

# Student motivation and commitment

## A cornerstone of strategy instruction

### Mike Hock

Research Associate  
with the Center for  
Research on  
Learning

**T** *TEACHER:* ... and if you learn the Theme Writing Strategy, your grades in English

*composition will improve. In addition, whenever you have a paper to write for any class, you can use this strategy and improve the quality of your written work. Does this sound like something you'd like to experience?*

*STUDENT:* I don't know. I just want to get my homework done.

*TEACHER:* Well, I understand the need to get your homework done and here's an option. Why don't you participate in strategy instruction long enough for me to describe the strategy to you. Then, you can decide if you are willing to commit to learning the strategy. Keep in mind that we can always devote some time at the end of the period to homework help. Does this sound reasonable?

*STUDENT:* I really don't want to learn this stuff. I don't think strategies will help me. I need to get my homework done, or I'll fail!

The scenario above may sound all too familiar to teachers. The effectiveness of strategy instruction with students who are reluctant to commit time and energy to learning is often limited. Fortunately, experienced teachers know how to use a variety of techniques to gain student commitment to learning. For example, teachers use positive reinforcement, set high expectations, reward personal improvement, make academic tasks more interesting, teach attribution

alternatives and self-advocacy, or orchestrate success through learning strategy instruction to motivate students. The purpose of this article is to discuss an additional technique designed to increase student motivation.

### What do we know about academic motivation?

We know a great deal about academic motivation. We know that most students begin their formal school experience motivated to learn. In fact, they seem to have a natural desire to learn. Additionally, most students have high expectations for success. When children are given an appropriate learning task, they have great confidence that they can do it.

Not only are children motivated to learn, they tend to remain motivated. Even when young learners encounter frustration and failure, they demonstrate remarkable resilience. They continue to work at being academically successful even in the face of failure, at least for a while. However, for many learners, motivation and optimism begin to diminish with repeated failure. By the upper elementary grades, teachers begin to encounter "unmotivated" students. Teachers begin to hear, "I don't want to do this. I don't care. I hate school."

Once students begin to believe they cannot complete certain tasks or do well academically, teachers and counselors

*(continued on page 2)*

**"..motivation throughout the instructional process will be higher if students make a commitment to improve their skills..."**

**-SIM Strategy Manual**

# Improving motivation through Possible Selves

(Continued from page 1)  
must reach into their academic “tool box” and call upon interventions powerful enough to rekindle the motivational fires that determine learning success.

## What can be done to increase academic motivation?

Let’s return to the opening dialogue. The student in this scenario could very well be the product of motivationally undermining experiences. If this student is unmotivated and unwilling to risk failure again, an intensive response is required. First, we must select a motivational intervention powerful enough to gain the student’s commitment to learning. Secondly, we must find the *time and opportunity* to skillfully support the development of student motivation.

## Hopes, Expectations, and Fears: Improving Motivation to Learn Through the Development of Possible Selves

Recently, the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning staff have been working on a motivational program called “Possible Selves.” Possible Selves is designed to increase student motivation by having students discuss their future lives. Specifically, students think about and describe their hoped for, expected, and feared possible selves. Once students describe their possible selves, they create a Possible Selves Tree. The tree

is a metaphor used to examine the key roles students play in life, their hopes, expectations, and fears for the future, and the overall condition of their “tree.” In effect, students are challenged to evaluate and take action to nurture their tree.

Researchers have found that once students have examined possible selves, they are more inclined to believe that they can do well in school and in life. They begin to view learning as the pathway to their hopes and expectations and as a way to prevent feared possible selves from materializing. Thus, learning becomes more relevant,

and students increase their willingness to put forth effort and commitment to learning.

## The Possible Selves Intervention

A student participates in several activities during evaluation and development of possible selves. First, the student completes a structured but open-ended interview with a teacher or counselor. Figure 1 on this page is a sample of typical interview questions designed for student-athletes at the University of Kansas. The type and number of questions can be

(Continued on page 3)

### Possible Selves Interview

**Directions Part I:** Read and carefully discuss each statement with the student completing the questionnaire. Define and clarify the terms athlete, learner, and person. Make notes on the interview reporting form which capture, as close as possible, the student’s word-for-word response to each question. Number each response to each question; for example, write Question 1 next to Response #1.

