Motivating Students: to learn or not to learn

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Abstract

It is known that every individual is driven by something, which is best known as motivation, in doing anything, be it by extrinsic or intrinsic factors, and the same holds for every student. The motivation that a student has will help him in his learning process since it can influence him to learn or not to learn. Teachers can play a great role in developing students’ motivation to learn. Their expectation toward their students can influence the students to learn or not to learn. Teachers can also use the knowledge of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of the students to help them learn better. Using external incentives to a certain extent, the teacher can thus induce the students’ mastery and achievement motivation as the cognitive based view considering human being has the need to master their environment. From the teacher’s part there are some characteristics expected such as enthusiasm, competency, and positive expectation toward their students. The FOCI method is also given as a tool to convey positive expectation toward the students.

Keywords: extrinsic, intrinsic, achievement motivation, expectation, modeling, enthusiasm, reward.

Introduction

Each behavior of an individual is driven by something. For example: why does he eat? The question can be answered: because something drives him to eat. What drives him to eat? It can be diverse factors such as hunger (biological factor), as a polite gesture because the host offer him something to eat (social factor), because he needs something to chew on (emotional factor perhaps) and others. Why do students learn on the night before the midterm exams? Some answers can be given to that
particular question. Perhaps he is afraid to get bad grades if he does not study, maybe he's afraid to be mocked by his friends if he get bad grades, perhaps he is driven to get the special gift his parents promised to give him if he passes all his exams with flying colors. For some noble cause, maybe he's learning because he really wants to understand his lessons well, perhaps he finds it satisfying to know about something new, perhaps to him the challenge of getting good grades is good enough to make him learn. But one thing that can be inferred, something makes him learn. The examples given above explain how something makes one do something. That something is best known as motivation.

Motivation, simply described, is the driving energy behind every behavior. It gives a course of direction to any individual, it gives persistency to the individual, the tenancy to endure in pursuing its goal. Because of its nature, it can be understood why motivation takes an important part in learning. In fact, many educational books pay great attention to motivation. Try to imagine a classroom full of motivated students, eager to learn, to soak up on any given knowledge. It will be very easy to transfer knowledge then. It will be easy to fulfill the educational goals. In the end, the whole learning process will be so worthwhile, both for the students and the teacher/educator.

Knowing how important motivation is, it will be best to try to understand its relations to the learning process in order to help students to learn better. Teachers can play a great role in developing students’ motivation to learn. It has been studied that teacher’s expectation toward his students can actually make the students perform according to the level of his expectation. Concluding then, that the teacher’s expectation can influence the students’ motivation to learn or not to learn. Take for example: a student who is so encouraged by his teacher to express his ideas, this student will learn that it is all right to speak his mind, in the end it will give a boost on his self esteem. A negative example will be a student who is so intimidated by his teacher that he is afraid to express his ideas to escape the teacher’s negative remarks on every ‘stupid’ opinion of his students. In the end, the student will think, “Why bother to think? He will call me stupid anyway.” The student may then believe that he is stupid, even though he is not, and act like it (self fulfilling prophecy). He may learn not to try anything because of that (learned helplessness). These examples put greater emphasis on negative words and attitude from the teacher. It would become much worse if the teacher also use physical punishment in the learning process.

If taken seriously, knowing students’ motivation can help any educator to motivate them to learn better. So to know what motivates students and how teachers can channel the students’ motivation in pursuit of a better learning process is what is going to be discussed in this paper.
Definition of Motivation

Motivation can be described as the reason why people act in a certain way (Santrock, 2001). It is something that initiates and directs any given behavior of an individual (Lefrancois, 1985; Hamachek, 1990). By its initiating and directing power, it has the power to make an individual to do or not to do something, to start doing something or to stop doing something. Motivation itself can be noticed by the antecedent conditions prior to any given behavior and the responses made toward that antecedents conditions, which of course become the behavior (Wittig, 1981). For example: why does student A study till late? It might be because he has an exam tomorrow. The knowledge that there is going to be an exam tomorrow motivates him to study till late. It initiates and directs him to study. Maybe he is studying so hard because he did not get good results on his previous exam. That is also the reason why he studies. Or maybe he is studying hard because he is the kind of person who really wants to do his best in everything that he does. The answer for the question why student A studies till late can be deducted to many various reasons, known exactly by student A himself.

Motivation also has the maintaining power, it gives persistency to one who possesses it to keep on doing what he is doing (Santrock, 2001). It gives the endurance quality to any individual who has it. It tells the individual to keep doing something or stop doing something. An example of this will be: a student who really wants to master one of his subjects, studies really hard until he feels that he really knows about the subject inside out. He, sometimes, has to turn down his friends’ offer to hang around together when he think he needs extra time to study. But at some point, he feels he already know the subject well, his motivation to study hard for the subject may not be the same as before. He started to study less for the subject. It might be that the student needs another challenge to motivate him to study hard again.

