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Leveraging Situated Expectancy-Value Theory to Enhance Student Persistence: A Reflection-Based Approach

Context

The strategies and theoretical insights presented in this teaching tip were developed through a scholarly dialogue between Dr. Aimable Mugabo and Dr. Jacquelynne Eccles. These ideas were extracted from the interview transcripts of "Expectancy-Value Theory Explained," where they explored the evolution of motivational theory and its practical application in educational settings (Mugabo, 2026).

Introduction

In agricultural education, students often possess the technical ability to succeed but choose to disengage when the material becomes challenging. According to Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT), a framework developed by Jacquelynne Eccles and colleagues, student motivation is not a static trait but a dynamic process driven by two primary factors: expectancy for success (Can I do this?) and subjective task value (Is it worth my time?). Although educators are skilled at teaching the "how" of agriculture, students frequently struggle with the "why". When students do not see the immediate relevance of a lesson, the perceived cost (the effort, time, and emotional energy required) begins to outweigh the perceived benefits. To combat this, instructors must move beyond simple knowledge transmission and actively help students construct utility value (usefulness for future goals) and attainment value (relevance to personal identity). This teaching tip provides a structured "Utility-Value Reflection" strategy to help students bridge the gap between abstract classroom concepts and their future professional aspirations.

Procedure

This strategy is designed to be a low-stakes, high-impact intervention that can be integrated into any agricultural lecture or laboratory setting. Follow these four steps to implement the reflection:

1. Contextualize the Core Concept: Identify a specific technical skill or concept (e.g., calculating fertilizer application rates or identifying plant pathogens). Before beginning the technical instruction, briefly mention how this skill serves as a "building block" for professionals in the field, such as agronomists or farm managers.

2. The "Future-Self" Reflection Prompt: Dedicate the final 10 minutes of the session to a written reflection. Instead of a standard "exit ticket" that tests content knowledge, use a prompt focused on motivation: "Identify one specific career path or community challenge you are passionate about. How could the concept we covered today help you succeed in that role or solve that problem?"

3. Address Perceived Costs: During the reflection, encourage students to be honest about the costs of the task. If a student finds a concept like hydroponic chemistry difficult, have them reflect on whether the "cost" of the effort is justified by the “utility” of managing a sustainable food system. Acknowledging that learning is an investment of limited resources (time and energy) helps students make a conscious decision to engage.

4. Identity Mapping and Role Models: Collect the reflections and use them to guide future instruction. If several students mention an interest in urban agriculture, bring in examples or guest speakers from that field who utilize the specific technical skills being taught. This reinforces attainment value by showing students that the skills they are learning are essential to the person they wish to become.

Assessment

The effectiveness of this tip is rooted in shifting the student's psychological perspective from passive recipient to active investor. By asking students to perform “utility-value reflections,” instructors are directly strengthening the task value component of the SEVT model. Evidence suggests that these brief interventions work for several reasons:

- Reduced Psychological Barriers: By normalizing mistakes and focusing on growth, instructors build the student's expectancy for success.
- Increased Persistence: When students explicitly define why a task is useful, they are more likely to persevere through difficult technical content because the perceived “attainment value” outweighs the “emotional cost” of potential failure.
- Identity Alignment: Students are most motivated when their activities align with their sense of self. These reflections force a connection between the classroom and the student's future identity, making the learning feel personal rather than mandatory.

Regular use of these reflections allows the instructor to monitor the “motivational pulse” of the classroom. If students consistently struggle to find value in a particular unit, it serves as a signal to the instructor to provide more real-world examples or adjust the perceived difficulty (cost) of the assignment.

References

Mugabo, A. (2026, March 6). *Expectancy-Value Theory Explained | Interview with Dr. Jacquelynne Eccles* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/9sbBB5WpcOw

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