A ProLiteracy Research Brief
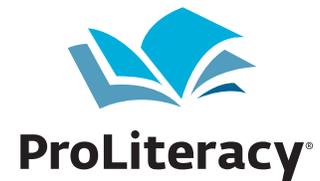
JANUARY 2022

Motivation and Adult Learners

M Cecil Smith, Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Alisa Belzer, Research Brief Series Editor, Rutgers University

Motivation is essential to learning. Individuals who feel motivated to learn can articulate their learning goals; hold deep interest in the skills they are developing or the subject matter that they want to learn; devote attention and effort toward learning, skill development, and mastery; and have expectations regarding the outcomes of their efforts. Motivated learners enjoy the work that goes into acquiring knowledge, developing a skill, or achieving goals. They are more likely to persist until they have attained their goals, remember what they have learned, and use the skills they have developed. Individuals lacking motivation demonstrate few of these characteristics but can become motivated given the right conditions. As the description here implies, motivation is not one thing, but is a set of psychological processes pertaining to the "direction, vigor, and persistence of behavior" (Bergin, Ford, & Hess, 1993, p. 437). Despite the importance of motivation, many adult educators are unfamiliar with the scientific literature on human motivation and often lack knowledge of scientifically validated methods for improving motivation. This is unfortunate, given how powerful motivation is to learners' success.

Adult educators often hear learners say that they feel "motivated" to improve their skills so that they can get a better job or be positive role models for their children and assist them with homework. They also want to use their skills to be better informed and more able to engage in civic and community activities. Others want to overcome years of shame and embarrassment due to their lack of literacy proficiency. They desire more control and agency over their lives rather than needing to rely upon others.

However, even when adult learners report that they are motivated to learn, the tasks before them present substantial obstacles. If adults having low skills do not experience initial success or feel unsupported in their efforts and embarrassed by their struggles, they may quickly lose motivation and desire to persist. Thus, it is critical for adult educators to understand motivation and how to help adult learners maintain, even increase, their motivation for learning.

This brief research review will help strengthen practitioners' capacity to do so by summarizing four of the dominant theoretical perspectives on motivation in education: goal theory (Elliott & Dweck, 1988); expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 2005); attribution theory (Weiner, 1986); and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Various dimensions of motivation are explained by these theories; but, given its complexity, no

single theory is entirely satisfactory for capturing all the elements of the construct.

Goal Theory

Goal theory (Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Maehr & Zusho, 2009) describes motivation as a mix of psychological (e.g., patterns of thinking, emotional responses) and behavioral *processes* (i.e., actions) that involve a variety of personal and contextual factors. These factors interact to influence how an individual "approaches, engages in, and responds to" (p. 79) achievement-related tasks and situations. Goals give an activity both purpose and meaning for the learner (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007) and are the incentive or outcome the learner is trying to achieve (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). So, for example, an adult learner's goal might be to become a better reader or to earn a high school equivalency diploma.

According to goal theory, there are two principal reasons that account for learners' motivation to accomplish achievement-oriented tasks. One reason is to demonstrate *competence* in the performance of a task. A second reason is to achieve *mastery* of a skill such as reading or a subject matter (e.g., learning about cryptocurrencies). Mastery-oriented learners feel motivated when they observe their skills or knowledge improving through sustained effort. Pursuing mastery goals thus serves to facilitate learners' interests, persistence, and help-seeking behaviors.

In contrast, some learners may develop performance-oriented goals. These goals consist of two types: *performance-approach* goals, where the learner feels motivated to out-perform others, and *performance-avoidance* goals, where the learner is motivated to avoid performing less well than others (Pintrich, 2000), and thus experience feelings of embarrassment and shame. An important consequence is that performance-oriented learners often report greater anxiety when engaged in learning tasks, in comparison to mastery-oriented learners (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). These feelings can impede efforts toward mastery.

Goal theory can be helpful to teachers for understanding that the ways in which they create and assign learning tasks or how they convey information about achievement-related goals and performance standards influences learners' achievement-oriented behaviors. Teachers who, for example, emphasize personal improvement are likely to influence learners' adoption of a mastery learning orientation. Teachers who recognize (and reward) high-performing learners over less-proficient others are likely to influence a performance goal orientation among learners.

