starting far behind the middle-class child in language skills, numeration, reading, listening skills, and experience with ideas, events, and people, simply because of his or her home situation.

Does it help to understand the backgrounds of Bill and Sam? Such understanding may prevent us from playing the "blame game" – blaming the victim (the student), his parents, his teachers, the educational system, poverty. Certainly there are many contributors to the problem, and some are stronger than others. However, finding a reason for it does not fix the problem. We already know there is little achieved by saying that Sam is simply unmotivated. Does understanding the backgrounds of Bill and Sam provide clues as to how we might motivate Sam to be a better performing student? No, because the diagnosis of Sam's problem does not lead us to methods of increasing his motivation. We may blunder in our attempts to fan Sam's latent "spark." Of course, Sam will suffer the most for our failed attempts. We must, therefore, proceed in a better-organized manner to inspire our reluctant learner to unaccustomed levels of achievement.

We know motivation only through behavior. When we examine Bill Bright's eagerness to learn, his energy to acquire knowledge, the joy he gains from the learning process, we note the characteristics of his motivation. We sensed Bill's motivation through the **behavior** we observe. How was Bill's motivated behavior established, maintained, and increased? Experiments in motivation and learning have answered this. Behavior is increased by its positive consequences – that is, by what follows the behavior after it occurs. Positive reinforcement achieves gains in behavior and performance.

Educators are not naive to the role of reward and punishment. They recognize reinforcement theory when they hear it described. They learned in Psychology 101 that Pavlov's dog would salivate to the sound of a ringing bell when it was paired with food, that pigeons in a learning lab will peck a disc for grain, and that rats will press a bar for food. We can say that the pigeon and the rat are **motivated** to perform; they are motivated to work for their food. We also learned that if these same behaviors were punished or ignored, they would soon diminish.

## Reinforcement Principles Applied to Real Life Situations

Reinforcement theory isn't just about food, but many of the same principles apply. *Behavior,* especially complex behavior, is better acquired by positive reinforcement rather than punishment or non-reinforcement. Punishment, shocks and the like, are often effective in temporarily suppressing behavior or extinguishing it, but it cannot build new behaviors. Certainly children are infinitely more complex than animals in a laboratory, but educators know about the student's dread of the red pen, and they know how a student will smile when he reads "Very Good!" on an exam. We can take reinforcement theory out of the laboratory and apply it to Bill's and Sam's life experiences, including those in the classroom. Clearly, Bill Bright's classroom behavior developed because he received a lot of positive reinforcement for it – the compliments and smiles of his teachers and his parents. Moreover, Bill's parents encouraged him, talked to him about his school experiences, and told him many times that education will unlock the doors of opportunity for him. Bill Bright is in a win-win situation.

Sam Slack's situation is not so fortunate. Sam's father is absent. His mother does not get home from work until 6:00 p.m. She starts preparing dinner while Sam and his younger brother and sister watch television. Sam's mother doesn't have much time to talk to him – she has dishes to wash and clothes to iron. The kids never stop watching TV, even while eating dinner. After dinner, their mother announces that they must now do homework. Sam says he doesn't have any. An argument ensues about his veracity, but his mother soon gives up, joins in the TV watching, and later makes a lengthy telephone call.

Despite this scenario, we must realize that Sam has one favorable circumstance. He is still in school. Yes, he is on the dropout track, and he will drop out of school if educators do not intervene quickly; but right now his classroom experience may yet motivate Sam and convince him to stay. Once he has left school and escaped that punishing experience, it will be much harder to convince him of any value to be found in learning. Time is critical. We must convince Sam that school is a positive place where he can succeed, or he will be lost. What feasible options do we have, and how do we implement them?

## Setting Up a Positive Learning Environment

For productive strategies, let us return to some applied reinforcement principles. Recall that **behavior is determined by its consequences**. Responses to situations are learned – established or extinguished – by what immediately follows those responses. If positive consequences follow, then the behavior is strengthened; if the consequences are punishing, the behavior will be extinguished or suppressed. If Sam attempts an essay and his teacher mentions that eight out of ten sentences are correct, he is likely to remember what he did correctly. If, on the other hand, his teacher returns the essay with only "Bad grammar" written on it in red, he is simply reminded that he is no good at writing and hates English. If the consequences are neither rewarding nor punishing, the behavior will simply not be learned. If a behavior, such as turning in homework, had been established but is no longer being rewarded, it will soon cease to be performed.

