STUDYING & UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION

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“Of all the problems in living we humans must confront, that of self-motivation is the most important and the least understood.” Kytle

There are many challenges which face America’s education system. Schools face economic pressures to increase their teaching load and class size. Many students simply pass exams or meet classroom requirements without having thought deeply about that major’s values and questions. Indeed, many view education as a means toward a diploma, not as an intrinsic value in and of itself. As the costs of education rise, parents and students demand more, perhaps unrealistically, from their teachers. Society is also demanding that schools handle non-traditional education tasks such as handling substance abuse, eating disorders, discipline, and nutrition.

Ironically, while the costs of education skyrocket, many students are displaying less concern for their education. For example, 40 percent of recent college students report being bored in class, 63 percent say they arrive late to class, and only 32 percent of freshman say they spend at least six or more hours a week studying (Kytle, 2004). Indeed, many teachers criticize their students for their laxness and apathy. However, schools and teachers are also part of the problem. Contemporary education appears to be arranged as an organization which produces commodities, not critical thinkers adept at resolving complex issues (Kytle, 2004). Moreover, teachers seem more concerned with their research or teaching students “what” to think instead of “how” to think. If “learning is our species’ most important survival mechanism,” (Kytle, 2004), then we have much to fear. The following paper will discuss the relevant literature on the study of motivation. I will also discuss motivation as it relates to education at the United States Military Academy.

Historical Look at the Study of Motivation

The root word of the term motivation is movere (to move). In regards to learning, motivation generally involves inner forces, enduring traits, behavioral responses to stimuli, and sets of beliefs and affects. The study of motivation can be broken down into two main categories: behavioral and cognitive theories. Behavioral theories “view motivation as a change in the rate, frequency of occurrence, or form of behavior as a function of environmental events and stimuli” (Schunk & Pintrich, 1996). Teachers can shape student responses by conditioning the external environment. In contrast, cognitive theories stress the internal structures and processing of information and beliefs. Cognitive theories stress the importance of perceptions of competence, values, affects, goals, and social comparisons when measuring motivation.

Kytle (2004) reminds us that if we want to understand how to motivate others, we must first comprehend the motivation and learning dynamics in ourselves. Toward this end, psychologists have added a lot to our understanding of motivational learning. Early psychologists studied the importance of will (an individual’s desire, want, or purpose) and volition (the act of using the will) (Wundt). Other psychologists such as McDougall (1926) and James (1890) argued that one’s instincts drive motivation. Of course, most are familiar with Freud’s work on psychotherapy. Freud conceptualized motivation as psychical energy which could be expressed or repressed for various reasons.
Conditioning is another psychological breakthrough which explains one’s motivation. Pavlov’s dog is the classical example here (Pavlov 1927). In the classroom, teachers can employ either positive or negative reinforcement to encourage certain behavior. At West Point, most of the conditioning comes in negative reinforcement. Cadets receive negative “observation reports” if they miss class, fall asleep, or perform poorly in class. Cadets lose their privileges if they receive a poor grade, and they receive negative feedback on exams and papers for mistakes.

There are many other theories of motivation. Purposive behaviorism suggests the goal directedness of behavior (Tolmman 1932). At West Point, many cadets pursue a high GPA in order to obtain their branch and post of choice, not for the intrinsic value of learning itself. Trait theories contend that specific characteristics of individuals can explain consistency of behavior across situations (Allport 1937). West Point admits candidates who display certain characteristics in regards to leadership, academics, and sports. They do this in their admissions process because they believe these variables are solid indicators of high performance at the Academy.

Teacher and Classroom Influences

Many studies point to the behavior of teachers as directly influencing a student’s level of motivation. Clark & Yinger (1979) argue that teachers can improve student motivation by specifying learning objectives, organizing activities, and delineating evaluation methods. Teachers decide whether students will be evaluated on competitive, cooperative, or individualistic arrangements (Slavin 1983a). Besides in their planning, teachers also influence student motivation by their instruction delivery and monitoring student performance. Rosenshine & Stevens (1986) created the following list of instructional functions: (1) review, check previous day’s work, reteach as necessary; (2) present new material; (3) give students guided practice, check for understanding; (4) provide feedback, reteach if needed; (5) give students independent practice; (6) review at spaced intervals.

Lantos (1997) argues that a professor’s attitude is the crucial variable which makes a difference in a students’ thinking, attitude, and performance. As such, Lantos presents nine principles for motivating students: (1) pragmatic, problem-solving, and participation-provoking; (2) reward-dispersing and reinforcing; (3) Objectives-oriented and Outcomes-achieving; (4) flexible and fluid; (5) enthusiastic and encouraging; (6) satifier of students’ needs and desires and salesman-minded, (7) sincere and ethical, and straightforward; (8) on top of things and on the cutting edge; and (9) rapport-establishing and relationships-building. Patrick et al. (2000) would agree with Lantos. In an experimental study of college student they found that a teacher’s enthusiasm was a strong predictor of a student’s intrinsic motivation.