Expectancy-Value Theory

Expectancy-value theory posits that learners' expectations for success (or failure) on learning tasks, and the value that they place on these tasks, are strong predictors of achievement-related behaviors (such as goal setting) and learners' choices about what and how to learn (Eccles, 2005). As an example, some adult learners have histories of school failure or under-achievement. As such, they may expect that they will not do well when beginning an adult basic education program. Educators can help learners develop more positive expectations by creating moderately challenging tasks from which learners can quickly experience success. Task difficulty can be increased gradually with appropriate support. As learners succeed, they will come to expect that they will be successful in accomplishing more difficult tasks.

However, there are always costs involved in learning. For example, time must be devoted to it that might otherwise be put toward other activities. There may also be some psychic costs to adult learners who, as they acquire new skills, will need to shed aspects of their identities. To balance costs, assigning value to learning tasks is important to support motivation. Four types of task value have been identified: *utility value* (i.e., how useful is this activity to me?); *attainment value* (i.e., how important is this activity to me?); *intrinsic value* (i.e., how interesting or

enjoyable is this activity to me?); and *cost* (i.e., what do I have to give up to perform this task or achieve my goal?). Expectancy-value theory suggests that, to increase learners' motivation, they should be persuaded to attribute at least one kind of value to learning tasks. Capitalizing upon learners' interests, for example, is an effective approach to increasing the task value of learning activities, thus leading to stronger motivation. By first learning about the topics and activities (i.e., hobbies and pursuits) that learners want to learn about, instructors can then use this knowledge to create activities that have intrinsic task value, hold learners' attention, and further motivate them to improve their skills. When instructors understand and can express the task value of instructional activities to learners, they can better plan instruction, prepare stimulus materials, and support learners.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory pertains to the reasons that learners cite to explain their success or failure on learning tasks (Weiner, 1986). Such reasons include so-called "locus of control" factors, which are both internal (e.g., ability; effort) and external (e.g., task characteristics; luck) to the learner. Locus of control refers to the extent to which individuals feel that they have control, or a sense of agency, over the events that influence their lives.

A person's motivation is usually enhanced when they attribute successful outcomes to their ability and effort (Graham & Williams, 2009)—factors over which they tend to have greater personal control. When learning new skills, for example, adult learners can exercise control over how much effort they put forth. However, factors such as luck and task difficulty are generally not under the learner's control and, as such, these conditions may diminish motivation. Learners tend to attribute their failures either to perceived low ability or bad luck.

Teachers' feedback to learners is "an important source of attributional information" (Graham & Williams, 2009). When teachers express undeserved praise, for example, such statements may signal to learners that they have low ability, thus reinforcing their negative self-attributions. Aside from providing timely and accurate feedback, it is also important for adult educators to help their learners make accurate attributions. Research has demonstrated the efficacy of training learners to make accurate attributions for their failure to learn. Reattribution training teaches learners to attribute their lack of success to poor or low effort rather than to factors outside of their control. Such training has demonstrated success for adults in academic settings (Wilson, Damiani, & Shelton, 2002).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory focuses on the social conditions that support or inhibit motivated behavior. According to this theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), there are three innate psychological needs that drive individuals' motivated behavior. These needs are *autonomy* (i.e., feeling that one is in control of the self), *competence* (i.e., feeling that one's skills are adequate for task success), and *belonging* (i.e., feeling emotionally connected to others).

The theory also makes an important distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is present whenever the learner performs a task where the result typically leads to attaining a tangible reward, such as earning money or praise. When teachers use rewards to motivate, learners tend to lose interest in learning because they feel a loss of control over their learning. Intrinsic motivation is present when the learner performs a task for the pleasure or satisfaction that the activity provides, making it preferable.

When individuals experience satisfaction of their needs for autonomy, competence, and belonging within a given situation, they tend

to become more intrinsically motivated; when such needs are thwarted, intrinsic motivation subsides. Whenever learners can make choices about what, when, and how they learn—along with an absence of external pressure—they are better able to develop an internal sense of control and causality, thereby maintaining intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). They work, study, and learn because they want to and it feels good to do so.