It is easy for us to characterize the consequences of Bill Bright's responses to school and academic learning as positive and reinforcing. Bill Bright is never punished at school because he never feels the need to misbehave. Bill's life is a long string of achievements. It is easy for Bill to give responses that will be reinforced because they are well established in his "response repertoire." His behavioral history and current family support provide assurance that he will continue on a path of accomplishment. Bill exemplifies the adage, "Nothing succeeds like success." In other words, **reinforcement has been a primary source of motivation** for Bill, and the fact that his successes are lauded breeds more success.

This cycle is good news for educators who thought motivation was fueled by some mysterious, untouchable inner drive. The success of Bill Bright proves that they do not have to use shock treatment, so to speak, to achieve desired behaviors. We *can* motivate students to learn by reinforcing their desirable behavior. Unfortunately, we can also discourage students by punishing them or ignoring them altogether. Just as Bill has enjoyed praise from all quarters, Sam has been deprived of it. We see where he is now. Although Sam is a ninth-grade student, he reads on a fifth-grade level and finds it difficult to write a correct sentence. He has difficulty with subject-verb agreement, with spelling, and with punctuating his sentences, especially if they contain quotes. He can do very little that will please his teachers because of his limited repertoire of academic skills. Actually, school is not very important to him, mostly because he is not successful at it, and the peers with whom he most often associates strongly reinforce this attitude.

## Remediation: Too Little, Too Late . . .

The school recognizes Sam's deficiencies and has assigned him to a remediation class twice a week for two 50-minute periods. Sam is required to take his textbooks to this class; and the remedial teacher, with the assistance of an aide, does his best to do as much one-on-one tutoring as time will allow for his class of 25 students, all of whom need individualized attention. Try as he might, this teacher is too overworked to spend the amount of time necessary for Sam to catch up. Also, the students in this class know full well why they are singled out of the student population, and this does little to help their motivation.

Sam, of course, shows little motivation. Matters are deteriorating. A conference is called by the school counselor, and Sam's mother is invited to attend at 2:30 p.m. on Tuesday. She declines because she cannot get off work. The conference is held; all agree that Sam needs help. His math teacher makes the point that Sam refuses to take responsibility for his learning, and unless he does, there is little she can do to help him. His English teacher makes the point that although Sam is rapidly becoming a behavior problem, he's not a "bad boy," and that he might respond to a "strong male model" in the community who could take interest in Sam and help him. The counselor says that she will counsel Sam and try to "work through his feelings of low self-esteem."

We could go on describing this rather typical scenario, but we already know that most of these efforts, though well-intentioned, will not work. The most needed and most practical step to help Sam is not being addressed. Sam desperately needs **success** experiences in school instead

of experiences for which he is constantly being punished. More homework will not motivate him, nor will raising standards lead to greater achievement. Suspending him will not motivate him, nor will requiring five 50-minute remedial periods a week. This is just giving Sam more of the same. Above all, there is nothing to be gained by blaming him, his mother, his absent father, his school, his teachers, poverty, or even society.

Of course, we do not suggest that his negative behavior be ignored, especially if it interferes with the learning of other students. What we are recommending is an effective remedial program in which Sam can **succeed**. Students are motivated by doing their work well. Having opportunities to do school work well creates motivation in students. School for Sam is a continuous and bitter experience of failure. Raising his hand to answer questions has long been extinguished in Sam's repertoire of responses. When he attempts to do his math homework, he finds it too difficult – he just doesn't understand the assignment because the class has moved far beyond his poor power to compute. Any student faced with such constant failure will give up, and Sam is considering this seriously.

## An Essential "Fail-Safe" Experience for At-Risk Students

The student who is at risk of failing must have a **fail-safe** learning experience for academic achievement. Sam Slack, who is on the dropout track, will not survive another year of personal punishment. To find solutions to Sam's problems, we must change our thinking about motivation and learning. It is imperative for us to create a learning environment in which Sam can succeed. Each success experience will build momentum for continued success. Such positive reinforcing events create what we call **motivation**. Finally, we can close the gap between the reinforcing environment where Bill Bright has spent the whole of his academic career and the punishing environment where Sam has languished ever since he entered school. Though Sam is already three years behind, he can catch up.

When we accept this idea regarding the source of motivation, an idea endorsed by an overwhelming number of learning specialists, we are then challenged to "engineer" a fail-safe learning experience that teaches basic skills to a 100% level of mastery. Workplace literacy, science education, tech prep, school-to-work transition, and successful competition in the global economy are goals that can be achieved; and they depend absolutely upon proficiency in basic academic skills. In addition, basic skills instruction bolstered by constant positive reinforcement not only can prevent dropout, but will no doubt lead to the eradication of illiteracy.

