The Role of Interest in Motivation and Learning

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Abstract. Interest is exhibited by all people for different reasons, in different situations and in varying degrees. It is not correct to say that students at school are not interested. However, they do, not always have interest for what the school curriculum offers. Research indicates that interest is a significant factor influencing the motivation of students and consequently their learning.

Motivation
A person who is motivated to action according to Ryan and Deci (2000) can be described thus: Someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated. Ball expands this notion by stating: The term motivation is usually defined by psychologists as the process involved in arousing, directing and sustaining behaviour.

Motivation is vital if student learning is to be dynamic and effective. Schools have the responsibility to educate students while meeting the challenges of an increasingly, rapidly changing society. The focus on how schools can best meet these challenges has been considered by many researchers in the past as well as those currently involved in determining the different influences that affect motivation and consequently learning.

Students posses differing amounts and types of motivation and teachers need to employ strategies which will produce optimum outcomes for their students. Research has shown that motivation decreases as students progress through the educational continuum and adolescents provide teachers with continuing dilemmas and hurdles as they strive to foster a stimulating environment where students will be active, curious, self-directed and engaged.

A teacher who understands the motivational process, consciously or intuitively, will be better able to ensure that students are more active, better directed and more persistent. Teacher needs to be conscious that motivation is affect by task value, self-efficacy, self-regulation and offer students opportunities which consider all variables.

Interest
According to Macquarie Dictionary, interest is defined as the feeling of one whose attention or curiosity is particularly engaged by something. Dewey defines interest in the educational context as the engrossment of the self in an object and implies that which connects two things otherwise distant. He believed that the need for students to see/experience the connection was essential for sound educational practice. This need epitomizes an essential function of education; that students are challenged in an environment which provides skills, structures and a climate of inquiry.

Dewey’s work was followed by many others who focused on interest and its importance in student learning. Deci and Ryan studied the link between intrinsic motivation and interest in their self-determination theory; was interest necessary for a student to be intrinsically motivated? Lepper and Cordova began their search for a link between interest and learning. Schiefele was concerned with the link between prior knowledge and interest; were they related and did then how did they impact on a person’s desire to learn? In 1999 Schiefele continued his research by trying to determine if interest was a precondition for intrinsic motivation. His enduring studies into this area of research demonstrate his interest and curiosity and resulted in sustained endeavours. Tobias’ study focused on
interest and goal setting and their effects on learning. Pintrich, Ryan and Patrick were also trying to find a relationship between goals and interest.

Researchers are a group whose work reflects the impact of their particular interests and their quest to satisfy their curiosities. The pursuit of these interests has a beneficial effect many other people. Many important contributions to health, education, the sciences, economics and most other areas of our being, would not have occurred without firstly the interest and then the tenacity of significant individuals and groups.

Hidi and Ainley’s work concentrates on the notation that interest is primarily situational or individual. Their conclusions corroborated much of the earlier research.

**Individual and Situational Interest**

**Individual Interest**

Interest is only one area of study which researchers have been concerned with when considering motivation and learning. Its impact is obviously significant but other factors also determine how and why students learn. Interest is a notable determinate of what students learn, but its role is a recent research focus and so is still being investigated.

Hidi and Ainley’s studies have collaborated earlier work by Krapp 2000 as cited in Hidi and Ainley (2002) to synthesize knowledge on how interest is an essential for deep and sustained learning.

Individuals begin learning soon after birth and hopefully continue throughout their life. Experiences contribute to the individual interests a person develops. These experiences need not always be positive for them to influence what an individual chooses to be interested in, or in what captures curiosity. It is still speculation why individuals choose to become engaged in certain activities i.e. what interests them.

As people move through stages of their life their interests change, and schools provide the setting to facilitate some of these changes. Family, peers, and stages of development are other contributing factors for the acquisition of individual interests. The situations in which one learns are many and varied and consequently most significant. By providing the situation that captures interest or stimulates curiosity, enables teachers create the environment to allow students to develop individual interests.

Some teachers do this extremely well and their classrooms are conducive to deep understanding and learning. This is the easier task than that of trying to capture individual interests, because student interests cover the spectrum of all possible topics. The range is too vast to use individual interest as the hook that student take up to become engaged. It is possible to gain some of the students in some lessons because they are interested in the work presented.

Some subject areas are more easily able to provide this situational interest and others face much student opposition to what teacher is trying to achieve. Shiefele, 1991 as cited in Mitchell, 1993 proposed that: Interest is a content-specific concept. It is always related to specific topics, tasks and activities.