1. What statements best **Describe** you as a learner?
2. What statements best **Describe** you as a person?
3. What statements or words best **Describe** you as an athlete?

**Directions Part II:** Explain to the student the concepts of Hope, Expectations, & Fears. Provide a personal example of a hoped for, expected, and feared possible self.

4. What do you **Hope** to achieve as a learner?
5. What do you **Hope** to achieve as a person?
6. What do you **Hope** to achieve athletically?
7. What do you **Expect** to achieve as a learner?
8. What do you **Expect** to achieve as a person?
9. What do you **Expect** to achieve athletically?
10. What do you **Fear** as a learner?
11. What do you **Fear** as a person?
12. What do you **Fear** athletically?

Figure 1

# Students consider future and Possible Selves

Responses to “What do you <i>Hope</i> to achieve as a <u>learner</u> ?”		
<b>University Student</b>	<b>8th-Grade Student</b>	<b>6th-Grade Student</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- not flunk out</li> <li>- get a 2.5 G.P.A.</li> <li>- be eligible to play sports</li> <li>- really want a degree</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- have the grades to go to college</li> <li>- learn more science, history, reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- graduate from high school</li> <li>- be a successful student</li> </ul>
Responses to “What do you <i>Hope</i> to achieve as a <u>person</u> ?”		
<b>University Student</b>	<b>8th-Grade Student</b>	<b>6th-Grade Student</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- be more responsible</li> <li>- take care of my responsibilities</li> <li>- take care of details as expected</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- be a lawyer</li> <li>- be in a profession</li> <li>- have self-respect</li> <li>- be trustworthy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- earn a scholarship</li> <li>- have a decent home</li> <li>- be a good person</li> </ul>

Figure 2

*(Continued from page 2)*

modified to fit the age and interests of the student.

During the interview, the student is asked to describe himself or herself. For example, the student may be asked to describe himself or herself as a learner, person, and athlete. As the student responds to questions and describes himself or herself, the teacher writes down what the student says. The teacher asks additional questions about the student’s hopes, expectations, and fears for the future related to each area and records these responses as well. Figure 2 on this page represents responses to questions from a first-year university student-athlete, a sixth-grade student, and an eighth-grade student.

Once the interview has been completed and the results analyzed by the teacher, the teacher and student draw a Possible Selves Tree. The teacher begins by stating, “I’ve learned a lot about you as a

person. Let me share what you’ve taught me by using the picture of a tree to represent everything I’ve learned. The tree will have branches that represent your hopes and expectations as a learner, person, and athlete. The roots will represent the words you used to describe yourself *now* as a learner, person, and athlete. I’ll use the exact words you stated to add branches and roots to the tree. You can help by adding to or modifying the statements you made. Later, I’ll ask you to evaluate the tree and tell me if it really represents the ideas you shared.”

Next, the tree is drawn, evaluated, and goals are discussed concerning how to keep the tree strong, make it fuller, protect it from fears, and provide it with nourishment. The student is asked to think about the tree and explain the tree to the teacher.

Figure 3 on page 4 is an actual tree completed by a university student-athlete.

Notice the unbalanced nature of the tree. The athletic limb is much fuller and contains branches with very positive hope statements. The learner limb is less full, and the words are not nearly as positive. The roots of the tree on the athletic side are deep and strong. The roots for the learner side are weak. Fears are added to the picture as toxins in the soil that threaten the roots or as a strong wind able to break a limb off the tree.

The picture of the tree is a good place to begin a discussion of how academics and learning support the total tree. Since athletic hopes will be lost without improved academic performance, the student may be more inclined to commit time and energy to learning.

