STUDENT MOTIVATION

John C. Baskerville, Jr.

This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 2012.

Whether education professionals consider student motivation to be an inherent trait, driven largely by the individual psychology of the student or a potentially latent force that can be facilitated, implanted and/or extracted from the student by the right teacher or classroom environment, almost all agree that a motivated student is a key element of a successful educational environment. With a focus on secondary and post-secondary education, this study performs a review of the literature on ‘student motivation’ through the following framework: history; key current issues; variations; beneficial attributes; and controversial aspects. Within this framework, it focuses on three general realms: individual student psychology; classroom environment; and teacher behavior and practices.

History. Because motivation is such a potentially vague and complex notion, the modern literature on ‘student motivation’ is exceptionally broad in scope and encompasses almost all facets of education. However, three of the most prominent areas of modern research are: (1) student motivation as it pertains to the psychological dimension of the student; (2) student motivation as it relates to the classroom environment; and (3) student motivation as it relates to teacher behavior, activities, and techniques (Dornyei, 2001).

A great deal of the literature on the subject appears to be rooted in the study of psychology and leadership, with concepts, such as ‘expectancy theory’ and ‘needs theory’ - that elevate the psychological dimension of the student - at the fore (Entwistle, 1974; Cooper, 1995). Briefly,
Vroom’s ‘expectancy theory’ posits that a student’s motivation will be based on the rewards that he/she may expect to gain from performance, together with the value that he/she places on the reward (Hancock, 2001). ‘Needs theory’, on the other hand, assumes that one’s motivation derives from various intrinsic needs, such as achievement and autonomy (Cooper, 1995). With this theory, the student is motivated by an internal desire to fulfill personal cognitive-related needs.

While these theories focus on the psychology of the individual and the extrinsic versus intrinsic nature of motivation, others have focused on the environment in which the learning takes place. Largely rooted in organizational theory, these studies move away from individual aspects and focus on what may be classified under the rubric of ‘classroom environment’ or ‘classroom context’. Bolander (1973), for example, argued that student motivation can be related (inverse proportionally) to class size. Other studies have looked at multiple dimensions of the classroom context, taking into account not only size but intangible aspects of the environment. Most of these studies advocate a classroom ‘environment’ that promotes engagement and respect, as opposed to a classroom that promotes individual achievement and competition among the students (Ryan, 2001).

Another realm of scholarly research has placed a large share of the ‘student motivation’ burden on the teacher. Lowman, for example, in his “Two Dimensional Model of Effective College Teaching,” has included descriptors that appear most often when learners evaluate for exceptional, award-winning teachers. They include, in order of appearance: “helpful;” “encouraging;” “challenging;” “fair;” “demanding;” “patient;” and “motivating” (Lowman, 1995). Also, with regards to teacher attributes as they relate to student motivation, Lowman has

---

1 Here, there is an implication that a good teacher understands and strives for student motivation.
made significant contributions to thoughts on effective lecturing. From the planning to the execution of the lecture, he has dissected the elements that keep a group of students involved, interested, and eager to engage with the material that the lecturer is presenting (Lowman, 1995).

**Key Current Issues.** The most recent literature, while not abandoning the focus on any of the three main realms of research, appears to strive to integrate the realms - not looking at them independently, but as realms that interact and inform and influence one another.

Hancock (2002) takes a nuanced look at teaching methodologies and student learner types (related to psychology) to demonstrate that student motivation is a factor of the relationship between the conceptual level of the student and the level of structure in the educator’s approach to the material. In this particular study, Hancock argues for an inverse proportional relationship, whereby the less conceptual a thinker a student is, he/she is more motivated by tightly structured presentation of material.

Recent literature also appears to shift away from fixed notions of motivation in the learner. For instance, one can observe a shift away from a focus on the individual learner and his/her seemingly *pre-determined or inherent* psychological make-up to the idea that with the right environment (e.g. having a say in content and deadlines; having the chance to re-engage assignment in order to reflect upon and improve past work) a student may grow and develop into a ‘self-regulated’ learner and one that understands the intrinsic value of learning (Young, 2003).

Sharing the notion that motivation is not a fixed value in a given individual, but one that varies according to nurturing and environment, there has also been quite a bit of research on affect and mindset as they relate to motivation and learning. In this arena, some have argued that to facilitate a student’s motivation to learn, especially when confronted with challenging material, one should not focus on intelligence as a set determinant of academic success, but
should teach young learners to be ‘mastery-oriented’ - looking at intelligence as something that
can be developed and honed over time (Dweck, 2007). Proponents argue that this type of mindset
motivates students to keep applying effort, even in the face of adversity. This would contrast with
a ‘helpless’ mindset that would lead a learner to throw up his/her hands in surrender when he/she
encountered a problem that exceeded a set intellectual capacity.