It is often assumed that extrinsic motivation leads to poor outcomes for learners because they are motivated only to receive rewards or compensation for their work—regardless of how much or how well they have learned. Four types of extrinsic motivation lie along a continuum from externally controlled to self-controlled motivation. The least autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is that which is *externally controlled* (i.e., the teacher makes all learning decisions). In contrast, the most autonomous and most beneficial type of extrinsic motivation, *integrated regulation*, is closest to intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An example is when an instructor determines the target behavior to be demonstrated by the learner, but the learner *values* the behavior and believes it to be *relevant* to achieving their goals. Here, the learner may be more likely to assume greater control over their learning and feel motivated to achieve their goals.

Self-determination theory suggests that teachers should strive to be autonomy-supportive rather than controlling (Reeve, 2009). This is characterized by the teacher's efforts to understand learners' perspectives, promote the learner's capacity to make choices among different learning activities, provide helpful hints when learners are stuck, acknowledge their improvement, and encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning (Reeve, 2009). Such efforts can lead to positive outcomes because learners experience a personal connection and supportive relationship with their instructor.

Conclusion

Motivation is a critical factor in learning for individuals of any age. Familiarity with different theories of motivation can help adult educators create the needed positive learning environment, engaging instructional tasks, and supportive relationships with learners. Instructors should encourage learners to identify and adopt personally meaningful learning goals. Also, providing informative feedback can help adult learners articulate clear goals that are challenging but attainable.

Adult educators should also ask about their learners' expectations for success (or failure) when they are tackling learning tasks. Their expectations should align with the learning goals they have identified. Realistic expectations are critical to individuals' willingness to engage, persist, and achieve.

Adult learners are likely to experience both successes and failures in their efforts to improve their skills. Instructors should prepare them for this by helping them make accurate attributions for these outcomes. Attribution retraining can be as simple as suggesting alternative explanations for failure, for example, and encouraging learners to focus on those tasks where they performed well.

Whenever individuals' learning goals are self-determined, they are more likely to feel autonomous and in control of their learning—conditions that are highly motivating and contribute to their feelings of competence. Teachers' efforts to support rather than to direct adult learners' efforts to develop their skills is essential.

When adult educators understand learners' goals and their expectations for success, as well as what they value in learning, and when they can help learners make accurate attributions for their performance on learning tasks—in the context of a supportive relationship that values learners' autonomy—learners' motivation is greatest and positive outcomes are more likely to be achieved.

References

Bergin, D.A., Ford, M.E., & Hess, B.D. (1993). Patterns of motivation and social behavior associated with microcomputer use of young children. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 85*, 437-445.

Deci, E. & Ryan, R. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum Press.

Eccles, J. (2005). Subjective task values and the Eccles et al. model of achievement related choices. In A.J. Elliott & C.S. Dweck (Eds.), *Handbook of competence and motivation* (pp. 105-121). Guilford.

Elliott, E., & Dweck, C. (1988). Goals: An approach to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*, 5-12.

Graham, S., & Williams, C. (2009). An attributional approach to motivation in school. In K.R. Wentzel & A. Wigfield (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation at school* (pp. 11-33). Routledge.

Kaplan, A., & Maehr, M.L. (2007). The contribution and prospects of goal orientation theory. *Educational Psychology Review, 19*, 141-184.

Maehr, M.L., & Zusho, A. (2009). Achievement goal theory: The past, present, and future. In K.R. Wentzel & A. Wigfield (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation at school* (pp. 77-104). Routledge.

Pintrich, P.R. (2000). Multiple goals, multiple pathways: The role of goal orientation in learning and achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 92*(3), 544-555.

Reeve, J. (2009). Why teachers adopt a controlling motivating style toward learners and how they can become more autonomy supportive. *Educational Psychologist, 44*, 159–178.

Ryan, R., & Deci, E. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25*(1), 54-67.

Weiner, B. (1986). *An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion*. Springer-Verlag.

Wilson, T. D., Damiani, M., & Shelton, N. (2002). Improving the academic performance of college learners with brief attributional interventions. In J. Aronson (Ed.), *Improving academic achievement: Impact of psychological factors on education* (pp. 89–108). Academic Press.