Relationships can be a key component of student motivation as well. The manner in which teachers ask questions, provide feedback, administer rewards and punishments, praise and criticize, respond to students’ questions and requests for help, and offer assistance when students experience difficulties goes a long way in determining how motivated a student will be to learn course material. In regards to student feedback, teachers may provide performance, motivational, attributional, or strategy comments (Rosenshine & Stevens 1986).

The climate a teacher creates in his/her classroom will also influence student behavior. Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) demonstrated three types of classroom leadership: authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire. Group productivity was highest with the authoritarian and democratic forms of leadership.

Classroom management is crucial to fostering a healthy level of student motivation. Kounin (1977) listed “withitness” (demonstration by teachers that they know what is going on at all times; “overlapping” (ability of teachers to attend to more than one issue simultaneously; “movement management” (strategies designed by teachers to initiate, sustain, and alter activity flow in the
classroom; “group focus” (extent to which teachers keep students attentive to the learning task; and “programming to avoid satiation” (how well teachers minimize boredom due to repetition of material).

School Culture and Organization
Scholars define a school’s culture as the norms, values, and shared beliefs of the preponderance of members at that institution. Moreover, these norms, values, and shared beliefs can be both consciously and implicit. Generally speaking, a school’s culture is comprised of the following elements. First, it entails a belief about the character of human nature. Are students basically good? Are they motivated to learn without incentives? Or are student basically bad, not motivated to learn and in need of negative reinforcement? At West Point, much of the faculty believes the latter. The second aspect of beliefs concerns the malleability of student learning and ability. Do students have the capacity to grow their learning and ability, or do students have a limited capacity? A third component of a school’s culture are norms over classroom behavior. At West Point, cadets expect to do many group assignments and work at the boards. Finally, a school’s culture is informed by the shared goals or purposes of the school. At West Point, the mission statement is quite clear. However, the dual nature of the Academy as both an institution of military and academic instruction often hurts student motivation. Military training during the academic semester sends a message to cadets, staff, & faculty alike that the true priority of West Point is military, not academic training (Schunk & Pintrich 1996).

Current Research on Motivation
Current research on motivation focuses on theories which bridge the work of past scholars. Recognizing the complexities of how human behavior interacts with one’s environment, current scholars are researching how combining disparate theories may give us a more comprehensive understanding of student motivation. For example, Ainley et al. (2006) focuses on the interest of learning. They conceptualize student interest as an amalgam of affective, motivational and cognitive processes. Student interest involves positive activation (affect), directed attention and impulses to action (motivation), and information-seeking (cognition). Another example is Lin et al. (2003). Lin et al. conducted a survey of college students comparing intrinsic and extrinsic learning motivation. Unlike other scholars who treat these two variables as dichotomous, Lin et al. postulate that their relationship may be additive. Lin et al.’s contend that a moderate level of extrinsic motivation (operationalized as pursuing good grades) and a high level of intrinsic motivation (operationalized as a preference for challenge), were the best predictor of classroom results.

Other current research focuses on how relationships and distractions may influence motivation. Bong (2008) assesses the role parents play in student motivation. She argues that students which have a stronger sense of obligation toward pleasing parents will have stronger performance-approaches to learning as well as stronger performance-avoidance goals due to fear of failure and upsetting one’s parents. Kytte (2004) argued that students are faced with more distractions which vie for their attention today. According to Kytte, “staying motivated in the face of distraction and fatigue is a daily challenge for individuals who must make lives for themselves in a problematic world of ambiguous choice” (Kytte, 2004). Fries and Dietz (2004) are also concerned with how distractions influence student motivation. They discovered that distractions (such as watching videos) do not influence intrinsic motivation; however, the presence of videos does reduce a student’s motivation to perform well.

Controversy in Research
Some current issues in the research of motivation entail “how much” teachers and institutions should strive to motivate students to learn. Are teachers and institutions creating an unhealthy expectation from students that teachers are obligated to motivate their students in the classroom? At West Point, some staff and faculty argue that West Point is doing too much to promote instructor
responsibility to motivate cadets in the classroom. This organizational culture then promotes an unhealthy level of apathy and “consumer” mentality among the cadets that their teachers will ensure they make it through each course. Other controversial methods to promote student motivation include Lewes & Stiklus’s (2007) practice of rewarding students with money for their participation in the classroom. Some argue that this practice of positive reinforcement further enshrines a sense of entitlement among the students that they deserve recognition and need external motivation in order to participate in the classroom.

Conclusion
The study of motivation remains a critical component of the learning and teaching disciplines. In a rapidly changing world scholars must continually reassess how the changing social, political, and economic complexities in society impact the attention and mood of students and teachers alike (Kytle, 2004).

