

# Think Tank: Maslow



Marc Helgesen

## Maslow's Hierarchy and University Part-Timers

*"The most wonderful good fortune that can happen to any human being is to be paid for doing that which he passionately loves to do." - Abraham Maslow*

I hope that describes us as teachers, at least much of the time. However, there is one type of teacher that is too often overlooked: Part-timers. I'd like to look at them and connect their work to Maslow's Hierarchy.



Universities are making more and more use of part-timers. I think that's a mistake for many reasons, including the fact that it is making life harder for students: Students, who find it hard enough trying to catch full-time teachers with time to listen to them, encounter even more difficulties getting to talk to part-timers outside of the classroom. I know better than to waste my time and energy on a topic I can't do anything about (i.e., convincing the school to hire more full-timers). Instead, I'll look at an area where I can make a difference. How can we help increase the motivation of our part-time teachers?

**If you were intentionally designing a demotivating work situation, it would look a lot like the way universities treat their part-timers.**

If you were intentionally designing a demotivating work situation, it would look a lot like the way universities treat their part-timers. At most schools, part-timers have only minimal contact with the school staff and faculty between terms—just enough to establish what classes they’re teaching, schedules,

classrooms, etc. Once classes start, part-timers here in Japan show up every week, *hanko* in (sign in with their name stamp), and go right to their classroom or hang out in the part-timers room, talking only to other part-timers on the once-a-week plan.

Teaching is a helping profession. As such, the real rewards for teaching are—or at least should be—in the upper half of Maslow’s Hierarchy. For teachers, issues like belonging, esteem, achievement, and self-actualization are where we want to be working. Others describe how important that is for learners. I’d suggest it is just as important for teachers—if the teacher is motivated to be creative, and both passionate and compassionate, there’s a good chance it will rub off on the learners. But the way the system is organized, part-time teachers come, teach, go home, and then get paid. Our institutions are paying attention to only their physiological (physical) and safety needs. They can buy food and pay the rent (hopefully). How can we expect part-timers to really feel like they are part of a team (love and belonging) when they hardly ever see the full-timers?

Of course, a lot of part-time teachers do get those higher-level rewards due to their own hard work and their great relationships with students. That is wonderful, but wouldn’t it be even better if the schools were helping everyone to achieve those things?

In my department, we’ve been consciously trying to make our part-timers feel like the important part of the program they are. What we do isn’t particularly difficult, but the part-timers have told us how much they appreciate it and how different it is than at most other schools. Here are some of the things we have done.



- For many years, we had a part-time faculty room in the department. Actually, we just converted a “preparation room” (*jumbi-shitsu*) next to a communication classroom (a former language lab). Of course, our part-timers could use the university-wide part-time staff room, but they all preferred the one in the department. It was right across from the department’s full-time English teachers’

offices so we all got to see each other every week. That made it easy to talk about how classes are going, about students who are having problems, the things they need for their classes, etc. Many of our part-timers commented that they feel our doors are always open. There is better communication and “having a home” in the department made it clear they are part of the department.

- In the part-time faculty room, each teacher had a mailbox and a basket where they could keep things so they don't have to be dragging extra teaching supplies to and from school every week. We also had class sets of colored pencils, markers, glue sticks, scissors, and other stationary supplies, which makes it easier to do creative lessons that go beyond, “Open your books to page 57.” (We also have a big box of stuffed animals—but that is a story for some other time).

Unfortunately, when the department was restructured and its staff expanded, we lost the part-timers' room. We moved the teachers' mail boxes to a bookshelf between my office and another English teacher's office. We still have the class sets of extra materials. We see the majority of the part-timers most weeks. But it is not as good as when we had a room that was theirs.



- At the beginning of the year, the other full-time teacher and I hold a “pizza lunch” for all the part-timers. It is more than meeting the “physiological need for food” (though everyone likes a free lunch.) It is a chance for the teachers to get to know each other—full and part-timers—to talk about our plans, to share ideas. It starts the year off in a positive way and builds the understanding that we really are a team.

I'm an avid barbecuer. A few times a year, I cook extra and bring lunch for the Monday part-timers. Mostly it is because I love sharing my free-time interest with them—but I think it communicates that I care about them as people.