Let’s examine another example of how future hopes can be used to gain student commitment to learning. In this case, the student hopes for a career as the owner of a trucking business. The student and

*(Continued on page 4)*

# Possible Selves Tree helps picture strengths

(Continued from page 3) teacher can begin to identify short- and long-term goals that are necessary to attain this possible self. It is hoped that the student will discover (with teacher guidance) that learning how to problem solve, earning a high school diploma, learning business math skills, or learning the Paraphrasing Strategy to comprehend important material supports the attainment of the student's hopes and expectations for the future. In addition, the student may discover that these same goals help the student avoid the feared selves he or she has identified (for example, no job, no money, no friends).

In any case, the possible selves tree and the goals established to "nurture" the tree are revisited regularly. Goals are modified, their attainment celebrated, new goals added, and hopes, expectations, and fears continually examined. Also, whenever the value of learning is questioned, the tree can be used to demonstrate how specific learning experiences and student effort contribute to the strength of the student's tree (future).

the Self-Advocacy Strategy, use positive reinforcement, make tasks more interesting, or explore Possible Selves, teachers and counselors will need the **time and opportunity** to engage in intensive, sometimes one-to-one instruction. One high school teacher who participated in a Possible Selves case study remarked, "I wish I had the time

to do Possible Selves with **all** my students." Finding time and opportunity will take commitment and creative problem solving if teachers and counselors are to overcome this critical barrier.

In addition, we need more evidence that Possible Selves is indeed a successful intervention. Specifically, we need to be able

(Continued on page 8)

