How Motivation Affects Learning and Behavior

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When it comes to art, Anya is highly motivated. We can reasonably draw this conclusion based on her close attention in class, her eagerness to draw whenever she can, and her career goal. Motivation is something that energizes, directs, and sustains behavior; it gets students moving, points them in a particular direction, and keeps them going. We often see students’ motivation reflected in personal investment and in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement in school activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Maehr & Meyer, 2004; Reeve, 2006).

Virtually all students are motivated in one way or another. One student may be keenly interested in classroom subject matter and seek out challenging course work, participate actively in class discussions, and earn high marks on assigned projects. Another student may be more concerned with the social side of school, interacting with classmates frequently, attending extracurricular activities almost every day, and perhaps running for a student government office. Still another may be focused on athletics, excelling in physical education classes, playing or watching sports most afternoons and weekends, and faithfully following a physical fitness regimen. Yet another student—perhaps because of an undetected learning disability, a shy temperament, or a seemingly uncoordinated body—may be motivated to avoid academics, social situations, or athletic activities.

When Anya comes to school each day, she brings her strong interest in art with her. But motivation is not necessarily something that learners bring to school; it can also arise from environmental conditions at school. When we talk about how the environment can enhance a learner’s motivation to learn particular things or behave in particular ways, we are talking about situated motivation (Paris & Turner, 1994; Rueda & Moll, 1994). In the pages to come, we’ll find that as teachers, we can do many things to motivate students to learn and behave in ways that promote their long-term success and productivity.

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Motivation has several effects on students’ learning and behavior.

- **Motivation directs behavior toward particular goals.** As we discovered in Chapter 10, social cognitive theorists propose that individuals set goals for themselves and direct their behavior accordingly. Motivation determines the specific goals toward which learners strive (Maehr & Meyer, 1997; Pintrich et al., 1993). Thus, it affects the choices students make—for instance,
whether to enroll in physics or studio art, whether to spend an evening completing a challenging homework assignment or playing videogames with friends.

- **Motivation leads to increased effort and energy.** Motivation increases the amount of effort and energy that learners expend in activities directly related to their needs and goals (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1989; Maehr, 1984; Pintrich et al., 1993). It determines whether they pursue a task enthusiastically and wholeheartedly or apathetically and lackadaisically.

- **Motivation increases initiation of and persistence in activities.** Learners are more likely to begin a task they actually want to do. They are also more likely to continue working at it until they’ve completed it, even if they are occasionally interrupted or frustrated in the process (Larson, 2000; Maehr, 1984; Wigfield, 1994). In general, then, motivation increases students’ time on task, an important factor affecting their learning and achievement (Brophy, 1988; Larson, 2000; Wigfield, 1994).

- **Motivation affects cognitive processes.** Motivation affects what learners pay attention to and how effectively they process it (Eccles & Wigfield, 1985; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Pugh & Bergin, 2006). For instance, motivated learners often make a concerted effort to truly understand classroom material—to learn it meaningfully—and consider how they might use it in their own lives.

- **Motivation determines which consequences are reinforcing and punishing.** The more learners are motivated to achieve academic success, the more they will be proud of an A and upset by a low grade. The more learners want to be accepted and respected by peers, the more they will value membership in the “in” group and be distressed by the ridicule of classmates. To a teenage boy uninterested in athletics, making or not making the school football team is no big deal, but to a teen whose life revolves around football, making or not making the team may be a consequence of monumental importance.

- **Motivation often enhances performance.** Because of the other effects just identified—goal-directed behavior, effort and energy, initiation and persistence, cognitive processing, and the impact of consequences—motivation often leads to improved performance. As you might guess, then, students who are most motivated to learn and excel in classroom activities tend to be our highest achievers (A. E. Gottfried, 1990; Schiefele, Krapp, & Winteler, 1992; Walberg & Uguroglu, 1980). Conversely, students who have little interest in academic achievement are at high risk for dropping out before they graduate from high school (Hardré & Reeve, 2003; Hymel et al., 1996; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997).

### Extrinsic Versus Intrinsic Motivation

Not all forms of motivation have exactly the same effects on human learning and performance. Consider these two students in an advanced high school writing class:

Sheryl doesn’t enjoy writing and is taking the class for only one reason: Earning an A or B in the class will help her earn a scholarship at State University, where she desperately wants to go.
Shannon has always liked to write. The class will help her get a scholarship at State University, but in addition, Shannon truly wants to become a better writer. She sees its usefulness for her future profession as a journalist. Besides, she’s learning many new techniques for making what she writes more vivid and engaging.

Sheryl exhibits extrinsic motivation: She is motivated by factors external to herself and unrelated to the task she is performing. Learners who are extrinsically motivated may want the good grades, money, or recognition that particular activities and accomplishments bring. Essentially, they are motivated to perform a task as a means to an end, not as an end in itself.

In contrast, Shannon exhibits intrinsic motivation: She is motivated by factors within herself and inherent in the task she is performing. Learners who are intrinsically motivated may engage in an activity because it gives them pleasure, helps them develop a skill they think is important, or seems to be the ethically and morally right thing to do. Some learners with high levels of intrinsic motivation become so focused on and absorbed in an activity that they lose track of time and completely ignore other tasks—a phenomenon known as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1996; Schweinle, Turner, & Meyer, 2006).

Learners are most likely to show the beneficial effects of motivation when they are intrinsically motivated to engage in classroom activities. Intrinsically motivated learners tackle assigned tasks willingly and are eager to learn classroom material, more likely to process information in effective ways (e.g., by engaging in meaningful learning), and more likely to achieve at high levels. In contrast, extrinsically motivated learners may have to be enticed or prodded, may process information only superficially, and are often interested in performing only easy tasks and meeting minimal classroom requirements (A. E. Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001; Reeve, 2006; Schiefele, 1991; Tobias, 1994).

In the early elementary grades, students are often eager and excited to learn new things at school. But sometime between Grades 3 and 9, their intrinsic motivation to learn and master school subject matter declines (Covington & Müeller, 2001; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005; Otis, Grouzet, & Pelletier, 2005). This decline is probably the result of several factors. As students get older, they are increasingly reminded of the importance of good grades (extrinsic motivators) for promotion, graduation, and college admission, causing them to focus their efforts on earning high grade point averages. Furthermore, they become more cognitively able to set and strive for long-term goals, and they begin to evaluate school subjects in terms of their relevance to such goals, rather than in terms of any intrinsic appeal. In addition, students may grow increasingly impatient with the overly structured, repetitive, and boring activities that they often encounter at school (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Larson, 2000).

Extrinsic motivation is not necessarily a bad thing, however; often learners are simultaneously motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Covington, 2000; Lepper et al., 2005). For example, although Shannon enjoys her writing course, she also knows that a good grade will help her get a scholarship at State U. Furthermore, good grades and other external rewards for high achievement may confirm for Shannon that she is mastering school subject matter.
(Hynd, 2003). And over the course of time, extrinsic motivation may gradually move inward, as we’ll discover in Chapter 12 in our discussion of internalized motivation.

In some instances, extrinsic motivation—perhaps in the form of extrinsic reinforcers for academic achievement or productive behavior—may be the only thing that can get students on the road to successful classroom learning and productive behavior. Yet intrinsic motivation is ultimately what will sustain students over the long run. It will encourage them to make sense of and apply what they are studying and will increase the odds that they will continue to read and learn about writing, science, history, and other academic subject matter long after they have left their formal education behind.

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