Educational motivation meets Maslow: Self-actualisation as contextual driver

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Abstract

This paper considers motivation and the relationship to the self-actualisation needs proposed by Abraham Maslow, impacting the academic motivation of students. Self-actualisation needs, are applicable to self-determination theory as well general and academic motivation. The work of Maslow and his conceptions of self-actualisation have evolved over time and it is the aim of the author to marry modern notions of self-actualisation and motivation with ways by which they can inform educators' practices.

Keywords

Educational motivation meets Maslow: Self-actualisation as contextual driver

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This paper considers motivation and the relationship to the self-actualisation needs proposed by Abraham Maslow, impacting the academic motivation of students. Self-actualisation needs, are applicable to self-determination theory as well general and academic motivation. The work of Maslow and his conceptions of self-actualisation have evolved over time and it is the aim of the author to marry modern notions of self-actualisation and motivation with ways by which they can inform educators' practices.

Keywords: motivation; intrinsic motivation; Maslow; self-actualisation; humanism; education

Introduction

Education may be taken for granted or viewed as a burden by young students, who can be devoid of motivation, drive for self-actualisation or strong relationships. Students can be prone to fluctuations in motivation when undertaking education at any level, which influences academic achievement and, as a consequence, self-actualisation needs (Kudrinskaia & Kubarev, 2013). Self-actualisation needs conceptualised by Abraham Maslow as selflessness and altruism (Greene & Burke, 2007), may be responsible for the variance among individuals' motivation in an academic setting. Achieving self-actualisation needs, in which an individual acts for the wellbeing of others and for purpose greater than their individual life, fosters strong bonds with others. Human beings are social creatures driven by their innate desire to foster relationships and feel a sense of belonging, an evolutionary characteristic to ensure longevity (Greene & Burke, 2007; Huss & Magos, 2014; McNeill, 2015; Petty, 2014).

Humanism rests on the principles of human relatedness, the inherent good nature of humans, and the pursuit of self-actualisation (Ryu, 2010). The ultimate objective of education is humanism – to reach a state in which acts of kindness and goodwill are undertaken in everyday life to benefit human society (Shenghua & Yunfeng, 2014; Vico, 1968), a notion of holistic development throughout the life course (Kudrinskaia & Kubarev, 2013; Ryu, 2010; Suthakaran, 2012). Choices in education are routes by which individuals can achieve esteem needs, by expressing themselves, and consequently love and belonging needs, through finding a purpose in society, both of which are vital components of humanism (Dollarhide, 2012). Individuals who engage in lifelong learning increase the likelihood of reaching this state, with humanistic perspectives having been shown to positively contribute to education theory and implications for classrooms, as these environments foster self-

actualisation (Akçay & Akyol, 2014; Ryu, 2010). This paper will highlight the implications of Maslow's hierarchy of needs for students of all ages' educational motivation and illustrate the importance of humanist thought in understanding the complexity of human nature.

Humanistic perspective

Altruism is often viewed as a secondary element in modern society, as our lives dictate less focus on community wellbeing than individual wealth and success. Darwin (1909) highlighted the importance of altruism, from a humanistic perspective, when describing the courage that humans exhibit in emergency situations as an expression of an innate social instinct. Evidence of the cross-cultural importance of such attributes as fairness has been identified by Henrich et al. (2001), whose experiment of an ultimatum game across 15 small-scale societies showed a significant proportion of each population would sacrifice monetary rewards to share with others or to punish unfair actions. This moral sense and drive is a significant contributor to responsible action that allows long-term planning, such as embarking on education to further develop skills (Lawrence & Pirson, 2015).

Humanistic perspectives hold optimistic views of human nature and have been linked to fundamental characteristics of human evolution (Franzenburg, 2009; Lawrence & Pirson, 2015). The limbic area has been shown to become activated, in similar fashion to responses to food and sex, when considering charitable contributions (Zahn et al., 2009, cited in Lawrence & Pirson, 2015). The notions of scaffolding for humanism include human dignity and ethics, which have been portrayed as altruistic self-actualisation needs that ensure the survival of the species (Lawrence & Pirson, 2015; Maslow, 1970, cited in Akçay & Akyol, 2014). The cognitivist approach to human behaviour is limited to data produced by controlled experiments, although it has been steadily becoming more popular to explain human behaviour since the 1950s. Suthakaran (2012), is an example of a researcher who is critical of scientific perspectives of human behaviour, he argues that cognitivism is restricted, as it simplifies phenomena in a controlled environment and seeks a unified truth, whereas humanistic psychology embraces complexities filling the role of reinvigorating and extending our understanding of observed phenomena.

Self-actualisation

Education motivation can be misunderstood as the desire to gain a job and wealth or approval from authority figures in the form of impressive grades. It is rarely discussed to its fullest potential, whereby higher levels of education in society can benefit both interpersonal relationships and the wellbeing of a given community while giving meaning to individual lives. Maslow (1943, 1970; Otway & Carnelley, 2013) highlights the importance of early experiences on individual development and personality stability; scaffolding for autonomy and personal growth are attributed to reciprocity of love and respect from an early age. Self-actualisation requires a level of maturity commonly found in those who undertake lifelong learning (Otway & Carnelley, 2013; Akçay & Akyol, 2014). The conditions of the environment must be accommodating in order for an individual to reach self-actualisation – in some cases this takes many years, as those lacking nourishment in a lower tier of Maslow's hierarchy of needs are ruled by those concerns (Gold, 2013; Huss & Magos, 2014;

Petty, 2014).[1] Additionally, individuals who seek meaning and understanding in the dissatisfaction confronted by circumstances in life are likely to be motivated by self-actualisation needs (Frana, 2013; Huss & Magos, 2014).

