



## WHAT CREATES THE MOTIVATION TO CHANGE?

2 KEY FACTORS INFLUENCE TEACHERS' WILLINGNESS TO MODIFY THEIR PRACTICE

BY THOMAS ARNETT

**L**aura loved teaching. She loved getting to know her kindergarten students, doing hands-on activities with them, and coming up with creative ideas for lesson plans. But when her district kicked off its blended learning program, she felt lost, confused, and anxious in her own classroom.

As a blended learning teacher, she was supposed to incorporate online learning software into her reading and math lessons at least twice a week. But as someone with self-professed zero

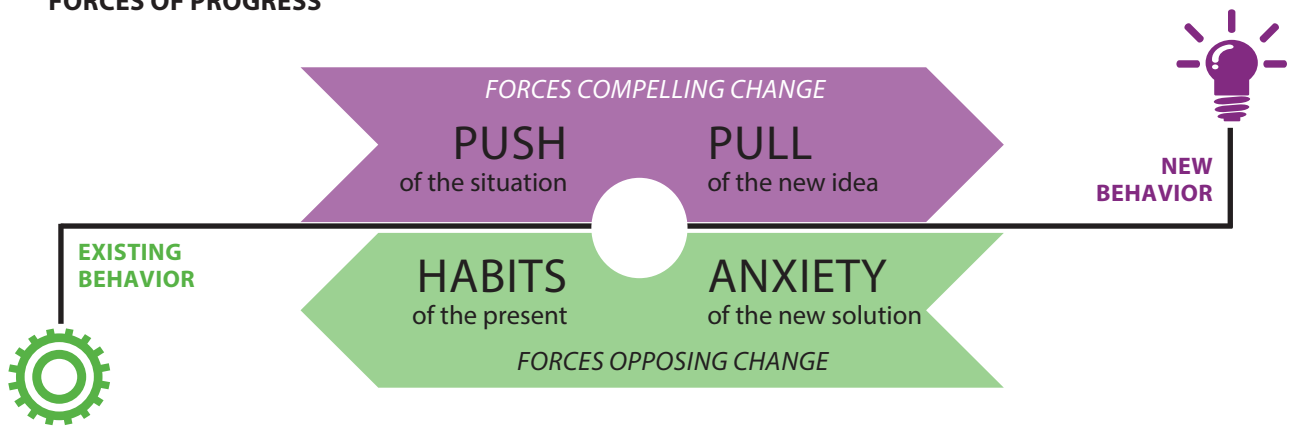
technical savvy, she felt petrified by the notion of using computers with her students.

How could she help them use software she did not understand herself? How would she deal with the inevitable technical difficulties that could quickly derail her classroom management? Most important, how could she have confidence that the time her students spent online was actually worthwhile? Troubled by these questions, she thought to herself, “This is the dumbest waste of time.”

Yet in her determination to not stand out as a Luddite and keep her students from falling behind the rest of the school, she dutifully hauled the laptop cart into her classroom and tried to get her students logged onto the district’s licensed software. Within the first few weeks, many of her worries came true. But at least no one could criticize her for not trying.

Laura is a fictional character based on teachers my colleagues and I have interviewed in our research. But the challenge she faced, and her approach

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to dealing with it, are real for many teachers.

Would Laura’s adoption of blended learning be considered a success? If you looked just at her evaluation rubric, you might think so. She was faithfully checking the box in the middle of the page that reads: Uses technology. And from a nearsighted perspective, she was helping reach the district’s adoption targets.

But good teaching doesn’t come from mere check-box compliance. Teachers who have real impact with their students continually use their expertise and intuition to evaluate, adapt, and improve how they implement new strategies within their classrooms.

New practices rarely make a difference unless teachers engage eagerly and thoughtfully in adopting and refining them. Given Laura’s response to blended learning, none of those approaches or mindsets seemed true for her.

So what can motivate teachers like Laura to adopt new practices with more enthusiasm and an eye for continuous improvement? The answer lies in the conditions that fuel a teacher’s appetite for change.

### **JOB**S TO BE DONE

If we want teachers to adopt new practices enthusiastically, the key

lies in understanding the desires and circumstances that define the jobs they are trying to get done. In this context, a job doesn’t refer to a professional role, like teacher or principal, but to the things teachers are trying to accomplish to make progress in their work and their lives.

