

Fostering Lifelong Learning

Beverly Amico

Jun 13 2016



What motivates a baby to walk? Is it the same drive that motivates a business owner to work late or an elementary student to learn math facts? In the first case, most would label the baby as having intrinsic motivation – engaging in behavior that is personally rewarding. But our other two examples? It's difficult to know, but most would likely guess extrinsic – money, praise, grades – the carrot and stick concept that's been in place to encourage workers and students for centuries.

What if, instead, the student and worker were intrinsically motivated? What would that look like and would that motivation be sufficient to accomplish the task at hand? Which works better, ultimately, for lifelong learning?

Questions about behavior, learning, and motivation have been studied since Aristotle and have moved through the times to be addressed by great thinkers like Rousseau, Froebel, and James. But motivation in regards to learning theory in education really hit its stride in the middle of the 20th

century after psychologists were able to combine increasing knowledge of child development (from Binet and Piaget) with Skinner's work on behaviorism and the growing field of cognitive neuroscience.

The 21st century study of motivation and learning continues to discover the benefits of intrinsic motivation, not only as it applies to classroom learning, but also its importance as a foundation for new skill acquisition in an ever changing, global workplace.

One of the more interesting modern studies on the limits of external motivation comes from [Sam Glucksberg](#), who looked at the effect of adding external motivators to [Karl Duncker's Candle Problem](#), a cognitive performance test measuring creative problem solving.

In brief, adding external motivators to a creative learning task decreased the subjects' performance. One might assume anxiety might be involved in this phenomenon, but author Daniel Pink, in his book, [Drive](#), continues looking at corresponding studies to [find deeper associations](#). He found that extrinsic motivators work well for very simple cognitive tasks such as stuffing envelopes; pay per envelope and subjects will accomplish the task more efficiently. However, in creative problem solving, extrinsic if/then rewards de-motivate because they narrow the subjects' focus to task and put blinders on to creative thinking.

Pink says, "If/Then Rewards were good for many 20th century tasks, but are not useful when it comes to the creative problem solving needed in the 21st century. If/Then rewards often destroy creativity."

Stanford Professor, [Carol Dweck, PhD](#), has dedicated her life to studying what motivates people to learn and succeed. In her book describing her studies, [Mindset](#), she explores what she believes to be a killer of creativity and learning, and it's a mirror of Pink's theory. For Dweck, however, it goes slightly deeper than If/Then motivators to what mindset has been taught to students – either fixed or growth. In her opinion, anyone with a fixed mindset throws over lifelong learning for lifelong proving out of their intelligence. Put simply, [Dweck's research](#) found that people who learned that intelligence is genetic and set, vs. learned and pliable, fail at lifelong learning. They simply lose their motivation to challenge themselves.

She explains it this way: "Believing that your qualities are carved in stone — the fixed mindset — creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over. If you have only a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain moral character — well, then you'd better prove that you have a healthy dose of them. It simply wouldn't do to look or feel deficient in these most basic characteristics."

On the other hand, those who learn that intelligence is not fixed (and not just one thing either), are highly motivated to learn new skills. They become lifelong learners, motivated by a passion, "for stretching and sticking to it, even when it's not going well."

What emerges from these and other modern studies on the topic of intrinsic motivation is that it is an innate quality we all have at birth (baby walking) and somehow lose as we age and begin focusing outward toward extrinsic motivators.

[Barbara L. McCombs](#), PhD, researcher and director of the Human Motivation, Learning, and Development Center at the [University of Denver](#), puts it this way in her [Motivation and Lifelong Learning Summary](#): “The motivation to learn is an internal, naturally occurring capacity of human beings that is enhanced and nurtured by quality of relationships, opportunities of personal choice and responsibility for learning meaningful learning tasks. Lifelong learning is also a natural propensity of humans to continue to grow, learn, and develop that is facilitated by uncovering the enjoyment of learning and reducing negative thoughts and belief systems.

So how do we, as educators, get out of the way of the intrinsic mindset and motivation that inspires lifelong learning? Waldorf Educators have a particularly keen interest in this question as we strive to create an atmosphere where students *want* to learn, since lifelong learning is really about a lifetime of wanting to embrace new challenges. It is not a surprise, then, that Waldorf Educators have been implementing the strategies, for the last 100 years, now recommended by Pink, Dweck, and McCombs. They all agree in these basic tenets of cultivating intrinsic motivation:

- Means over Ends: It’s about valuing the process of learning, rewarding effort not result, and de-valuing external rewards like grades and other if/then motivators (including punitive ones).
- Autonomy and Purpose: Students must learn that they are responsible for their own learning. It does not come to them as they sit passively, but must be owned and earned through effort. How will they embrace this autonomy? By having educators which foster a love of learning by bringing relevant value to the learning process. It means engaging the learner in a way that matters to them, so that they can bring purpose, curiosity and resilience to the task at hand.
- Normalizing Failure: While engaging in a relevant learning process, valued for the process itself and not the end, failure will naturally occur as it is a key part of the learning process. For this reason, maintaining intrinsic motivation requires devaluing the stigma of failure. Failure must move into the value column, so that learners can see it as a natural byproduct of learning and not a personal assault to the ego.

Gerhard Fischer, PhD, and director of the [Center for Lifelong Learning and Design](#) at the [University of Colorado, Boulder](#) adds that the focus must shift from “Sage on the Stage” teaching to an engaging, collaborative classroom atmosphere.

“It comes down to this: self-directed learning should take place in the context of authentic, complex problems (because learners will refuse to quietly listen to someone else’s answers to someone else’s questions) and learning should be embedded in the pursuit of intrinsically rewarding activities; learning on demand needs to be supported because change is inevitable, complete coverage is impossible, and obsolescence is unavoidable; opportunities for informal learning are created by allowing students of all ages to participate in a rich set of activities; collaborative and organizational

learning must be supported because the individual human mind is limited; and skills and processes that support learning as a lifetime habit must be developed.”

Essentially, modern researchers on the topic all agree: it's about creating an atmosphere where students maintain their natural, intrinsic motivation to learn because lifelong learning is really about a lifetime of eagerly embracing new challenges, just as we did as babies learning to walk.

Photo credit: [San Francisco Waldorf School](#)

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