Multifaceted Motivation:
The Many Components to Motivating Students

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What is motivation? Les Brown, one of the world’s leading motivational speakers, once said, “shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars.” I believe that this quote truly captures the essence of motivation. This inspirational quote reminds people of the reason that they should try to perform to the best of their ability, so as to gain “the moon.” It reminds us that effort and hard work will always be rewarded, whether it is to achieve a sense of pride for one’s work or a teacher’s praise for a job well done. Motivation is the drive a person feels to accomplish a particular goal or task (Ray, 1992). Motivation energizes and directs a person’s behaviors, as well as enables that person’s persistence towards a goal (Laliberte, 2006). In an academic setting, motivation is what makes students want to learn and succeed. If educators place a value on developing their students’ motivation to learn, they will be able to make an impact upon students initiating learning activities and maintaining an involvement in learning, as well as influence their students’ commitment to the process of learning (Ames, 1990). Using the various methods of motivation and inspiration, an effective educator can encourage students to develop goals, beliefs, and attitudes that will sustain a life-long involvement with learning, as well as contribute to the students’ quality of education. Although there are numerous theories of motivation, the attribution and expectancy-value theory are two that must be considered when motivating students to learn and achieve academically.

The attribution theory, introduced to psychological literature by Fritz Heider and formulated into an applicable model by Bernard Weiner, explores the role of attributions, or perceived causes of outcomes, on a person’s motivation (Schunk, 2003). According to attribution theorists, when a student unexpectedly performs poorly, he or she will likely engage in a cognitive process termed “causal search,” in which individuals try to understand why events have occurred (Kinzie, Muller, Simmons, & Stage, 1998). The conclusions students reach about
themselves and their environments during causal searches encompass imperative implications for their achievement, motivation, learning, and future academic performance (Kinzie, Muller, Simmons, & Stage, 1998). Within an academic setting, students attribute their successes or failures to factors such as ability, effort, task difficulty and luck (Biehler, McCown, & Snowman, 2009). These four factors are the most common attributions. However, there are many other attributions such as strategy use, help from others, and environmental conditions that can affect a student’s motivation. Within students’ achievement domains, observed studies have suggested that the range of explanations for success and failure outcomes is confined, with ability and effort outweighing other factors (Kinzie, Muller, Simmons, & Stage, 1998). When accounting for achievement related tasks, it can be assumed that students rely on the simplistic system involving the following two factors: how competent one is and how hard one tries.

In addition to identifying the perceived cause of success or failure, students’ attributions can be classified by three underlying dimensions: control, stability, and locus. A student’s attributions are typically assigned into the distinct and opposing categories of controllable versus uncontrollable, stable versus unstable, and internal versus external (Kinzie, Muller, Simmons, & Stage, 1998). The dimension of controllability determines whether an attribution or cause is under the individual’s control—namely, whether the individual can increase or decrease it by effort (Kinzie, Muller, Simmons, & Stage, 1998). The dimension of stability refers to whether an attribution or cause changes or remains relatively constant (Kinzie, Muller, Simmons, & Stage, 1998). The dimension of locus defines whether the outcome is dependent on internal factors within an individual, such as effort, or external in the environment, such as the study environment (Kinzie, Muller, Simmons, & Stage, 1998). These three underlying dimensions influence different aspects of motivation. The dimensions of controllability and locus correlate
more to affective consequences of success and failure, such as pride, self-esteem, shame, and guilt, whereas the dimension of stability impacts an individual’s expectancy of future success following a success or failure (Kinzie, Muller, Simmons, & Stage, 1998).

The factors a student attributes to a success or failure, such as one’s ability or effort, have differential effects on that student’s motivation. Students who are success-oriented usually attribute success to ability, in addition to effort, and attribute failure to insufficient effort (Biehler, McCown, & Snowman, 2009). Therefore, when success-oriented students experience failure, it does not diminish their expectancy of success, feelings of competence, or the attractiveness of rewards (Biehler, McCown, & Snowman, 2009). These students will decide to work harder in the future in order to achieve success. The attribution pattern of high-achieving students credits both effort and ability to their success. This pattern is beneficial to students’ motivation because they are recognizing effort as an internal and controllable attribution, and they have a continuous high level of confidence in their ability to succeed.