This concept comes from Harvard professor Clayton Christensen’s jobs to be done theory, which he and his colleagues developed while studying innovation across many sectors, including health care, real estate, and hospitality (Christensen, Dillon, Hall, & Duncan, 2016). It’s a theory that enables researchers and practitioners to uncover the motivations and circumstances in people’s lives that cause them to adopt new resources, strategies, or ideas.

According to the theory, all people are internally motivated to make changes in their lives that move them toward success or satisfaction within their particular life circumstances. The theory labels these circumstance-based desires as jobs. Just as people hire contractors to help them build houses or lawyers to help them build a case, people search for something they can hire to help them when jobs arise in their lives.

Importantly, jobs are not the same as goals. People often articulate goals based on what they say they want or

value, but then neglect those goals amidst the hustle and bustle of life. For example, consider how often people set goals to lose weight or exercise regularly, only to see those goals fall to the wayside as they manage the more pressing desires and circumstances that show up in day-to-day living. Jobs, in contrast, reflect the desires and circumstances that move people to take action.

Jobs are also not the same as responsibilities. When people meet their responsibilities, their motivation comes not from the responsibilities themselves but from an underlying job that gets fulfilled when they carry out those responsibilities.

An example from outside of education illustrates how jobs underlie motivation. One research team set out to discover what motivates many adults to purchase milkshakes in the morning. By interviewing patrons at one restaurant, the researchers found that many milkshake customers had long morning commutes. These people hired milkshakes not just as a snack, but as something that could relieve them from stress and boredom while one of their hands was busy driving.

In other words, people’s motivation to pick milkshakes over other food options had little to do with either nutrition or flavor preferences. In fact, their actions were likely incongruent

with any stated goals to live a healthy lifestyle. Instead, their desire for relief from boredom within the circumstance of a long commute defined the job that they were hiring for.

Similarly, teachers have jobs underlying their motivation to adopt new practices. For example, one teacher may look for supplementary activities to help him reach a particular student who always seems checked out. Another teacher may adopt a classroom management strategy from his colleague to deal with escalating conflicts with a student who frequently disrupts class.

Whenever teachers decide to change something about how they teach, an underlying job — defined by desires for progress within a particular set of circumstances — motivates that change.

The challenge for school leaders, then, is to figure out how to align new programs and initiatives with teachers' existing jobs so that teachers are motivated to use those programs and initiatives to fulfill their jobs. When they do so, adoption happens naturally.

In contrast, when an administrator-led program fails to address teachers' jobs, the outcomes that follow will range somewhere between mindless compliance and outright rejection.

In Laura's case, she didn't see blended learning as a way to fulfill any of her existing jobs. She often adopted new practices that offered manageable ways to engage and challenge more of her students. But she didn't see blended learning doing that for her. Instead, it triggered a new job in her life: trying not to fall behind on her school's new initiative. This new job diverted her attention from helping her students and instead focused her on managing perceptions.

Fortunately, compliance isn't the only job that motivates teachers to get on board with their schools' programs. Last spring, my colleagues and I interviewed teachers who had recently made a major

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change to their instructional strategies to discover the jobs motivating them to make those changes (Arnett, Moesta, & Horn, 2018).

Through our interviews, we discovered a number of jobs that intrinsically motivated teachers to change how they teach. These other jobs included: "Help me to lead the way in improving my school," "Help me find manageable ways to engage and challenge more of my students," and "Help me replace a broken instructional model so I can reach each student." When teachers saw schoolwide programs as compelling ways to fulfill these other jobs, they were eager to get on board.

#### **ADDRESS THE CIRCUMSTANCES**

Once school leaders identify their teachers' jobs, the next step for encouraging teachers to adopt new programs or practices is to address the circumstances that determine the desirability of a particular solution. According to Christensen's job theory, the circumstances that shape a job can be classified into four categories, called forces of progress because they move people either toward or away from adoption (see figure on p. 56).

Two forces move people toward new behaviors. First is the **push** of the situation — the moments of struggle that cause someone to want to take action. The push of the current situation is about what is taking place in someone's life that makes him decide

he needs to change and make some progress differently.

