



MOTIVATING THE ADULT LEARNER

Understanding Motivation

This lesson builds understanding of the concept of motivation by exploring the theoretical basis, and applying theory to practice.

Theories of Motivation

Three theories that provide a basis for understanding motivation are:

1. Attribution Theory
2. Self-Efficacy Theory
3. Self-Determination Theory

People used to think that our behavior is driven by needs, and that our needs give energy and direction to our behavior – in other words, we are motivated by things that are out of our control.

More recent theories of motivation suggest that motivation is more a factor of conscious cognitive processes; it's not just some human drive, but our thinking that motivates, or demotivates us. We can control these kinds of thoughts once we are aware that they are there.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory says that we are motivated by our emotional reaction to how we have performed at tasks in the past, and to who or what we attribute our past success or failure. There are three causal factors, or three ways that all people (even you!) explain success or failure.

1. Locus of control
2. Assessment of the stability of an event
3. Perceptions of the controllability of an event

Locus of control refers to whether success or failure is caused by internal or external forces.

A student with an **internal locus of control** believes that the outcomes they achieve are related to factors that they can control or impact.

A student with an **external locus of control** often describes life outcomes as something that “happens” to them due to luck, or fate.

The stability of an event relates to whether or not a factor is temporary and likely to change, or permanent. Effort is unstable because a student can change the amount of effort.

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Controllability has to do with the autonomy that students feel in the learning environment, and the power that they have over the causes of success or failure.

Locus of control is about where control is located – inside of the student, or outside of the student. It answers the question “where.” Controllability answers the question “how much?”

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy theory looks at the impact of people’s own assessment of their ability to succeed at something.

Learners are more motivated when they expect to succeed. A student who has high self-efficacy toward a task will be motivated to begin a task, and motivated to persist until the task is completed satisfactorily.

Self-efficacy is context or task-specific, so students may have very low self-efficacy beliefs in one arena, such as math ability, and very high self-efficacy in another area, such as artistic ability.

One way to increase students’ self-efficacy beliefs is to create mini-successes.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory looks at a learner’s innate need to feel competent, connected, and in control. Instructors can increase student motivation if we meet these three needs in our students.

Competence needs; feeling that we are able to complete a task

- a) Focus on increasing content knowledge.
- b) Focus on helping students to develop the skills they need to complete literacy tasks.
- c) Build background knowledge. When students read, they make connections between what they are reading and their prior knowledge. If a student does not have prior knowledge they have nothing to connect new information to.
- d) Do not assume prior knowledge.

Relationship needs are students’ need for safe and positive connections to others within the class. If we feel disconnected, we are less motivated. If we feel a part of the group, and if we feel valued, we are more motivated.

Autonomy needs represent the need to feel in control of our own actions.



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Incentive and Disincentives:

Incentives are things that encourage students to do something or work harder. By their nature, incentives are external to the student.

Incentives may negatively impact motivation by taking attention away from the internal motivations that students may have for learning.

One good way to use incentives is to link them to behaviors that we want to encourage instead of linking them to outcomes.

There are three tips that will help you implement incentives in a way that will not negatively impact motivation.

- a) Give incentives for inputs, like time and effort, versus outputs like grades and goal attainment.
- b) Use incentives to encourage behaviors that promote achievement.
- c) Use incentives to remove barriers to participation.