Annotated Bibliography


Ainley focus on the interest of learning. They conceptualize student interest as an amalgam of affective, motivational and cognitive processes. Student interest involves positive activation (affect), directed attention and impulses to action (motivation), and information-seeking (cognition). In other words, “triggering interest activates a system that generates positive feelings, focuses attention on the object that has triggered interests, and in the absence of stronger competing motivates will prompt cognitive activity” (402). While convoluted at times, Ainley provides an adequate literature review which demonstrates how these three processes are inter-related.


Ames argues that scholars all too often measure motivation by quantitative changes in behavior (e.g., higher achievement). Ames contends that teachers should be concerned about the ways students view themselves in relation to the task and how they approach learning. Ames refers to this as a “master goal.” A mastery goal tenet is that effort and outcome covary. There is an intrinsic value in learning and effort utilization. Master goals lead to pride and satisfaction in effort, a preference for risk taking and challenging work, and perseverance in learning in the face of difficulty. Ames argues that teachers should focus their classroom structures on effort, not ability. Thus, teachers should create the structures of their class (tasks, authority, and evaluation/recognition) in concert with mastery goals.

Many scholars believe that social motivation and student motivation are inextricably linked. However, as Anderman et al. points out, the causal mechanism of how these two variables are linked is not well known. In this introductory article, Anderman et al. illustrates the contours of debate on social processes and academic motivation. Some scholars focus on how social motives influences academic engagement. Other scholars focus on social relationships which deal with interpersonal relationships (student-teacher, student-parents, student-student), interaction patterns, and social perceptions. Still others focus on a student’s perception of social acceptance or sense of belonging to a community. Finally, Anderman et al. argue that scholars should not discount the importance of culture and cultural processes when examining student motivation.


Bong assesses the role parents play in student motivation. She argues that students which have a stronger sense of obligation toward pleasing parents will have stronger performance-approaches to learning as well as stronger performance-avoidance goals due to fear of failure and upsetting one’s parents. These students will also demonstrate stronger tendencies to cheat or avoid seeking help. Bong’s research demonstrates that the quality of relationships parents maintain with their children will have a profound influence on how their children fair in disparate learning situations.


Fries & Dietz present two research questions: First, what are the consequences of temptation for the ongoing learning process? Second, when does an alternative turn into a temptation, entailing detrimental effects on learning? Fries & Dietz discovered that distractions (such as watching videos) do not influence intrinsic motivation; however, the presence of videos does reduce a student’s motivation to perform well. Moreover, they discovered that the presence of a distracting alternative activity was detrimental to deep learning outcomes but not to surface learning outcomes.


Katz et al. argue that junior high school students report lower autonomous motivation for homework than do elementary school students. The author attributes this to a drop in teachers’ support of students’ psychological needs. This research fits with the work done by “stage-environment fit” theorists who argue that students that move from the intimate and supportive elementary school to the large junior high environment which presents less autonomy and teacher support, will demonstrate a lower level of motivation to learn. The author also concedes that the characteristics of the home environment, such as parents’ support, may also be related to differences in the quality of students’ motivation to homework at different ages, although the connection is not entirely clear.


Many scholars believe that “the number one problem in education today is the failure to motivate students...to get them off the dime and into action” (Hendricks 1987). Many students seek not to learn
but rather to achieve a good grade and obtain credits pursuant graduation requirements. In other words, they want a degree, not an education. Lantos argues that a professor’s attitude is the crucial variable which makes a difference in a students’ thinking, attitudes, and performance. As such, Lantos presents nine principles for motivating students: (1) pragmatic, problem-solving, and participation-provoking; (2) reward-dispensing and reinforcing; (3) Objectives-oriented and Outcomes-achieving; (4) flexible and fluid; (5) enthusiastic and encouraging; (6) satisfy of students’ needs and desires and salesman-minded, (7) sincere and ethical, and straightforward; (8) on top of things and on the cutting edge; and (9) rapport-establishing and relationships-building.


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Nelson & DeBacker contend that peer relationships influence achievement motivation. Adolescents who perceive they are valued by classmates demonstrate higher levels of adaptive achievement motivation. They reported higher scores on self-efficacy and mastery, performance-approach, intimacy, and responsibility goals. On the contrary, students who perceive they are not valued by classmates or who possess a friend who is resistant to school norms form maladaptive achievement motivation. This research complements the research on interpersonal support and student motivation.


Pascarella et al. examine the variables which influence student motivation in regards to learning science. They held science achievement and student background characteristics constant. They discovered that class morale/social environment and the utility of science content and science classes were statistically significant in promoting learning motivation. Teacher motivation was statistically significant only for early adolescents. Finally, a teacher’s control over and structure of classroom activities did not influence student motivation.


Patrick et al. add to the literature on intrinsic versus extrinsic learning motivation. In an experimental study of college student they found that a teacher’s enthusiasm was a strong predictor of a student’s intrinsic motivation. A teacher who is perceived to have a dynamic, enthusiastic teach style tends to have students who report being motivated by the subject matter and feeling energized in class. Patrick et al. postulate that teach enthusiasm may serve as an external catalyst for the intrinsic motivational energy that may be lying dormant within the student.
Additional Resources