Part of Laura's lack of interest in blended learning stemmed from the fact that she didn't have any strong pushes motivating her to change how she taught. On a typical day, her students were engaged, she was having fun with her classroom activities, and together they were sharing the joys of kindergarten. In her mind, there was nothing broken that needed fixing.

If her administrators wanted her to be drawn to blended learning, they first needed to help her recognize for herself a need for change. For example, before any talk of blended learning, they might have used reading diagnostics to help her see how some of her students were slipping by with unaddressed challenges in reading.

The second force is the **pull** of a new solution to satisfy the job to be done. Without this, people will stay on a treadmill — thinking that they must do something different, but not acting. That new solution must be enticing. It must create some magnetism and allure so people can see how it can improve their lives.

Laura felt the greatest pull from songs, games, crafts, and other physical activities that channeled her students' energy toward learning. In contrast, blended learning seemed to her to offer little that was relevant for kindergarten. To create pull for blended learning, her administrators needed to help her see that blended learning wasn't just about plugging kids mindlessly into devices.

Instead, blended learning could help her differentiate reading instruction while also helping her manage and reinforce her other classroom learning centers where the real magic of learning happened.

It is also important to address two forces opposing change. The first is the **anxiety** of the new solution. As people consider a new solution, they start

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thinking about all the things they might not be able to accomplish with it. Will it deliver on its promises? Will they be able to use it? Is it too expensive? How will they learn to use something so new? That anxiety — that fear of the unknown — deters people from adopting anything new.

In Laura's case, anxieties about technology were her biggest deterrents to adopting blended learning. Thoughtful administrators should have identified these anxieties before rolling out their schoolwide blended learning program.

To address these anxieties, they might have offered Laura a mix of professional learning experiences, such as upfront training on the blended learning technology, opportunities to observe or even co-teach with another teacher who was familiar and comfortable with blended learning, a community of other teachers who were also learning how to use blended learning, and a blended learning coach who could drop in to Laura's classroom the moment she hit any bumps in the road.

The second force acting against motivation to adopt something new is **habit**. "I'm used to doing it this way" or "I don't love this, but at least I know it works" are classic habits that keep people wedded to the status quo. The thought of switching to a new solution is almost too overwhelming. Sticking with the devil you know, even if imperfect, feels safer.

For Laura, years of teaching experience, tried-and-true classroom procedures, a file cabinet of well-worn lesson plans and activities, and her basic notions about how kindergarten should look and feel all worked against any appeal she might have seen in blended learning.

The only way for her administrators to curb these habits would have been to move her to a new grade level where her habits were no longer relevant. But given how much she

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loved kindergarten, and how much her students and families loved her, such a major shift in her teaching assignment wouldn't have made sense.

Rather than trying to address her habits head-on, Laura's administrators needed instead to focus on making sure the pushes and pulls of blended learning gave her enough positive motivation for change to overcome the inertia of her habits.

In the end, uptake for most new instructional programs lives or dies based on how well the programs address the forces that act on teachers' motivation to change. When school leaders create strong pushes and pulls for a program and minimize teachers' habits and anxieties, the program can develop momentum of its own that runs ahead of their deliberate efforts to promote adoption. But when school leaders fail to take these forces into account, no amount of directives or incentives will be sufficient to sustain the program.

Fortunately, even if a program gets off to a rough start, understanding and addressing teachers' jobs sheds light on how to make needed course corrections. In Laura's case, partway through the academic year, her school finally gave her training on the software she was supposed to use and connected her with colleagues who could help her figure out the classroom procedures for making blended learning work.

By the end of the following year, Laura couldn't imagine teaching any other way. She relied on the software to help her keep her advanced students

challenged, show her which students were struggling, and save her from hours of work in the copy room that consumed her prep time in years past. And with blended learning, her small group lessons took on a whole new life.

## TWO IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

As Laura's story illustrates, jobs to be done is a powerful theory for helping education leaders align their programs and initiatives with teachers' intrinsic motivation. The next time you're designing a new instructional program for your school, start by asking yourself two important questions:

- What are the circumstance-based desires that define the jobs teachers are already trying to get done?
- What forces will move teachers toward or away from choosing my program as a way to fulfill their jobs?

If you can address these questions, you'll be well on your way to launching or implementing an instructional program that not only garners adoption, but also motivates the kind of engaged adoption that drives better student outcomes.

## REFERENCES

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