**Situational Interest**

Situational Interest: Its multi-faceted structure in the secondary school mathematics classroom.

Mitchell’s research had the notion of “interestingness” as a focus for his study. He was concerned with the impact of situational interest in the teaching of mathematics. Because with the best of
intentions, we have created a curriculum of mathematics that has been severed from the real world. It consists of meaningless bits and pieces, and we ask students to learn it as a large collection of meaningless bits and pieces.

He was concerned that many students have a negative attitude to doing mathematics; they do not engage in lessons and have no deep or sustained understanding.

His study involved a group of 14-16 year old doing first year algebra or geometry, who were given open ended questionnaires to all, and he also formed focus groups (5-9 students). The questionnaires gave the students the opportunity to express what was interesting or boring in their classrooms and qualitative data was collected. Five facets were identified by both the focus groups and the questionnaires, as contributors of classroom interest.

His model below has these classified as “hold” or “catch” facets. The catch factors are those which are employed to provide a change of pace in the classroom but do not necessarily produce long term change in students’ interest in doing mathematics, because they are only temporarily stimulating. The hold factors are those which yield the inquiring student of mathematics who does it for his/her own enjoyment. They are intrinsically motivated and consequently students have better higher order thinking and are self directed when he hold factors are prominent.

Students who only connect with the catch factors will be temporarily engaged but the meaningfulness and involvement need to exist for long term enjoyment and fulfillment to result. These produce the interestingness for students to want to learn, and for them to initiate and be responsible for their learning.

Mitchell’s analysis of the data he collected was sophisticated and rigorous and from it he deduced that the catch and hold theory had basis and also that situational interest was a pertinent contributor to learning.

Future Research Possibilities

Mitchell noted in his conclusions that there is currently a lack of empirical studies and also a lack of instruments available to conduct such studies. His research involved complicated refinements during the analysis stage because few previous similar studies had been conducted. He also concluded that the study of mathematics could be enhanced by finding links between involvement and meaningfulness. These studies need to contain behavioral impact as a consideration. He claims that Schiefel’s theory on domain specific interest requires further consideration, for it to be conclusive.

Mitchell’s findings on the catch factors and their importance in situational interest suggested to him that other investigations could provide salient information as to their level of relevance.

The implications for further research on interest and its impact on motivation foreshadow school and curriculum restructure. Schools have some evidence now that existing practices are not conducive to deep and sustained learning. Students are not self directed and are not empowered by the activities and experiences they are exposed to. When students have deep understanding of issues it is expected that they would have less reliance on situational interest i.e. they have the characteristics of an intrinsically motivated learner.

Implications for Educators

As teachers we strive to have our students interested in what is presented to them. The reality is though, that many students do not find it so and there are a multitude of reasons why this is the case. Researchers such as Strong, Silver, Perini and Tuculescu (2003) claim that every individual wants to learn but exhibits boredom because four natural human interest: The drive towards mastery, the drive to understand, the drive toward self-expression, and the need to relate, are not met by the tasks and experiences they are exposed to. When students have deep understanding of issues it is expected that they would have less reliance on situational interest i.e. they have the characteristics of an intrinsically motivated learner.
engage. Students who claim to be bored are more than likely acknowledging that they do not have the level of competency necessary to meet the challenge or cannot see the relevance of the task.

Csikszentmihalyi describes his notion of flow as: The spontaneous, effortless experience you achieve when you have a close match between a high level challenge and the skills you need to meet the challenge.

If teachers are able to encourage students to be in a state of flow then learning activities can be more relevant, sustained and have greater lasting impact. When students know their learning strengths then the learning will be easier and they will have the confidence and desire to take on new challenges, and their four natural interests will be more likely satisfied.

Curriculum has the mandate to provide education for students which is relevant and engages students, it is incumbent on educators to design the curriculum so that learning is active rather than passive. Cooperative learning and other hold activities (e.g. the use of technology) must have greater prominence so that students have the desire to learn more. Persistence is vital if students are to develop higher order thinking skills that careers of the future will require. Simultaneously, adaptability is required as future generations grapple with the evolving pace of careers not yet thought of, as well as existing careers that will no longer be required.

Enquiring and curious students have positive beliefs about themselves and are confident in taking on challenges. They know that they belong at school and that want to know the answers and are not comfortable absorbing someone else information. Their individual interest is not dependent on the situational.

Schools have always had the mission to be a place of socialization and this still is paramount. Schools of the future may deliver education on-line but students will require different skill and a different mindset to pursue this type of education. Interest in the tasks will be vital for this type of self-directed learning and so situational interest will be less influential.

References