On the other end of the spectrum is the student who lacks need for achievement and has a long history of academic failure. This student usually attributes success to easy questions, or luck, and failure to a lack of ability (Biehler, McCown, & Snowman, 2009). Ability is a stable attribution in which individuals expect its effect on achievement to be relatively constant from one task to another. Task difficulty and luck are both external attributions; individuals feel as though they have little control over their occurrence (Biehler, McCown, & Snowman, 2009). When low-achieving students attribute failure to a low ability level, they perceive future failure as more likely than future success. Another destructive force affecting motivation is the process of ascribing success to factors beyond one’s control. Doing so diminishes the possibility of
taking pride in one’s achievement and places a high value on rewards (Biehler, McCown, & Snowman, 2009).

An educator’s role is emphasized when it comes to motivating those students who have attributed their successes and failures to destructive causes and have consequently exhausted every ounce of motivation they had to succeed. These students are in dire need of help to re-awaken their motivation and achieve academically. The implications for educators revolve around the significance of understanding what their students believe about the reasons for their academic performance. As a future educator, I plan to communicate to my students a variety of attitudes about whether ability is fixed or modifiable, and I will encourage high expectations for individual students through instructional practices (Anderman & Midgley, 1998). In my future students’ early stages of learning, I will provide positive feedback for the students’ effort on tasks. According to Schunk (2003), it is beneficial to praise young students’ effort because it is a time when students have to work hard to succeed. As my future students’ skills develop, I will expand my positive feedback to include praising students’ skills and abilities, as well as their use of effective strategies when completing tasks (Schunk, 2003). In this way, I can encourage my future students to attribute successes and failures to internal and controllable factors, such as their effort on a task. I am also boosting a student’s self-esteem and confidence when praising their ability, therefore crediting both a student’s effort and ability to his or her success.

Providing feedback on controllable attributions, such as effort and strategy use, prevents students from attributing their successes and failures to factors outside of their control, such as luck or task difficulty (Schunk, 2003). As a future educator, I want my students to feel confident and capable of taking on any task. Through positive feedback and encouragement, I can help my students attribute their successes and failures to internal and controllable factors. When my
students attribute their successes and failures to such factors as effort and ability, they will become more motivated to pursue a task and achieve academically.

Additionally, low-achieving students need help to regain self-confidence in their academic abilities. In a process termed “attribution retraining,” strategies are introduced to the student in order to change the students’ tendencies from attributing failure to their lack of ability to a fixable cause, such as insufficient effort or the use of an inappropriate strategy (Brophy, 1998). In order to successfully assist a low-achieving student, the student must be exposed to a variety of experiences, such as modeling, socialization, practice, and feedback. This method teaches one to concentrate on the current task instead of worrying about failing, to cope with failures by reviewing one’s steps to find the mistake or analyzing the problem to uncover a different approach, and to attribute failures to insufficient effort or the use of ineffective strategies, instead of a lack of ability (Brophy, 1998). Overall, an educator’s support, encouragement, and assistance on tasks will certainly facilitate a students’ academic and motivational improvement.

Another theory of motivation, the expectancy-value theory, articulates that an individual’s expectancies for success and the value they have for succeeding are important determinants of their motivation to perform different achievement tasks (Wigfield, 1994). A student’s achievement performance, persistence, and choice of achievement tasks are most directly predicted by their expectancies for success on tasks, in addition to the value they place on tasks (Wigfield, 1994). Expectancies for success can be described as students’ beliefs about how well they will do on an upcoming task (Wigfield, 1994). It is essentially the student asking himself or herself, “can I do the task?” If a student answers “yes” to this question, they are more likely to perform better and have more motivation to select more challenging tasks in the future.
(Wigfield, 1994). However, if a student answers “no” to the question, they are unlikely to fully engage in the learning opportunities provided in school. Students’ confidence in their ability to complete tasks and master academic work is a strong predictor of their academic achievement.

