

WAYS TO STIMULATE THE LEARNING MOTIVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The passing from the traditional educational paradigm (focused on professor and teaching activity) to the postmodern paradigm (focused on student and learning activity) brings along deep transmutations regarding the planning, organization and evaluation of didactic activities. The student with his/her interests, potential and learning needs is being placed nowadays in the centre of the didactic activity. A decisive role towards success in learning is played by the learning motivation, when considered that the authentic and efficient learning is based on the inner impulse, the student's desire for knowledge, progress and development. A vast part of the specialty literature supports the idea according to which, a high level of learning motivation, especially the intrinsic motivation leads to higher performance in learning. There are two categories of factors that stand at the basis of learning motivation: internal factors (such as cognitive abilities, interests, aptitudes, will, emotionality, level of aspiration, health, curiosity etc.) and external factors (among which the teaching quality, the educational environment, the professor's personality, the contents of the studied discipline, the degree of novelty and difficulty of contents etc.). The professor's role is that of acting upon the factors in the student's outer environment, in order to empower the internal factors that could increase the level of learning motivation. The current study is concerned with three basic aspects: underlying the role of learning motivation in the instructional activity; the analysis of factors lying at the basis of learning motivation; introducing some ways to stimulate the learning motivation in higher education. On the whole, the paper aims at contributing to the development of theory and practice of instruction in higher education, focused on the student and his or her learning activity.*

Key words: *learning motivation; internal motivating factors; external motivating factors; stimulation of learning motivation.*

INTRODUCTION

Within the context of postmodern university education centered on the student and his/her learning activity, the learning motivation appears as a variable having a decisive role regarding the performance achieved by students. According to the paradigm of education centered on students, the students learn better and more efficiently if they are enlivened by an inner impulse, if they have an intrinsic motivation to reach the purposes they aim at (Iucu, Șerbu, 2013). In the American Psychological Association Report (1997), which includes the psychological principles of focusing upon the person who learns, the following three principles regarding the motivational and emotional factors are explicitly formulated:

➤ „*What and how much is learned is influenced by motivation. Motivation to learn, in turn, is influenced by the individual's emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking*”. This principle draws attention upon the important role of motivation in gaining success regarding the learning activity. The level of motivation for learning is determined again by the student's internal factors: the emotions he or she experiences (the positive ones intensify learning, the negative ones have negative repercussions upon the processing of information and learning results; the interests and purposes upon which the student focuses (clear, personally defined purposes lead rather to achievement, meanwhile the lack of purposes or vaguely defined purposes may lead to low performances in learning); thinking habits (positive thoughts,

self-trust, the belief in success intensify performances in learning, while the negative thoughts, fear of failure and a high level of anxiety have as a result low performances);

➤ „*The learner's creativity, higher order thinking, and natural curiosity all contribute to motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and providing for personal choice and control*”. This principle draws attention upon the necessity to place the learning tasks within the student’s area of proximal development, so that the level of intrinsic motivation may reach the optimum area, which increases the chances to obtain high performances in learning;

➤ „*Acquisition of complex knowledge and skills requires extended learner efforts and guided practice. Without the learners' motivation to learn, the willingness to exert this effort is unlikely without coercion*”. This principle underlines the role of motivation in supporting the effort implied by any learning activity. This way, professors are called to identify adequate didactic strategies that may support the students’ efforts: clear and pertinent explanations, active-participative attractive methods, suggestive instructional methods, various practical applications, the transfer of knowledge towards real life and reevaluation of students’ life experience.

Numerous researches emphasize the association of academic success, high-quality learning and creativity with a powerful motivation to learn, especially with a high intrinsic motivation (Busato et al., 2000; Martin, 2008; McCoach and Siegle, 2001; Preckel, Holling and Vock, 2006; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Tulbure, 2010). In this context we consider that the analysis of factors lying at the basis of learning motivation and the presentation of some ways to intensify the learning motivation in the context of the instructive-educational process in higher education would be necessary and useful.

