What Is Self-Determination Theory?

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a framework that explains various facets of motivation and personality (Deci and Ryan, 2000). An underlying assumption of the theory is that individuals are innately curious and desire to gain knowledge and make meaning of new information. This drive to learn can be facilitated or inhibited by the actions of the instructor. According to SDT, instructors should strive to create a learning environment and to employ teaching and learning practices that meet three innate human needs: competence, control, and connection (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Included here are recommended actions and activities that support each of these needs and facilitate autonomous and self-motivated student learning behaviors.

Motivating Students

Can I Motivate Students to Learn?

This is an important question to consider. While some students might enter your course with a strong, internal desire to learn about the subject, others may only be in the class because it is required, or for some other external reason. Additionally, some students may be less concerned with learning the content and more focused on the grades they might earn.

Given the aforementioned circumstances, you may think there is little you can do to motivate students. However, according to the literature, instructors can, through her/his actions, in and out of class, motivate students to become more self-regulated learners (Pintrich, 1999).

Using self determination theory as the framework, this brief paper showcases several activities and practices that instructors across disciplines have used to motivate students.

Practices that Encourage Competence

**Competence:** Often students feel there are some subjects that no matter how hard they try, they cannot master. As an instructor, there are a number of ways that you can combat this and develop a level of competence in your students.

- Break large projects and problems into smaller components and provide students with straightforward, but encouraging, ongoing feedback that will help them improve their product as they progress.
- Give students an opportunity to resubmit their work or to try again at demonstrating their proficiency after your feedback.
- Provide students with a rubric or guide to help them understand what is expected of them.

Another way to build competence is through peer instruction.

- Create assignments and activities where students are responsible for teaching their peers important content via student lead discussion or mini lectures.
Practices That Support Connectedness

Connectedness: Despite what students and instructors may think, deep learning is a social activity (Brookfield, 2011). There are two interpersonal interactions that researchers have consistently found to be important in academic life: interactions with peers and interactions with faculty (Tinto, 1997).

1. Be Available. Arriving 5-10 minutes early or staying a few minutes late, lets students know you are available to talk not only about your subject, but also their experience.

2. Learn students’ names. Being called by name creates a level of familiarity.

3. Give encouraging, but honest feedback. Such feedback represents the degree to which you care and lets students know you are committed to their learning.

4. Support students’ interest in the subject. Encourage them to pursue their curiosity independently. Direct them to resources and field their questions during office hours. You might even enter into a research project with them outside of class. You can also use an assessment called KWL which draws upon prior knowledge. First have students state what they Know about the subject. Then have them develop a list of what they Would like to know. After you have finished your instruction, have them reflect and write down what they have Learned.

Finally, instructors can facilitate a personal connection with the content. Students want to know the relationship between the content, their lives and real world applications. You might do this using a video, recent media coverage of a concern, or a case study with multiple perspectives to be examined.

Peer Interactions:
One way to increase engagement between students is to incorporate pair or group work. Well planned activities, where students think about and discuss a topic, can be extremely useful in both developing connections with peers and supporting critical thinking. An example is, Think (or Write)-Pair-Share. Students are first given an opportunity to think or write their thoughts related to a question and then pair up or get in small groups to discuss what they think. For more information visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGCyk_QaCoI

Faculty-Student Interactions:
Research shows that faculty-student relationships can be profoundly motivating (Komaraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya, 2010).

Consider the actions in the next column as possibilities you can take to foster this relationship.

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**Control:** As instructors we often unknowingly assert control in the classroom, the consequence being that we remove student responsibility for their own learning. Consider providing opportunities for students to take control of their learning experience, make decisions, and contribute to shaping the class. This will take guidance, but the result is often very rewarding for both students and faculty. Here are some ideas:

- Involve students in determining some level of course content or rules.
- Ask them what conditions help them to be engaged during class.
- Consider providing options for how they want to demonstrate mastery of learning outcomes. (e.g., writing an essay creating a project).
- Develop a rubric to help both you and them manage development and assessment of their assignment.

It is also useful for students to think about how they might change their behavior to advance their learning. Several activities that can facilitate this:

1. At the end of class, have students write down the clearest and the muddiest points of the lesson.
2. Take a break in the lesson and ask students to write down what they were doing just prior to the break that was helping or inhibiting their learning. Collect these. Discuss these at the next class or on a discussion board. You might also discuss what distracts them, strategies they use to get the most out of the class session, and why it is important to think about what they are doing as well as how they are interacting with the content.

3. **Use Wrappers.** After an assignment or exam ask students to respond to the following questions:

   a. What kinds of strategies or activities did you engage in to prepare for the test or execute the assignment?
   b. How much time did you spend doing each (percentage or minutes/hours)?
   c. What mistakes did you make?, and
   d. What strategies do you plan to use next time?

   Have a discussion about what strategies student found successful or not. Before the next assignment, have students review their wrappers and think about their approach to learning.

**References**


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