The Role of Self-Determination in Adult Motivation and Learning

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Abstract. Motivation plays an important role in learning. It is an internal state that arouses, directs, and maintains behaviour. This paper will make a distinction between internal and external motivation, and focus on the components of self-determination and the relationship to motivation and learning in adults.

Introduction
Motivation is defined by Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry as “an internal state that arouses, directs, and maintains behaviour”. The role that motivation plays in learning is a vast subject that involves many factors. This introductory paper will begin by making a distinction between internal and external motivation. It will then focus specifically on the components of self-determination and their relationship to motivation and learning in adults. In addition, it will highlight how motivation is viewed from a humanistic perspective in psychology and the possible constraints associated with that.

Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Motivation
A clear distinction must be made between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. To be intrinsically motivated means you are taking part in an activity because it is interesting and no external consequence is apparent. When a person is intrinsically motivated they are engrossed in an activity and cannot be easily distracted. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to behaviour where the reason for doing it is something other than an interest in the activity itself.

The intrinsic-extrinsic distinction has been widely studied. The results from studies in the 1970’s found that extrinsic rewards undermined intrinsic motivation. However, later research was able to demonstrate that under certain conditions extrinsic rewards actually enhanced intrinsic motivation. Most researchers have now come to view the two types of motivation in a more balanced manner which allows for a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Obviously this is a much debated issue with no clear-cut answer. The focus of this paper will be on intrinsic motivation and its relationship with the self-determination theory.

The Self-Determination Theory and Motivation
Self-determination is the need to experience choice in what we do and how we do it. Self-determination has been viewed as both a characteristic of adult learners and a goal to strive towards. It holds that people have a desire to realize their own aspirations, rather than have external rewards or pressures determine their actions. A study by Waterman et al. reinforced this notion by demonstrating that self-determination plays a central role in the subjective experience of intrinsic motivation in university students. A self-determination theory (SDT) of motivation, as proposed by Deci and Ryan, puts forth that students will feel motivated to learn when their three essential needs are being met. These include the need for competence, the need for autonomy, and the need for relatedness. It is predicted that conditions that allow for the satisfaction of these needs while doing an activity will lead to maintaining or enhancing intrinsic motivation for the activity. On the other hand, conditions that prevent the satisfaction of these needs are expected to lower intrinsic motivation. For example, according to SDT, a problem would be predicted to arise if a teacher acted in a very controlling manner towards a student which would lead to reduction in intrinsic motivation.
The perception of autonomy is an important aspect of the self-determination theory. An often quoted metaphor, used by deCharms, views people as “origins,” who are responsible for their own behaviour, or “pawns,” who simply carry out the directives of others. Optimally teachers should treat students as the former rather than the later. It is when people feel autonomous (they have choices) that they experience the initiation of their behaviour to be within themselves, which leads to further intrinsic motivation. A study by Assor and Kaplan found that students were able to differentiate among various types of autonomy-supportive teacher behaviours and that more autonomy-supportive actions resulted in a more positive orientation towards learning for students. A good point is brought forward by Burns who notes that a problem can sometimes be finding the appropriate balance between autonomy and my control. How much autonomy is too much? Or is there such a thing?

The need for competence is also an important element in motivation, according to SDT. Studies have found that competence-promoting feedback and structure are important for enhancing a person’s sense of competence and in turn their intrinsic interest. It is interesting to note that enhancing perceived confidence is not enough to increase intrinsic motivation. It is essential that the person also feels an accompanying sense of personal causation. The intrinsic needs for competence and autonomy motivate an ongoing process of seeking-out and attempting to master suitable challenges. Ideal challenges are matched to a person’s skills and are neither too easy nor too difficult.

**The Humanistic Approach to Motivation**

Humanistic theories are based on the belief that humans are continually motivated by the inborn need to fulfill their potential. Maslow suggested that people have a hierarchy of seven needs which ranges from lower level needs (physiological and safety) to higher lever needs (learning and understanding). At the top of the hierarchy is the need for self-actualization. Rogers made a similar point, arguing that life activity can be understood in terms of the actualizing tendency, which is the organism’s propensity to maintain the enhance itself. It has been suggested that self-determination is the educational interpretational of self-actualization.

Humanistic concepts of learning have weaknesses which need to be addressed. Maslow’s theory in particular has been subject to criticism. Maslow asserted that the lower needs must always be met before the higher needs. However, Tennant points out that this is not always the case and examples of exceptions come to mind easily. On a larger scale, humanistic adult education in general has been criticized. It is viewed by some as being too accommodative and depoliticized, as well as for placing excessive faith in the agency of the individual. Others argue that humanist approaches place too much emphasis on emotions and feelings and the expense of intellect. Still we should consider that the humanist view can be beneficial, if not necessary to adult learning. However, it can only be properly carried out with the guidance and support of a good teacher. Essentially, it holds that the way in which the student perceives the student-teacher relationship will influence motivation.

**References**