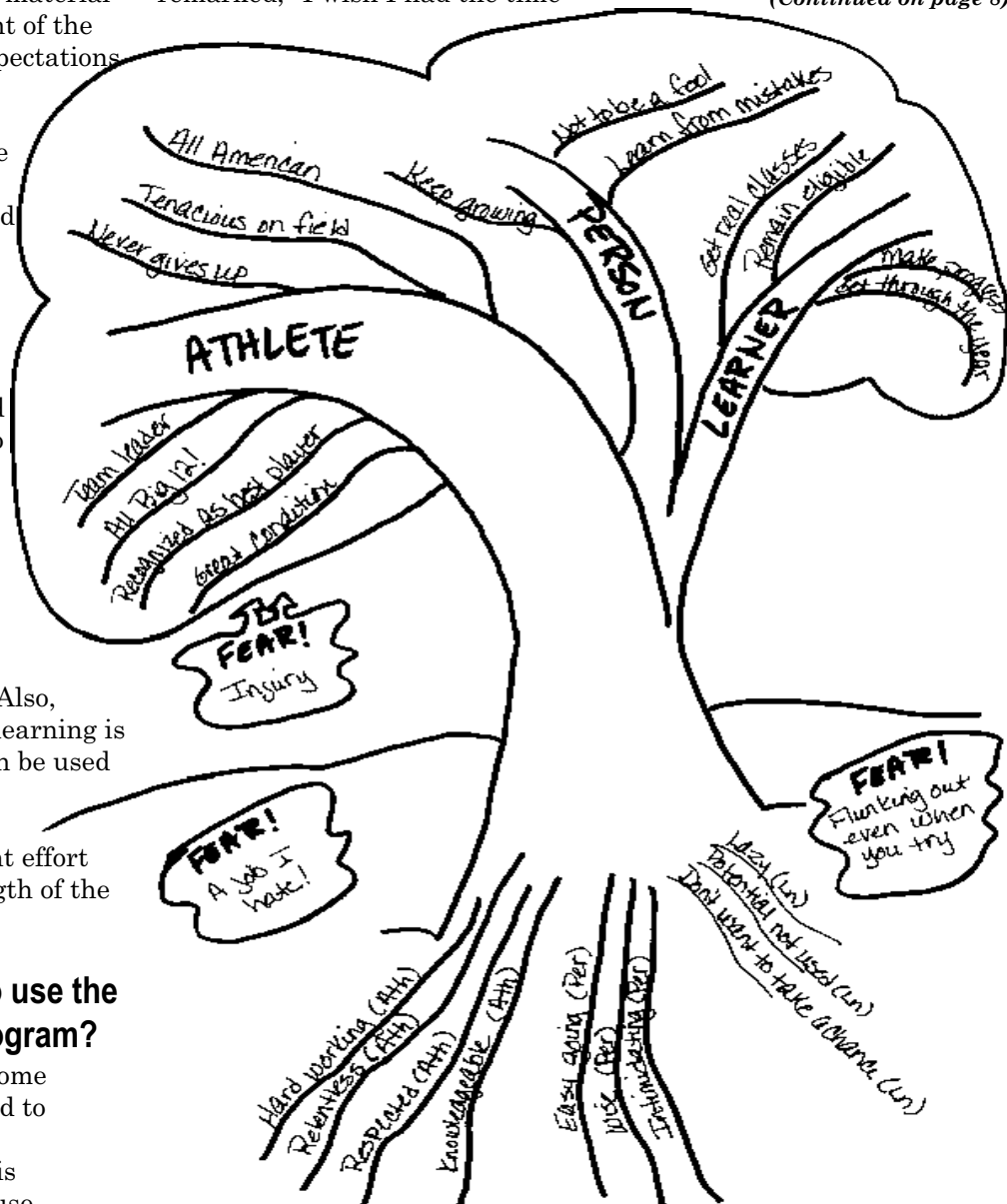


Figure 3

## What do we need to use the Possible Selves program?

When students become chronically unmotivated to participate in learning, intensive intervention is required. Whether we use Surface Counseling, teach

## Paragraph Shuffle deals winning hand for students

For Mary Ann Caraco's sixth-grade students, a deck of homemade cards and a quick shuffle can fill in the blanks in their struggle to master the Paragraph Writing Strategy.

"I have found that students often have a difficult time maintaining point of view, verb tense, and/or sequence when applying the strategy to a 'real' essay," Mary Ann said. "It is equally difficult for them to recognize these problems when revising and proofreading. In an attempt to make this more engaging for the students, I developed an activity they can work on independently or in a group."

Caraco, sixth- and seventh-grade language arts teacher at King & Queen Elementary School in Shanghai, Virginia, developed the Paragraph Shuffle, a card game that asks students to sort out problems as they put together essays. She has shared the instructions for the game so *Strategram* readers can use it in their own classrooms.

### Description

In this activity, students are given a set of cards. Each card in the set contains one sentence that could be part of a complete essay. Students must examine the sentences in their group of cards and identify which cards fit together to create a whole paragraph. With each set of cards, three separate paragraphs can be created. To determine how the cards fit together, students need to identify a discrepancy, which could involve point of view, verb tense, or the use of different transitional word. (See page 6 for an example.) To ensure clarity, each group of cards should focus on only one of these areas. The students should not be told what the discrepancy is. Let them figure it out.

Students then have to group the cards correctly. For example, if the discrepancy is verb tense, students should separate the cards into three groups: one each for past tense, present tense, and future tense sentences.

After separating the cards into like

### More Description

categories, students must organize the sentences in each group into an essay with an introduction (topic sentence), a body (lead-off and follow-up sentences), and a conclusion (clincher sentence) in a logical sequence. Students also will need to cull out any sentences that are not directly related to the main idea.

This activity can be used with individual students or small groups. A competitive approach can be used if it is effective with your group of students by giving them a time limit or simply seeing who finishes first.

(Continued on page 6)

# Paragraph Shuffle deals winning hand for students

(Continued from page 5)

## Procedures

### Point of View Discrepancy

- Write an essay on any topic or choose a student essay as the basis for developing your cards. Revise the essay twice so it is written in all three points of view.
- Write one sentence on an index card until all sentences in all three essays are written on individual cards.
- Write one to three extra sentences in each point of view that are remotely related to the topic but that do not contain related information. (**Note:** When you are composing these sentences, do not make them so off the topic that they stand out or so closely related as to be confusing.)
- Shuffle the cards and distribute the pack to individual students or to a group. Instruct them to identify the problem and then reorganize the cards so they form three distinct essays containing related information, an introduction, body, and conclusion.