There is also a body of current literature that is concerned with ‘anxiety’ and motivation.
In the field of foreign language education, for example, Dornyei has written about maintaining
student motivation by removing from the language classroom elements that potentially provoke
anxiety (Dornyei, 94). The focus in this environment is a lack of competition, a collegial
atmosphere, and the ability to accept ‘mistakes’ as part of the developmental process, not as
something to be absolutely avoided and feared. In the arena of anxiety, Hancock (2001) has also
researched the notions of test anxiety and the evaluative nature of classrooms, demonstrating the
toxic mix of student test anxiety and a competitive, ‘rank-conscious’ classroom environment.

**Variations.** As noted above, focus on student motivation has varied from a focus on the
psychological make-up of the student to the classroom environment to teacher techniques. Within
the realm of the psychological nature of the student, one major point of variation has been in the
study of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. Recent literature has attempted to present these
varied views as a false dichotomy. One such example is Covington (2000) in which the author
argues that what the educator must understand is that while grades may appear to be extrinsic
motivators (positive or negative), they may also have intrinsic implications. The sophisticated
educator is one that understands how to motivate students with an appropriate mix of both
(intrinsic and extrinsic) and as much as possible understands the students’ interests and helps
build those interests through the link between success and interest in accomplishing the task of learning.

**Beneficial Attributes.** As with any theory of education and learning, there is no set consensus or accepted panacea for the ‘achievement’ of high student motivation. However, there are several ‘best practices’ and commonly accepted ideas that are prevalent throughout the literature. They include:\(^2\)

- **Student-focused.**
  - Provide timely and well thought out feedback so that the student has something on which to gauge – whether they are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated
  - Allow students to also provide feedback so that they feel that they have some ownership of the learning process
  - Foster a positive attitude among students that makes them believe that they can continue to grow and improve in their academic pursuits
  - Focus on acknowledging and praising engagement and mastery of concepts, as opposed to a having a laser focus on grades, which may be based on mechanical aspects, such as turning in homework on time
  - Provide examples of why the material is personally relevant to the students so that they may embrace it and see its value. In other words, as much as possible, demonstrate to them that they are not learning the material just because it is part of some abstract idea of ‘curriculum,’

- **Classroom Environment-focused.**
  - Try to foster an environment of cooperation and teamwork in the classroom, as opposed to an environment of fierce competition
  - Publicly praise (within reason) the good work of students so that their peers see that a level of excellence is attainable by a learner, not just a professional in the field

- **Teacher Behavior-focused.**
Get to know each student well and consciously vary teaching techniques (e.g., level of structure) to suit the type of learners in the particular class

Display a level of enthusiasm and excitement about the material that demonstrates to the students that

**Controversial Aspects.**

The idea of ‘controversial aspects’ may seem a bit odd as one addresses “student motivation.” After all, how could one argue against techniques and procedures designed to get students excited about the material and heavily engaged in the learning process? However, there has been no shortage of controversy in the discussion of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. Here, the controversy is rooted heavily in the fear that too much focus on extrinsic motivation, in the form of rewards for performance in school for example, may have the effect of diminishing what may be an intrinsic value to learn for the sake of development and understanding (Benabou, 2003; Covington, 2000). A second area of controversy reflects the broad and potentially all-encompassing nature of motivation as a field of study. That controversy rests in the idea that one may be inhibited in looking for and finding root causes and solutions for performance issues by simply writing off poor performance as lack of motivation at the individual or group level (Entwistle, 1974).

As a field of study, student motivation’s roots in psychology, organizational theory, pedagogical techniques, and several other academic disciplines alludes to the complexity of the issue and the difficulty of pinpointing one area or focal point to achieve it. Through a framework of history; key current issues; variations; beneficial attributes; and controversial aspects, this

---

survey captures key aspects of motivation as they relate to the realms of student psychology; classroom context; and teaching behaviors and techniques.

References


**Annotated Readings**


Benabou’s work performs an enlightening analysis of one of the potentially controversial aspects of student motivation – the balance of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, along with the potential detrimental effects of an over emphasis on extrinsic rewards. The article attempts to maintain balance and not view intrinsic versus extrinsic as a zero-sum, either-or game. What it attempts is a more nuanced approach to demonstrate that while intrinsic motivation is the goal for a motivated learner (or worker, etc.) there can be a role for extrinsic motivation early in the developmental process. However, if not carefully thought through and implemented, extrinsic rewards may hamper the development of intrinsic motivation early in the developmental process and will likely have negative effects in the long-run. While these assertions are not novel, the authors work through them with economics-based methodology and the theoretical foundations of ‘the looking-glass self’ and ‘self presentation’.