Two Types of Motivation

Judging from where it comes from, it has been known widely that there are two kinds of motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic. What is known as extrinsic motivation is the motivation that comes from outside the individual (Santrock, 2001; Moore, 1998). A student who has this kind of motivation needs external incentives to motivate him to study. The external incentives are known as reward and punishment. The acknowledgement from peer students and teacher and parents can be a reward to the student. A student may work hard to get his teacher’s approval. He might study really hard to please his parents and to gain acknowledgement from his peer. In the end, it is not the learning process that motivates him, it is the reward that he perceives he will get will be the motivation behind his learning.

The other type of motivation, which is the intrinsic motivation, is the motivation that comes from within the individual (or the student in this particular paper). It is
based on internal factors such as self determination, curiosity, interests, and challenges perceived by the individual (Santrock, 2001; Moore, 1998). Intrinsic motivation is the natural tendency to seek out and to conquer challenges as one pursues one’s personal interests and exercise capabilities (Woolfolk, 2004) The student who has the intrinsic motivation to learn, will learn because he is challenged by the subject being taught, because he has a curiosity to learn about the subject, because he is interested on the subject. He will learn the subject being taught regardless what other students think of his studying. Since this motivation contains the interests factor, it can not be helped that some subjects will interest some students better than other subjects. But overall, as long as the student has any intrinsic motivation to study, it will help him to become an excellent learner since he does not need much external incentives to help him to study. Intrinsic motivation can sustain learning itself (Hamachek, 1990).

How to Induce Intrinsic Motivation: mastery and achievement

Both types of motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic, are necessary in any learning process. It can not be expected that all students have the same kind of motivation to learn. Sometimes, it might seem that the students have no motivation whatsoever to learn. In this kind of situation, the teacher plays a great role. Identifying what can motivate students to learn and use it to motivate students to learn is what any teacher supposed to do in order to create a conducive learning environment.

Sometimes, to a certain extent, the teacher has to apply a tight reward and punishment system (external incentives) to get the students involved in the learning program. In the process, it is hoped that in the end the students can have intrinsic motivation that can help them to learn better (Moore, 1981). The teacher can do this by building and establishing a classroom environment which will make the students more interested in learning, or by using such an instructional strategy to help students learn better.

Using an acknowledgement such as a praise in an appropriate way will motivate students to learn better (Hamachek, 1985). What needs to be taken into consideration is that the incentives should be given appropriately and simultaneously with the desired response from the student (Gagne, 1985). This is consistently in line with one of the principle of learning itself, the principle of contiguity, which states that the stimulus situation must be presented simultaneously with the desired response (Gagne, Briggs, & Wager, 1992). By doing that the students are shaped to produce a desired response.

Shaping does not mean that teacher just mould students to give out one specific response according to the teacher’s pleasure. It goes beyond that. That by using specific incentives, the students can be taught that there is more to learning. The students can be taught how mastering a subject can be self satisfying, and achieving something can be so exhilarating. It can be started as simple as giving an appropriate praise at an appropriate time consistently.
Two important terms are closely related with intrinsic motivation which are mastery or competence and achievement. According to cognitive perspective on motivation, human individuals have a need to master their environment, to deal effectively with their environment (Gagne, 1985; Santrock, 2001). Henceforth, it is known as competence motivation. The knowledge of the students' need to master their environment should be enough to give teachers some idea of how to use this knowledge for a better learning process. One of them is that the teachers have to make every lesson meaningful for the students. Once the students realize how important and useful the material or information given in the sessions is for their own benefit, it can be assumed that they will be more eager to learn it in order to conquer their world. So it is important to inform the students of the objectives of every lesson (Gagne, 1985).

It is said that individuals may acquire a persisting trait of striving to achieve these objectives provides motivation for many of their activities, which also goes for school learning (Gagne, 1985). In school context, achievement motivation refers to the degree to which a student wishes to do well on school tasks (Moore, 1998). The more the student expect to do well, the more persisting he will be in learning. Since it is acquired, achievement motivation can be nurtured or inhibited by the environment. A student who has this kind of motivation will learn better, or will be more eager to learn, if the teacher provides feedback for his effort. If he does not get feedback for every effort he makes, he will not know how good his effort is, and then it could inhibit his motivation.

