

Situating Student Motivation Through Expectancy-Value Motivation
**A Learner-Centered Teaching Strategy for Connecting Classroom Tasks to Students' Contexts,
Values, and Experiences**

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Introduction and Need for LCT Strategy

Student motivation is central to learner-centered teaching because it influences students' engagement, persistence, participation, achievement, and overall learning experience. However, many college classrooms continue to prioritize content delivery without giving enough attention to the situations in which students have been shaped and the situations in which they are currently learning. A learner-centered teaching strategy should therefore ask not only what students need to learn, but also how students' past experiences, relationships, family expectations, social identities, community contexts, and classroom environments shape what they believe they can do and what they value. In the context of student motivation, situatedness refers to the social, cultural, relational, educational, and community-based contexts that shape how students interpret learning tasks. Students do not enter a classroom as empty vessels. They bring prior schooling experiences, family messages, peer influences, cultural values, identities, strengths, fears, goals, and barriers that shape their motivation. In this way, classroom tasks are not motivationally neutral; students interpret them through the contexts that have shaped their lives.

Situatedness has been discussed by several researchers. Cortina (2025) described situatedness as the contextual embeddedness of educational research and practice. Radišić et al. (2026) explained that a situative perspective helps researchers examine how students' experiences, messages, cultural contexts, and interpretations shape motivational beliefs. Eccles et al. (2026) emphasized that the shift from expectancy-value theory to Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) was intended to show that people's decisions are shaped and constrained by the situations in which they find themselves. Similarly, Knobloch et al. (2007) found that agriculture provided situatedness, connectedness, and authenticity by helping students relate classroom content to daily life, real-world environments, and community concerns.

Connection to Literature

This strategy is grounded in Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT), which explains that students' motivation, choices, engagement, and persistence are shaped by their expectancies for success and the subjective value they attach to specific tasks. In simple terms, students are more likely to engage when they believe, 'I can succeed,' and when they believe, 'This task matters.' SEVT also emphasizes that motivation is situated. Students' expectancies and values are shaped by socializers, prior experiences, family and cultural messages, classroom practices, feedback, relationships, opportunities, identities, and perceived costs (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Eccles et al., 2026). From this perspective, learner-centered teaching should intentionally situate classroom tasks in ways that help students see themselves, their goals, and their communities in the learning process. A writing assignment, classroom discussion, case study, presentation, laboratory activity, community-based project, or problem-solving task can become more motivating when students understand how it connects to their lived experiences, career goals, family values, social identity, or community concerns.

Positive teacher-student relationships serve as an important motivational mechanism within this framework. Supportive relationships can strengthen students' expectancy for success by helping them feel capable, seen, and encouraged. They can also increase task value by helping students connect course content to their personal goals, future careers, families, communities, and real-world concerns. At the same time, positive relationships can reduce perceived costs by lowering anxiety, fear of failure, isolation, confusion, and uncertainty about classroom expectations. Research supports the importance of relationships for motivation and learning (Bennett et al., 2023; Cornelius-White, 2007; Koca, 2016). This perspective is further supported by recent motivational work. Mugabo

(2026) highlighted Dr. Jacquelynne Eccles' explanation that students are not simply motivated or unmotivated; rather, they are motivated toward specific tasks depending on context, confidence, value, relationships, opportunities, and barriers. Applied to learner-centered teaching, this means educators should ask, 'What is this student motivated to do, and how can I build from that?' rather than assuming that a student lacks motivation.

How It Works / Implementation of LCT Strategy

This learner-centered teaching strategy helps instructors situate student motivation by intentionally connecting classroom tasks to students' experiences, relationships, identities, goals, and communities. The strategy begins with the assumption that every learning task is situated. A discussion is situated because students bring previous experiences with speaking, listening, language, confidence, peer judgment, and belonging. A writing assignment is situated because students bring prior experiences with academic writing, feedback, identity, and fear of failure. A group project is situated because students bring previous experiences with collaboration, leadership, exclusion, trust, and responsibility.

Instructors can implement this strategy by designing tasks that invite students to connect course content to their own contexts. For example, a professor may ask students to analyze how a course concept applies to their family, local community, future profession, or a real-world issue they care about. In agriculture, food, environmental science, education, leadership, or natural resources courses, students may examine problems related to land use, water, food security, farming systems, community development, climate, technology, or local decision-making.

Relationship-building is also central to the strategy. Instructors can begin with simple but meaningful practices such as learning and using students' names, greeting students, showing genuine interest in their experiences, inviting student voices, and creating opportunities for students to share their perspectives. The strategy also includes inclusive communication, constructive feedback, transparent expectations, and classroom norms that promote respect, trust, and psychological safety. In SEVT terms, these practices strengthen expectancy for success by helping students believe, 'I can do this.' They also increase task value by helping students understand why the learning matters.

Student-to-student relationships are equally important. Collaborative learning activities, small-group discussions, peer mentoring, structured reflection, and shared problem-solving tasks can create a classroom culture of mutual support and belonging. These practices reduce social and emotional costs by making participation feel safer and more meaningful. They also allow students to learn from one another's experiences, recognize diverse perspectives, and build a culture of respect and recognition. A practical implementation routine may include five steps. First, instructors identify the learning task and ask how students may experience it differently. Second, they invite students to connect the task to their prior experiences, goals, identity, community, or future career. Third, they provide scaffolding, examples, and encouragement so students believe they can succeed. Fourth, they create peer interaction that supports belonging and shared learning. Fifth, they reflect on what barriers or costs may reduce students' willingness to participate and adjust the task accordingly.

Results to Date / Implications / Impact

The expected contribution of this framework is that it helps instructors identify the situated factors that shape student motivation in specific learning tasks. Rather than viewing motivation as a fixed trait inside the student, this framework encourages instructors to examine how motivation is shaped by task design, classroom relationships, past experiences, family expectations, social identity, community background, future goals, opportunities, and perceived barriers. Using SEVT, instructors

can ask three guiding questions. First, do students believe they can succeed in this task? Second, do students see this task as meaningful, useful, enjoyable, or connected to who they are and who they want to become? Third, what costs or barriers may reduce students' willingness to engage? These questions help instructors understand why students may engage deeply in some tasks but withdraw from others. This framework may help college professors make learning more relevant, inclusive, and learner-centered. For example, when instructors connect course tasks to students' communities, natural resources, family experiences, social identities, and future professions, students may be more likely to see value in learning. When instructors provide clear expectations, encouragement, and respectful relationships, students may be more likely to believe they can succeed. When instructors reduce unnecessary fear, confusion, isolation, or social risk, students may experience lower perceived costs of participation.

Future Plans / Advice to Others

For educators seeking to implement learner-centered teaching, situated motivation should be viewed as a central part of effective teaching. Instructors should not begin by asking, 'Why are students unmotivated?' Instead, they should ask, 'What are students motivated to do, what contexts have shaped that motivation, and how can this task be designed to connect with students' values, experiences, and goals?' Small actions can have meaningful effects. Learning students' names, inviting their voices, connecting examples to real-world issues, using community-based problems, encouraging peer interaction, providing clear expectations, and showing students how a task connects to their future can strengthen motivation. In learner-centered classrooms, motivation grows when students feel capable, valued, respected, connected, and able to see meaning in what they are learning.

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