- Many schools discriminate against non-NEST (non-Native English Speaking Teachers) for oral classes. We don't. Our English communication classes meet twice a week and we try to organize the schedules so students have one NEST and one non-NEST teacher. There are things non-NESTs are better at than natives, one of which is being great role models. Also, in this age of international English, the fact that our students meet good English speakers who are Japanese, Korean, Thai (our present complement), and an



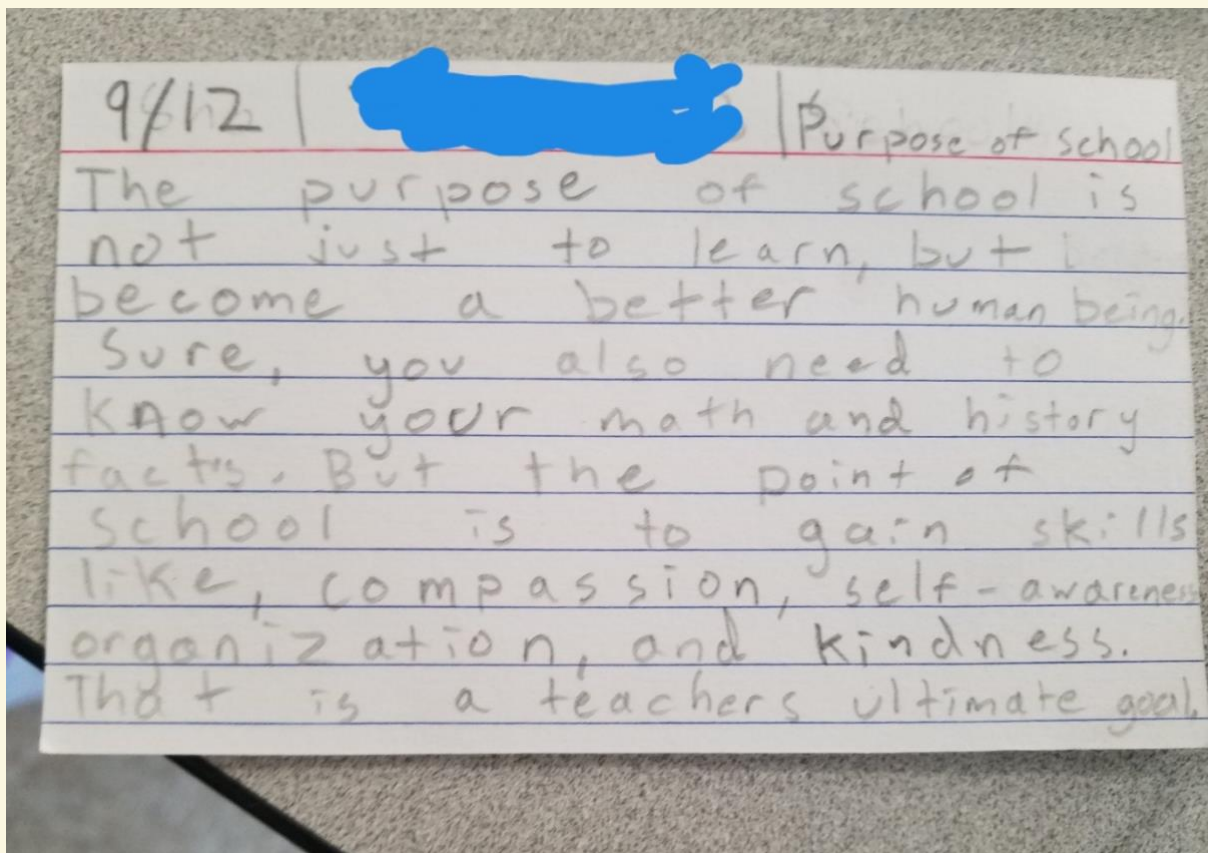
Iranian coming on shortly, in addition to Americans, Canadians, Aussies, Kiwis, and Brits, is all the better. And, by not discriminating, we have a much wider pool of teachers to choose from. We can choose really good, highly motivated teachers. The students know the reasons behind this policy. We try to make it a case of setting high expectations for everyone.

All these ideas, I think, come back to a basic, essential element of motivation: Respect. When we treat our part-time colleagues as the professionals they are, it is easier for them to feel they are part of the team. That is dealing with higher levels on the Hierarchy.

(An earlier version of this appears on ELTnews.com a few years ago.)

---

Marc Helgesen is a professor at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University, Sendai and teaches Positive Psychology in ELT at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. He's author of over 180 articles, books, and textbooks for ELT including *English Teaching and the Science of Happiness (ABAX)* and *the English Firsthand series (Pearson)*. He's been a featured or plenary speaker at conferences on five continents (include being Featured at next month's JALT conference where he is talking about brain science and happiness). His main websites are [www.ELTandHappiness.com](http://www.ELTandHappiness.com) and [www.HelgesenHandouts.weebly.com](http://www.HelgesenHandouts.weebly.com)



Written by a 6<sup>th</sup> grader. Tweeted by a teacher.