In addition to a student’s perception of whether or not they can complete a task, the student must have a desire to do the task, or be able to place a value on the success of that task. A student’s value of the success of a task is determined by four related constructs: intrinsic interest, attainment value or importance, utility value, and the cost of engaging in the activity. The first construct, intrinsic interest, refers to the enjoyment one gains from doing the task, or the enjoyment one expects to experience while engaging in the task (Wigfield, 1994). The interest value of a task results from either inherent characteristics of the task, known as situational interest, or personal characteristics of the individual doing the task, also known as personal interest (Wigfield, 1994). When a student is interested in doing a task because of situational, personal, or both situational and personal interests, the student will be more engaged and motivated to learn and complete the task. The second construct, attainment value, is the importance of doing well on a given task (Wigfield, 1994). To put it simply, the more important a task is to a student, the more motivated he or she will be to complete the task and do it well. The third construct, utility value or usefulness, refers to how well a task corresponds with a student’s future goals and plans (Wigfield, 1994). If the content or task is relevant to the student, he or she will be more motivated to complete the task. The fourth construct, cost, refers to what the individual would have to give up in order to do a task, in addition to the anticipated effort the individual will need to complete a task (Wigfield, 1994). For example, a student may weigh the options of doing homework or doing something fun with friends. If a task seems overwhelming or is not interesting, a student will be less motivated to complete that task.
In order for educators to motivate students in accordance with the expectancy-value theory, the students’ expectancies for success and the four constructs of the task’s value need to be addressed. To improve a student’s outlook regarding an upcoming task, an educator can provide multiple opportunities for his or her students to experience success, thereby improving a student’s viewpoint of the task. As a future educator, I understand the importance of boosting my students’ confidence before taking on a task, in order to further motivate them to complete the task, do it well, and believe that they will succeed. When students have the initial self-confidence and belief that they can succeed at a task, they will be much more motivated to do the task. Additionally, if students have had experience with similar tasks in the past, they will not perceive the current task to be overwhelming or too difficult to complete. In order to motivate my students as it relates to the expectancy-value theory, I will provide my students with choices of tasks. Additionally, I will make sure that my students have experienced and succeeded doing similar tasks in the past. By allowing my students to choose from a variety of tasks, providing positive feedback, and ensuring my students have experienced success on a similar task, I will increase my students’ expectancy to succeed and therefore, improve their motivation to complete a task.

In addition to a student’s expectancy for success, an educator has to address the value a student places on the success of a task. In order to do so, I believe it will be essential to get to know each of my students on an individual level, to learn all that I can about my students’ interests. Once I know my students on a personal level, I will be able to develop and design tasks that appeal to my students’ situational and personal interests. If the students are interested in a task, they will be more invested in the task, as well as more motivated to do a good job. In order to increase the usefulness of a task, I will work to make the content of tasks I create
relevant to my students. When a student distinguishes that a task is relatable, familiar, and/or relevant to their lives or the real world, the task will be more important for them to do and complete (Jones, 2009). If a student considers a task important, he or she will be more willing to do the task and therefore more motivated to achieve academically. In order to address the cost of a task, it will be important for me to consider what the task asks my students to do. If a task is of reasonable length and workload, interesting, and not difficult to complete, a student will be more motivated to do the task. As a future educator, I will strive to make the tasks I present to my students success-oriented, interesting, useful, and relevant to their lives. If all educators would take that focus, students would be more motivated, able to succeed, and able to reach their full potential.

To sum up, the attribution theory and the expectancy-value theory are both motivational theories to be considered when motivating students in an academic setting. As an educator, it is imperative to encourage students to attribute their success and failure to internal and controllable factors, such as ability and effort. An educator should also ensure that students experience success when given a task in order to improve their motivation and attitude toward upcoming tasks. The curriculum content and tasks should cater to the students’ situational and personal interests so as to spark their motivation and willingness to complete a task. In order to make a task important to students, an educator must make the material of the task relevant to students’ lives. Finally, a student must feel as though the cost of a task is not overwhelming but that it is worth completing because it promotes and improves their academic success. An educator must be able to motivate students to reach their full potential and aim high, or “shoot for the moon.”
References


