

Reflecting on Your Purpose for Learning

Instructional Strategy – What is it?

This is a writing exercise that students can complete one or more times during the semester. In this activity, students reflect on how school relates to real-world problems. Specifically, this activity asks students to focus on issues that matter to them personally and connect the skills they're learning in school to becoming the person they want to be.

Why does it work?

Students are more willing to persevere through challenges because they understand how doing so ties into their long-term goals and vision of their future self. By providing students with an opportunity to reflect on their purpose for learning, students can reappraise the value of the coursework and classes, and ultimately persist longer.

Reading and Writing About School

Overview: We are interested in your school experience so far and what your thoughts are about why you are taking these courses.

Instructions: Please read each page carefully. Then, at the end, please provide your own response that echoes some of the issues raised on the next few pages.

How Does School Relate to Real-World Problems?

Sometimes the world is unjust. And nearly everyone at some time in their lives sees this and thinks the world could be better in one way or another. Some people want there to be less prejudice, some want less violence or aggression, and others want to reduce poverty, educational achievement gaps, or diseases. Other people want different kinds of changes.

Think about all the issues that matter to you personally. Of these, what are some problems that you think about and that might relate to skills you are getting in school? *Please write a response in the space below:*

When you are done, turn to the next page. In the next section, we'd like to learn more about your reasons for doing well in school.

What do you want to get out of school? And what kind of person do you want to be?

One choice students make is how hard to work and what to work hard on. Almost everyone tries hard in school at least sometimes, and we are trying to learn why students put in that extra effort into classes.

We started surveying students at schools and four-year colleges, and several thousands of students from across the country have participated so far. The first thing most students talked about was getting a good education so that they could make more money by getting a good job. But we also learned that money was hardly ever the only reason--or even the main reason-- when they really thought about it.

Most students said they also worked hard for their future careers because of unique and personal reasons, even though they usually didn't talk about them with friends or other students. Some students hadn't even put these reasons into words until we asked them. But when they thought about it, it was these more personal reasons that really helped them get through the hard days when school work piled up and life got stressful. And it was these personal reasons that helped them see that even day-to-day activities had a lot of meaning for their life overall.

Surprisingly, this is what past years' students have said motivated them to do well in school:

- 64% said they wanted to be an educated person who has something intelligent to say about what's going on in the world.
- 69% said they want to learn so they can make a positive contribution to the world.
- 78% said they want to gain knowledge so that they can have a career that they personally enjoy.
- 72% said they want to have the freedom to pick the life that they want to live.

It's more interesting to hear this in students' own words. We picked three typical responses from students and copied them on the next page. Please read them, and then we will ask you to share your own thoughts.

Why do you do you work hard in school? Quote from Student #172

"For me, getting an education is all about learning things that will help me do something I can feel good about, something that matters for the world. I used to do my schoolwork just to earn a better grade and look smart (or not look dumb). I still think doing well in school is important, but for me it's definitely not just about a grade anymore. I'm growing up, and doing well in school is all about preparing myself to do something that matters, something that I care about."

Why do you do you work hard in school? Quote from Student #415

"Sometimes I see people who have jobs that make money but don't seem very interesting and don't seem to make a difference. I don't want to end up doing something boring with my life, especially if it doesn't even pay well. I want to learn things that will help me have a career I'm proud of and a career where I'll get to do interesting things. Some people in my classes just do the smallest amount of work they can, and they think they'll magically get a good job because they passed. Nobody wants to hire someone who thinks they're too good (or maybe actually too insecure) to take their work seriously. I think I'd regret it if I just coasted through school because I wouldn't be prepared for the more interesting kind of job I want, the kind of job where you get paid well to do work you actually like to do."

Why do you work hard in school? Quote from Student #108

"I want to learn as much as I can in school so I can be an educated person. Even aside from the money, educated people get more respect and more freedom to live the way they want to. Why would I choose less respect and less freedom for the rest of my life? It seems like a pretty obvious decision, though sometimes I have to remind myself why the effort is worth it when I get distracted or start procrastinating, or when I get really confused in hard classes."

Your turn: Why is learning important to your goals?

We're still in the progress of learning what motivates students to work hard, and we want students like you to add their voices to the conversation. Take a moment to think about what kind of person you want to be in the future. Also think about what kind of positive impact you want to have on the people around you or society in general. **We're not asking about things like money, high status, or power – even though those things can be important. Instead, we want to know what knowledge and abilities you want to have, and why you want to have them.**

Please take a few minutes to think about this and write your thoughts so they can be shared with others. Everything you write will be kept confidential. In the space below, write a few sentences that answer this question: **How will learning in school help you be the kind of person you want to be or help you make the kind of impact you want on the people around you or society in general?** (Don't worry about spelling or grammar. Just focus on getting your ideas across.)