### Verb Tense Discrepancy

Complete the steps described above, revising the essay into past tense, future tense, and present tense forms rather than shifting points of view. Again, provide one to three cards for each verb tense that do not contain related information.

## More Procedures

### Sequencing Discrepancy

Complete the steps described at left, but rewrite the essay using a different sequence of transitions each time. This may require slight reorganization in each essay, but the essays will still be about the same main idea. Again, provide extra cards that are not relevant.

# CEC seeks success stories for awareness campaign

The Council for Exceptional Children, responding to growing criticism of the special education field, has issued a call for success stories from classroom teachers, administrators, researchers, parents, and students.

As special educators, you see successes every day in students who would not have succeeded without the support of special education teachers, administrators, and researchers. Unfortunately, not enough people know about these successes. Some politicians, school administrators, and the media assert that special education costs are robbing general educators of the resources necessary to implement school reform. Some contend that the enterprise flat out doesn't work.

That's why the CEC asks that you share stories about student successes. The CEC will use your stories in a new public awareness campaign designed to inform the public, government

officials, and others about the many children who have achieved success as a result of special education.

Your stories are vital to helping the public understand the positive effect special education has for students.

strategies, behavior modification, mnemonics, or self-instructional procedures.

If applicable, you could also include information about how working with a student one-on-one or in small groups, as well as any modifications made to the

## Your stories are vital to helping the public understand the positive effect special education has for students.

Stories that demonstrate successful practice with all types of students with special needs at all levels—classroom, school, or district or state education agency—are needed. Make sure your stories have at least two components: student outcome data and a description of the educational practices responsible for student achievement. To be most effective, the outcome data should be specific and measurable. Student improvements should be linked to specific educational practices the special educator used with the student, such as learning

curriculum, contributed to the student's achievement.

In addition to the need for teachers' success stories, it is equally important for principals and district- and state-level administrators to write stories about the success of groups of students with disabilities.

Time is short for this initiative. The CEC hopes to begin reviewing stories and developing initial materials for the campaign in July. Send your stories (one or two typewritten pages) to the Center for Research on Learning, attention Julie Tollefson, 3061 Dole, Lawrence, KS 66045. You also may e-mail your stories to [jtollefson@quest.sped.ukans.edu](mailto:jtollefson@quest.sped.ukans.edu). We will collect the stories and forward them to the CEC to support this effort.

### ***Strategram* Renewal Form 1997-1998**

Send this form with your check for \$13 to *Strategram*, The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, 3061 Dole, Lawrence, KS 66045

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**City, State, ZIP:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Telephone:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Strategram**

Vol. 9: Issue number 4. Published six times per year by The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, Dole Human Development Center-Room 3061, Lawrence, Kansas, 66045-2342. Subscription rate: \$13 per year. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission from the publisher, unless otherwise stated.

©1997 by The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 66045. All rights reserved.

#### **Editor**

*Julie Tollefson*

#### **Consulting Editors**

*Keith Lenz*

*Don Deshler*

*Jean Schumaker*

## Comments on Possible Selves welcome

*(Continued from page 4)*

to answer such questions as the following: Do students who complete the Possible Selves interview and create Possible Selves trees demonstrate increased academic motivation? Are these students academically successful? Do they and their

teachers value participation in Possible Selves? With which students and at what grade levels is Possible Selves appropriate? These, and other questions must be addressed before Possible Selves becomes a widely disseminated intervention.

Your comments and suggestions concerning Possible Selves are valued. Please contact Mike Hock, Jean Schumaker, or Don Deshler at the Center for Research on Learning, (913) 864-4780, with your reactions and comments.

The University of Kansas  
Center for Research on Learning  
Rm. 3061 Robert Dole Bldg.  
Lawrence, Kansas 66045-2342  
1-913-864-4780

**Address change requested**

Non Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Lawrence, Kansas  
Permit No. 65