

The Motivating Word

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INTRODUCTION: I teach an online section of our student success course and am always on the look out for ideas that will make good discussion board topics. I use the discussion board as a way to both introduce and also "dive deeper" into the weekly topic. I look for prompts that will inspire students to exchange ideas and personal perspectives.

A little over a year ago, I read a great story on the FYE listserv about a football coach who had inspired his team to victory in a unique way: by using a special word. I immediately pondered how I could adapt this story for use in my class. Since we were about to tackle a unit on self-motivation, dreams and goals, it struck me that this story would be perfect for the weekly discussion board. It seemed like a fun way to arouse interest and introduce the concept of motivation. I re-wrote the story and added a few facts I was able to gather on the web.

DISCUSSION BOARD TOPIC: Here's the (supposedly) true story that I posted for my students' responses:

If you're a college football trivia buff, you know that the annual Rose Bowl competition started over 100 years ago, in 1902, when the University of Michigan trounced Stanford, 49 - 0. What is perhaps unknown to most people is the story behind that amazing win for Michigan.

In the year 1900, the University of Michigan had a football team that wasn't winning many games. Consequently, they fired their coach and searched for a new one. At about the same time, Stanford had to dismiss their coach because of a new rule that allowed only alumni to serve as coaches. Long story short, Michigan hired Stanford's former coach, a "quiet man of few words," named Fielding Yost.

As soon as the new coach arrived on campus, he granted an interview to the local newspaper. During the interview, he boldly claimed that his team would be undefeated the next season and the combined scores of the opposing teams for the entire season would be 49 points or fewer. When they heard about his interview, the Michigan team protested loudly. They complained to the coach that he was setting them up to be the laughing stock of football. Yost immediately ordered every member of the team to take off his uniform and gear and stack it in the corner of the locker room.

Then he marched to the blackboard and wrote one word. He instructed the team that they could retrieve their uniforms and play football only when they understood the meaning of that word.

That year Michigan was undefeated at 11 - 0 and outscored their opponents 550 - 0, averaging 55 points per game. Not only did this team allow fewer than 49 points in the first year, it took their opponents more than 5 years to score more than 49 points. And yes, they later went on not only to the first Tournament of Roses football victory, but three more national championships in the next three years.

What was the word the coach wrote on the blackboard? Please explain the reasons you think he chose this word to motivate his players. To encourage creativity and originality, do not guess the same word as another classmate who has already posted.

EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES:

As a tool for introducing the concept of motivation, I found this story very useful. The students were quick to respond and were eagerly engaged in trying to guess the word Yost had used. They supported and expanded on each other's choice. After everyone had posted, as a follow-up, I next asked them to post their personal dreams and talk about what motivated them. This resulted in further discussion and a great deal of support for each other's goals.

Here's an example of the word one student guessed: "I think the word is BELIEVE. By believing in yourself, you have already won half the battle. In order to win, you need to believe. By believing in yourself, others will believe in you also."

Later, in response to identifying dreams and goals, this same student wrote, "I have different levels of dreams. I dream of doing something meaningful with my life. Going on, day to day, at a 'job' that takes up the majority of your life is no way to live. I had a career I just absolutely loved, but due to circumstances beyond my control, I had to switch gears. But sometimes bad things happen for good reasons. Now I have the chance to follow another set of dreams. I have the opportunity to go to college and get my degree. I want this degree for me, not for anyone else. With my schooling I'll be able to have a meaningful career in nursing and I'll be able to help others in a way I wasn't able to do in my other career. With this career, I'll also be able to help my family. It is also my dream that my family will grow up close and full of love—not fall apart like so many others I've been seeing all too frequently. I try not to show my frustration with all the homework I have to do. I want my children to see school as a good thing, not something that gets in their way of having fun. I tell them everyday how much I like going to college and that someday they will get to go, too."

In this exercise, after all of my students had an opportunity to post a word and their explanation, I posted the actual word that Fielding Yost used to motivate his players. Did YOU guess it yet? Take a minute and come up with a word! If you're "at a loss for words," as I tell my students when they're concerned about choosing the "right" word, put yourself in the coach's shoes and think of a word you might use with your team. Or if you've been on any kind of team, what keeps you engaged and motivated? Now do you have your word?

Okay. Well, as the story goes, the coach wrote the word "love" on the blackboard. Legend has it that, as he explained it, you have to love the game, love your opponent (they challenge you and make you better), love the hard work it takes to be successful and get to your dreams, and love what you do.

In the same vein, I encourage students to love their studies, love the opportunity they have of going to college, and most of all, love the challenging situations they are bound to find at college. I tell them they are more likely to grow through experiences when they are loving the challenge and looking for good outcomes.

Furthermore, I suggest that even though there's one "right" answer regarding the word that Fielding Yost used with his team, indeed there are no wrong answers in this exercise. I invite them to reflect on the word they each chose in terms of what it says about them and their own motivation. From my experience, people will usually choose a word that is personally meaningful - one that is perhaps one of their own personal goals or a means to their goal, or a key to their success. I remind my students to hang onto their word when the going gets tough, and use their word to inspire themselves to keep up the hard work and get to their dreams.

As a way of introducing the topic of motivation, generating discussion and engaging students, this approach worked well! Their participation in the follow-up questions on dreams and goals was more enthusiastic than I had seen previously, and the level of self-reflection seemed enhanced. I believe you could also use this story to generate discussion on commitment, collective vision, supportive relationships (success teams), visualization, goal-setting and the use of affirmations.

My colleagues in face-to-face classes have also adapted this exercise for use in their classes. One even made a list of all the words her students guessed, to hand out at the end of the class as an inspirational memento that they could post in a prominent place at home.

As I mentioned above, the students "loved" this activity! They chose such words as pride, integrity, determination, dedication, loyalty, respect, believe, hope, faith, trust, discipline, etc. By the way, not one of them has ever guessed love, but, of course, it doesn't matter - there's really not just one right answer!