
Preface

Several years ago, I submitted a proposal to speak at the California League of Middle Schools (CLMS) conference in San Diego. I had a Friday midafternoon slot from 2:35–3:35 p.m. The title of my presentation was “Motivating the Academically Unmotivated Student.” Unfortunately, I woke up that morning feeling under the weather. I was sick enough that the thought of driving five hours to deliver a one-hour presentation wasn’t motivation enough for me to get out of bed and drive from Los Angeles to San Diego. My talk was scheduled in a room that would accommodate between 25–30 people and the time slot was usually a poorly attended one. I called the conference organizers to cancel, chugged down some cold medicine, bundled up, and closed my eyes. At 2:32 p.m., I was awakened by the phone and heard a frantic voice on the other end. The woman identified herself as a CLMS representative and asked if I could get to the conference immediately. I told her that I was sick, in bed, in Los Angeles. I was thinking, “Didn’t she get my message? What’s the big deal? People cancel all the time.” She said the interest in my presentation was a bit bigger than expected. She wanted to know if I could get there early in the morning and present the next day. She said, “There are well over 200 people wanting to hear your talk.” Those words echoed in my head for a few minutes. Since I had the talk already prepared, I told her I would wake up early and drive to San Diego.

I arrived in San Diego around 7:40 a.m. and walked to the conference registration desk. There were signs everywhere: “Motivating the Academically Unmotivated with Dr. Jeff Miller moved to the Grand Ballroom at 8:00 a.m.” Within educational circles, this was as close to rock stardom as I had ever been. I walked to the registration table. When I told them my name, there was a lot of hustling about and they escorted me to the Grand Ballroom. When I got there, about 50 people were already waiting. By 7:59 a.m., the room was packed. My PowerPoint presentation was being projected on a huge screen. At 8:00 a.m., I cleared my throat and

just looked out at the audience members. They were eagerly awaiting what they hoped would be the magic remedy for motivating middle school students. I opened my mouth and the following words inadvertently popped out: “This is pathetic! How can this be the hottest topic at a state conference? Are you telling me that middle school students are that tough to motivate?”

Every head in the room nodded as one. That was the moment I knew this book *had* to be written. Our job as middle school teachers is the most daunting in K–12 education. The talk went well and I stayed around for over an hour talking to people. I was surprised to see how much the needs of middle school teachers are frighteningly similar to the students they teach. They needed to be listened to. Everyone has a story. As you read through this book, know that it is a series of activities mixed with a basic understanding of motivation and learning so the strategies have a better chance to stick with you.

The activities and strategies that we present in this book have a few things in common. They have all been battle-tested and *they work*. They are based on the best understanding from the fields of cognitive science, educational psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, and pedagogical theory. We hope that we have actually written an “untextbook.” We wrote this book with the intention of it being user-friendly, valuable, and as jargon-free as possible. At a party, a man was asked what he did for a living. He answered, “I’m an editor for an educational book company. It’s my job to edit out the interesting parts.” He did not work on this book.

Note that one of the conventions we have used throughout this text is writing in first person. We do this because we both like to tell stories. There is a great deal of research today which shows that stories teach better than preachy-type lecture or academic-dry writing. In case you are curious as to which one of us is telling which story, use this simple test. I am five feet ten inches tall and Jeff is six feet six inches tall. If the story feels tall, it’s Jeff. I tell short stories. We hope you enjoy what we have to say.