Through the employment of progressive learning technology, **all students can learn twice as much in the school day** as they are learning today. If this astonishing feat can be accomplished, what impact might be realized on the long list of educational goals and objectives demanded by various reform groups? Such groups would be very satisfied with a two-fold increase in achievement. Teachers and school officials would be ecstatic, parents would shed tears of joy, students would love it, and our politicians would, of course, take the credit. **All** students could benefit, and the many Sam Slacks populating our public schools would experience **success** – many for the first time. As we all know, success experiences quickly spread to other

areas of a student's life. When a student discovers that he can do one thing well, he is encouraged to try other things. They gain self-confidence and self-esteem.

Listed below are feasible steps that can be taken now that will rapidly teach basic skills to deficient students. Basic skills must be taught first and thoroughly, for they are the building blocks for higher-order language and math skills.

1. Assess the academic needs of each student. The assessment process must pinpoint the student's deficiencies. Effective procedures definitely exist for accomplishing this task, such as testing the student to discover the skills he has mastered and the skills he needs to improve.

2. Prescribe exactly the instructional lessons that will teach the skills the student needs – and no more. Too much material is discouraging, but learning a manageable amount is the key to success.

3. Next, organize and format instruction to facilitate learning. Preferably, the instructional material should be programmed – either in a print-based or computer-based format. Such a format will permit self-instruction and self-paced learning, two essential needs for individualized instruction. Mastery skills should be raised to a criterion of no less than 90%. Certain instructional techniques can take the student even beyond 100% mastery to what is called "true" mastery or "fluency" (Lindsley, 1992; Binder, 1990).

4. Maximize student participation. This principle suggests that very little learning can occur merely through watching someone else perform a task. In short, effective learning principles prove the age-old truism that students learn by doing.

5. Validate the effectiveness of the instructional approach. Any approach or learning system proposed should be supported by unequivocal research that demonstrates its power to obtain consistent and significant results.

6. Create a **valid** accountability system. Holding everybody accountable for the learning that takes place in the classroom is actually holding **nobody** accountable. Different contributors to the learning process should be held responsible for their particular functions and required performance.

   Whoever selects instructional materials should be held accountable for the proven effectiveness of them. The principal must be held responsible for the teaching and all other activity that goes on in the school. The schools of education must be held responsible for graduating teachers who can teach effectively when given proven instructional materials. Students are expected to participate in their own learning under optimal and positive reinforcing conditions. Accountability does not stop with these examples. Others who play a role in the educational process should also be mentioned – government, parents, and courts concerned with funding schools. The list is long because education receives so much of society's treasures – both human and physical. The most

important contribution of a comprehensive and fair accountability system is that of assuring quality control and consistently valuable outcomes of the educational process.

7. Ensure the fairness of the approach. Many approaches and materials discriminate against diverse learners, those with disabilities, and those who are impoverished. These students are usually hurt when highly publicized programs do not work. High failure rates for disadvantaged students cannot be tolerated. Equal access to an education should not simply entail using the same educational approaches with all children; the objective is to use approaches that best meet the needs of particular children. One size simply does not fit all.

8. Determine that the costs of the approach and its implementation are reasonable. Costs of implementing and operating an approach should be compared to benefits expected. Approaches which are capable of bringing about significant improvement to the greatest number of children should be given priority.

The above criteria can be used by educators to establish the superiority of one instructional approach over another. Fad-driven methods, which are mandated frequently by school districts, permeate classroom instruction in our nation, leading to the dismal failure of children (Carnine, 1993). Teachers – the users of good and bad programs – can insist that these approaches stand the test of objective assessment and outcome data analysis. Does the approach teach the material to the targeted students? Can we test whether students have learned the material? If the answer to either of these questions is "no," then teachers must look for instructional materials that can accomplish these goals.

## Conclusion

No child seeks to fail in anything. For reasons described in this paper, many students are defenseless against an educational system where failure is accepted or used as punishment. Failure is even rationalized as an inevitable outcome for many children in our public school system.

Unfortunately, staggering numbers of children do fail – the current system guarantees it. Thus, our educational system also fails. Neither child nor system needs to fail, however. Such an outcome can be avoided if teachers are given more effective tools with which to teach – tools based upon true learning technology and not upon the impotent techniques incorporated in the conventional textbook. Ineffective programs are ineffective, no matter how they are colored or how many pictures and graphs are included.

Many children who fail in school also fail elsewhere – in their home, community, and with their peer group. However, schools can be a major source of the success that youth need so badly. When they do, the negative consequences of failure are avoided, and the so-called reluctant learner can become a "motivated," achieving person.

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