FACTORS STANDING AT THE BASIS OF LEARNING MOTIVATION

The motivating factors of personality are structures with relative consistency and stability in the human being’s life and activity (Neacșu, 1978, apud Magher, 2005). There are two categories of factors included in the composition of learning motivation: *internal factors* (biological and psychological) and *external factors* (that refer to the pedagogical, social and economical circumstances in which the student learns). Table 1 synthetically presents the two categories of factors:

Table 1.

Factors standing at the basis of learning motivation (adaptation after Magher, 2005)

Internal factors	External factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health; • age; • cognitive capacities; • cognitive interests and feelings; • aptitudes; • creativity; • will; • emotionality; • level of aspiration; • curiosity; • attention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contents of educational discipline; • novelty and difficulty of the conveyed contents; • quality of teaching (didactic strategies, means of instruction, forms of organization); • quality of educational evaluation; • professor’s personality; • family environment; • affiliation group; • social, economical and cultural environment.

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In order to stimulate the learning motivation in higher education, the professor's role is to intervene upon the external factors with the aim of stimulating the internal motivational variables. From the category of external factors that may raise the students' learning motivation we will focus our attention on those ones we consider most relevant and upon which we can intervene as practitioners of university education: organizing and presenting contents; didactic strategies; academic learning environment; evaluation strategies. For each of these factors we further present examples of ways to intensify the learning motivation, based on recommendations identified in the specialty literature (Nilson, 2010; Stan, 2004):

Organizing and presenting the contents

- Logical and clear structuring of contents and the explanation of reasons for which the course has been organized in a certain manner;
- Allowing students some freedom to intervene in the course content (ex. questions, interventions, types of presentation, ways to evaluate); thus, they will feel more responsible regarding the learning activity;
- Explaining the applicability and usefulness of acquisitions gained during courses, establishing the link with the work market.

Didactic Strategies

- Student-centered strategies may be motivating as they are built upon the need for recognition and affiliation (Stan, 2010);
- The active participation techniques are more adequate than the passive ones as they bring novelty, emotions, actions and diversity;
- The professor can explain to students the reasons for which he or she makes an option for a certain teaching-learning-evaluation technique;
- The usage of diverse modalities to present the contents (free presentation, debates, PPT presentation, presentation with the students' help, strategies of graphical presentation of information, strategies based on problem solving, strategies based on cooperative learning etc.).

The academic learning environment

- The academic environment should invite the students to reflection, study and personal development;
- The didactic materials used by the teacher should make the conveyed contents accessible and aligned with the students' learning needs;
- The modular furniture allows the combined usage of the students' three organizing arrangements (frontal, grouping and individual);
- Democratic communication assures the assuming of responsibilities, the development of superior cognitive capacities and stimulates the learning intrinsic motivation;
- The positive feed-back offered in exchange for the students' valuable and opportune interventions intensifies the learning motivation.

Evaluation Strategies

- The combined usage of evaluation strategies (initial, formative, summative), so that it reflects, as accurately as possible, the students' learning progress;
- Providing the students a quick and constant feed-back regarding the performances obtained at the evaluation tests;
- The usage of various evaluation methods (traditional and modern) to evaluate a large range of academic results (knowledge, abilities, competences, attitudes etc.);

- Decreasing stress and anxiety regarding assessment by: clearly explaining the tasks; assuring accordance between what is taught, learnt and evaluated; presenting and explaining the evaluation criteria; justifying the grade given to the student; offering some possibilities to improve the performances obtained by redoing some pieces from the portfolio, retaking some partial tests, working on complementary tasks etc.).

CONCLUSIONS

Motivation is one of the key factors that influence the level and quality of academic learning. Knowing the factors that lay at the foundation of learning motivation has to be followed by a conscious and systematic intervention upon the variables within the student's external environment that have the potential to activate the internal motivational resources towards improvements in learning results. In the opening of this paper we intend to identify the factors which can be found at the basis of the learning motivation of students in agricultural education, followed by an experimental intervention upon this variable, towards improving the students' academic results.

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