

## Reward Students in Their Own Currencies to Help Them Value Classroom Capital

One of the biggest mistakes we make as teachers is that we assume that our students value classroom capital. As a result, we try to motivate students by rewarding them with things they don't value. Many of us think that the good grade should be enough of a motivation for doing the work. But, for many of our students who have not bought into the economy of our classrooms, good grades mean very little. If we want to motivate students, we have to reward them with currencies they value. Take my friend Cynthia for example.

One day, I dropped by her classroom to work on a presentation we were giving together at an upcoming conference. Although it was also Cynthia's planning period, she had a handful of students in her classroom making up a test. Her teaching assistant, Ms. Bledsoe, monitored the students while we worked at a table in the back of the classroom.

It wasn't long before our work was interrupted by Ms. Bledsoe's exasperated sigh. "Jesse, I have told you three times already to get to work. Take out your pencil and finish this test."

"I'm finished." Jesse slumped in his seat and put his pencil on the desk.

"You are not finished, Jesse. You still have two pages to go. Not get to work," Ms. Bledsoe admonished.

Jesse threw the test on the floor and got up.

"Excuse me," Cynthia whispered, never taking her eyes off of Jesse. "I'll be right back."

She put a smile on her face and went over to Jesse. "Boy, sit your little self down," she drawled playfully.

Jesse didn't smile, but he did reluctantly sit back in his seat. "Miss Gill, I don't want to do this test. It's boring." He crossed his arms.

Cynthia leaned over Jesse's desk and whispered something to him. He looked up at her quizzically, and she looked him directly in the eye and smiled.

Jesse reached for the test. "I don't have a pencil."

"I've got one right here." Cynthia reached in her pocket and handed Jesse a pencil. "Now hurry up. You only have about 20 minutes."

Jesse got to work.

When Cynthia returned to the table, I whispered, "You're amazing. What on earth did you say to him?"

"Who, Jesse? Chile, I just told him that if he finished his test, I'd make him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

I laughed aloud and Cynthia smiled enigmatically. "Don't know it honey. It works."

We didn't hear a peep from Jesse for the next 20 minutes. He hunched over his desk and completed his test. When the time was up, Jesse brought his test over to Cynthia.

“Did you do your best?” she asked him sternly.

“Yes Ms. Gill. I even went back over it to check my work.”

Cynthia flipped through the test and checked each page. Then, she went to her desk and took out a loaf of bread, a vat of peanut butter, a jar of jelly, and a plastic knife. She made what was perhaps the ugliest peanut butter and jelly sandwich I had ever seen, but to Jesse, it was a work of art. When she finished the sandwich, she handed it to Jesse who cradled it lovingly in the palms of his hands grinning.

“Thank you Ms. Gill,” he said reverently and carefully made his way to the door. As he left the classroom, we could hear him yell, “Hey Tito, DeMarco. Look what Ms. Gill made me!”

I asked Cynthia once about those peanut butter sandwiches. Why were these kids willing to work so hard for something that seemed so trivial? She used cheap bread and cheaper peanut butter and jelly. The sandwiches she made were positively ugly. What was it about these sandwiches that could get kids motivated when nothing else would? After all, wasn't it just a bribe -- the high school equivalent of giving students candy if they finished their work?

“You're focusing on the wrong thing. It's not the sandwich itself that matters. It's the fact that *I* make it for them. Cooking for someone else is one of the most nurturing acts a person can do. These kids don't get enough nurturing at home. Jesse's mother works two jobs. She doesn't have time to make him a sandwich. So, when I make him a sandwich, he feels nurtured and loved. Jesse has to know that I care about him before he will do anything else. When he feels like I care about him, he will do the work.”

Cynthia understood the idea of paying kids in their currency. Rather than impose her value system on Jesse, she recognized what currency he was taking and used what worked in his economy.

Sure, Jesse should have been motivated by the intrinsic reward of doing well. But, in Jesse's economy, the intrinsic rewards were not nearly as important as that peanut butter sandwich.

When you start where your students are, you don't think in terms of “should.” If you want to motivate students to learn, first find out what currency they are spending (or that they value) and pay them in that currency. From there, you can teach them how to find the reward in other things. For many of our students, intrinsic motivation has to be developed. It comes only after they have experienced the pleasure of doing well and know the rewards of success. At the beginning, many of our students haven't experienced consistent academic success and are not convinced that it will bring any pleasure. In fact, academic success has been a source of pain for them because it has been heretofore an unachievable goal. This is why it is so important to start with what motivates them and then as they experience more success, help them transfer or become motivated by that success.

For some students, it will take grades or points or extra credit. For other students, it will take the promise of some more tangible reward like extra time on the playground or a fieldtrip.

For Jesse, it took a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.