Informing students of the goals or objectives and giving them feedback on their work are some way to induce their intrinsic motivation through their need to master the environment and to achieve well in their mastering process. Some other ways to do that are by engaging them in the learning activity or learning process and using two-way communication in the learning process. These should help motivate students to be involved in the learning process. Teachers can do this by encouraging students get engaged in dialogues, both with the teacher and with one another (social discourse), by engaging them in experiences that might engender contradictions to their initial hypotheses and then encourage further discussions and so forth (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

As mastery and achievement motivation are viewed through the lenses of cognitive approach, it holds the thought that in order to learn better it is necessary to attend to the subject/information being given. It is then important to arouse the interests of the students first to the subject being taught, and to maintain the curiosity of the students in the course of the lesson (Slavin, 1997). Arousing the interests of the students can be done by convincing them of the importance and interest level of the subject. Maintaining their curiosity will help them to stay on in the course. Since the interests and curiosity of the students play a great role in helping them to want to learn, it is advisable to use a variety of interesting presentation modes and also interesting materials (Slavin, 1997).
Implication to Teachers

As it has been discussed above, motivation plays a great role in school learning. It can make the students want to learn or not to learn. It also has been described throughout the discussion of how important a role the teacher plays in inducing students' motivation to learn. There are some characteristics expected in the teacher to help motivating students to learn. They are:

a. Enthusiasm
When students perceive that their teacher shows his interest and involvement with the subject matter and convey this in his vigor and physical dynamism, they will produce desirable outcome of the learning process (Cruickshank, Bainer, Metcalf, 1999). A teacher can convey the message that learning is indeed self rewarding to the students by showing his enthusiasm to the subject material (Elliot, Kratochwill, Littlefield, & Travers, 1996). Thus he becomes a model for his students concerning learning that learning the material is something worth doing. In a way, his enthusiasm will arouse the students' interest on the subject, arousing their curiosity about what the teacher talks about, and hopefully, by the teacher's interesting presentation, they will eventually get involved in the learning process.

b. Competency
The knowledge about the subject being taught is essential to any teacher since one of the rewarding experiences for a teacher is to find out that his students have a positive transfer of the lesson. What it means by positive transfer is that the students can apply their knowledge, which they got in the previous learning process, to another learning session/process successfully (Woolfolk, 2004). The role of the teacher here is to make the learning meaningful. The question should be asked here: how can a teacher make the learning meaningful if he does not have sufficient knowledge about it? Still the key point relating to a teacher's competency not only lies in his knowledgeable capacity but also in how he delivers the message to his students. What is more important than the knowledge the teacher has, is the teacher's ability to combine knowledge of the subject, knowledge of teaching, and knowledge of the students (Cruickshank, Bainer, & Metcalf, 1999).

c. Positive expectations on students
The way a teacher behaves can affect the way his students respond. The expectation that a teacher conveys toward his students can lead his students to react or respond accordingly (Hamachek, 1990). What it means by the teacher's expectation is the inferences a teacher makes about the likely achievement of his students and the types of assignments they need (Davis & Thomas, 1989).
Based on that, it can be assumed that the expectations teacher places on his students can lead to self fulfilling prophecy on the students’ side. If a teacher express a negative expectation toward his students, especially by using verbal language, his students in return may receive his negative expectation and learn to act accordingly. For example, if the teacher has the habit of putting down a student, the student might believe that he really cannot do things right as the teacher had told him many times. He might then learn what is called learned helplessness, the state where he will not even try to do something because he perceives that it is useless to do it since he will fail anyway (Slavin, 1997). Teachers can avoid this by communicating positive expectation toward their students, who in turn will show their best performance accordingly. Teachers can do this by giving more positive feedback, giving more opportunities for students to respond to questions (output factor), creating a warm, inviting climate for students to learn, and teaching more material in increasing level of difficulty to their students (input factor) (Hamachek, 1990). This method can be easily remembered by using the acronym of FOCI (Feedback, Output, Climate, Input). Teachers can also communicate positive expectation by waiting for students to respond (giving them time to think before answering), avoiding unnecessary achievement distinctions among students, and treating all students equally (Slavin, 1997).

Conclusion

As motivation can help students to learn or not to learn, teachers should pay great attention on their students’ motivation. In fact, the knowledge that a teacher has concerning motivation should be used to develop and nurture his students’ motivation. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are both essential in any learning process. A teacher can use external incentives as an external motivation for his students to some extent, hoping that his using it will in some way induce the intrinsic motivation of the students. By using external incentives at first, he can help arousing the students’ curiosity and need for challenge since the cognitive approach views that every individual has a need to master or conquer his environment.

By giving a praise appropriately and consistently, a teacher can show the students that learning something, achieving something, mastering something can be so exhilarating. In fact, by modeling to them that learning is something worthwhile through his enthusiasm on the subject material, he can make the students get more involved in the learning process. A teacher’s competency then, not only lies in his knowledgeable capacity, but also in how he delivers the message in such a way that will interest the students and in his ability to combine knowledge of the subject, knowledge of teaching, and knowledge of the students.
Works Cited