This study is one of several attempts at reconciling the concepts of ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ motivation and demonstrating that they are not mutually exclusive. While pointing out the literature that establishes the potential negative effects (on intrinsic motivation) of a rewards-based focus to learning, Covington attempts to demonstrate that extrinsic aspects (rewards, grades) have their place and will not diminish intrinsic motivation if applied with thought and planning. Two of the issues the paper highlights are: (1) a prominent aspect of intrinsic motivation is one’s particular interests. Therefore, if one adopts strategies that account for and put to the fore the interests of the student, one can facilitate intrinsic motivation even in rewards-based environments; (2) one should set an environment that does not focus on grades as a measure of worth (aggrandizing or diminishing), but rather on an environment where the goal is the accomplishment of tasks and the engagement with knowledge.


Davis’ book is a very practical ‘handbook’ of effective tools for the teaching professional. While it offers a brief survey of some of the seminal research in the field of motivation, its portions on ‘student motivation’ are geared toward effective strategies and ‘best practice’. Its strategies are aligned with the idea of thinking through ‘motivation’ from the standpoint of time (from the beginning to the end of the semester) and from the standpoint of function, e.g. the effect of grades; feedback and advice; motivating students to show up for class; motivating students to engage in learning outside of the classroom.
As a professor of foreign languages, I found Dornyei’s work especially beneficial. It very briefly covers student motivation from a general foundational and theoretical perspective, but more importantly, it very practically covers motivation strategies for the language learning classroom. In tailoring motivational theory and practice to the language classroom, Dornyei covers some very enlightening subject matter regarding the psychology and environment-related factors for language learning. Three of these areas are especially pertinent to me as a professor of Arabic, a language with a reputation for being extremely difficult and therefore intimidating. With that idea in mind, I spend substantial time at the beginning of my courses ‘de-mystifying’ the language and letting the students know that it is an accessible means of communication. The first point is that one must set realistic expectations for the language learner. The second point is that one must make the language a living entity that relates to the students’ own past and expected future experiences. The third point is that one must try, as much as possible, to reduce ‘language anxiety’, especially as one deals with a language that starts off so very unfamiliar to the majority of students.


Part of the recent literature on motivation deals with ‘anxiety’. As a matter of fact, the concept of anxiety (and anxiety reduction) is prevalent in my field – the teaching of foreign languages where a student is by definition in a foreign or alien (read ‘potentially anxiety producing’) environment. This particular article discusses anxiety from a different perspective: test anxiety and evaluation ‘threats’. Using the ‘Test Anxiety Inventory’ and the level of ‘threat of evaluation’ in the classroom, Hancock demonstrated that students’ motivation is adversely affected by highly evaluative classrooms. Here, the author does not limit the concept of evaluation to tests and quizzes, but broadens the scope to allude to a classroom environment where grades, discussion, and activities contribute to an air of competition and self-worth, as the student is evaluated and potentially rated at almost every turn.


One of the seminal books in the field of teaching, Lowman’s work takes a very comprehensive look at student motivation across all three realms that this survey highlighted: student motivation as it relates to the psychology of the individual student; student motivation and the classroom environment; and student motivation and teacher practices and techniques. One of the more interesting portions of his study is his look at motivation as it relates to various types of assignments, both in and out of the classroom. This portion points out that as teachers prepare and give various assignments, they must think through how the student will engage with the work when it is just the student, the assignment itself, and a set of instructions. In other words, one must understand how the assignment can stand alone and capitalize on the motivation
facilitated in the three realms when the teacher has no physical/presence bearing on two of the three realms.


In this article, Young evaluates how one might shift the motivational climate of the classroom. Specifically, she works through the ‘elements of instructional practice’ - task; authority; and evaluation - and explores their implications for student motivation. With regards to task, she presents what may be a rather counter intuitive implication. For here, she argues that while most teachers want their students to understand exactly what is demanded of them and to have clear instructions on how to accomplish it, sometime a sense of accomplishment (strongly tied to motivation) comes from a student working through ambiguous and complex tasks. On authority, she also presents implications that may seem counter intuitive. For, in this section she argues that while a teacher must be a master of the material and the authority in the classroom, there are many ways to get student buy-in and ownership of the material (tied to motivation) by giving students some choice (authority) with regards to the material and how to engage with it. Finally, with regards to evaluation, she points out that evaluation can and should be tied to much more than grades used to rank order students. Instead, a mix of diagnosis and feedback in evaluation removes the potential anxiety and makes for a classroom atmosphere that facilitates ownership, cooperation, and motivation.