Liebert and Spiegler (1994) propose that self-actualisation growth is unique to the individual and comprised of adaptive behaviours, while Franzenburg (2009) extends this by adding openness and a sense of humour when describing self-actualisation accomplishment. Self-actualisation can be transformed into measureable items, otherwise known as when individuals are enabled to achieve their optimal development on the path to a superior state of existence (Akçay & Akyol, 2014; Frana, 2013; Gold, 2013). For Frana (2013), rather than an end state, self-actualisation is the ultimate free self-expression and adaptive growth behaviours exercised in an everyday sense, both of which share commonalities with self-determination goals (Lee, Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2015). This involves sincerely contemplating an individual's character and the choices made to reach self-actualisation (Frana, 2013; McElroy, 2013).

Deep feelings of empathy and positive affiliation with human beings are important components of self-actualisation (McNeill, 2015), where Maslow (1970) suggests individuals who have self-actualised have a greater capacity to identify with others and form stronger friendships. As a consequence, self-actualisation allows for more-effective communication, as individuals have greater depth to their understanding of their shortcomings accompanied by insight into solutions for these (Franzenburg, 2009; Huss & Magos, 2014). Effective communication is a useful learning tool when listening to the personal obstacles of others – individuals are more receptive to problem-solving information when granted from the position of an outsider (Franzenburg, 2009).

Self-determination

The foundation of self-determination theory (SDT) rests on the notion that the desire to learn is an inherent characteristic and can be encouraged or discouraged by social influences (Koludrović & Ercegovac, 2015). Eccles and Wigfield (2002) present an inclination toward defining SDT as a motivation theory that has its bedrock in individuals' reasons for engagement. Increasing students' autonomy and funnelling energy into collaborative contemplation and educational autonomy improves academic motivation and employability (Brown et al., 2015; Franzenburg, 2009; Kelley, Bartholomew & Test, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2015; Lee, Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2015; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Shogren, Kennedy, Dowsett & Little, 2014). Lee, Wehmeyer and Shogren (2015) found younger students benefit from early exposure to self-regulatory behaviour whilst older students have a greater capacity to engage in these behaviours, suggesting age differences between the positive effects of self-regulatory behaviours that enable autonomy. The relevance of content being covered in the classroom for each student is paramount in encouraging self-determination and autonomy (Kelley, Bartholomew & Test, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2015;

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[1] Howard and Walton (2015) suggest that – rather than the upper levels of the hierarchy being dependent upon the lower levels, with lower-level needs forming the basis for upper-level needs – each of the levels is dependent upon all the others.

Koludrović & Ercegovac, 2015; Lepper, Corpus & Iyengar, 2005; Melnic & Botez, 2014; Shogren et al., 2012; Shogren, Kennedy, Dowsett & Little 2014).

Deci and Ryan's (1985, cited in Can, 2015) enquiry into SDT of motivation examines the effectiveness and medium of motivation on a continuum from most self-determined to least. Intrinsic motivation falls on the 'most' end of the continuum with amotivation on the 'least'. Resting in between are four modes of extrinsic motivation: integrated regulation, identified regulation, introjected regulation and external regulation (Can, 2015; Koludrović & Ercegovac, 2015). Intrinsic motivation is comprised of self-determined behaviours that give a sense of competence to the individual, whereas extrinsic motivation entails the expectation of positive or negative reinforcement (Can, 2015; Koludrović & Ercegovac, 2015; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). External regulations are overt reinforcers such as receiving monetary rewards or high grades for behaviours (Can, 2015; Koludrović & Ercegovac, 2015; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Internal influencers, such as introjected regulation, regulate behaviours by instigating behaviours to avoid negative feelings, for example, a student completing homework to avoid guilty feelings (Can, 2015; Koludrović & Ercegovac, 2015). This differs slightly from identified regulation, which endeavours to seek positive results from specific behaviours. Amotivation is when individuals find no purpose in tasks and neither intrinsic nor extrinsic forces regulate behaviour (Can, 2015; Koludrović & Ercegovac, 2015).

An effective self-determination curriculum for the context of education involves choosing goals, expressing goals and taking action that has meaning for the individual (Kelley, Bartholomew & Test, 2011; Lee, Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2015; Shogren et al., 2012). Gottfried (1990; Arbabi et al., 2015) suggests early implementation of these curricula, as motivation in early elementary school years is a reliable predictor of outcomes on initial and future academic achievement. Although, Shogren, Kennedy, Dowsett, Villarreal & Little (2014) highlight, evidence of cross-cultural differences in autonomy and components of self-determination, Lee, Wehmeyer and Shogren (2015) found positive correlations between self-determination and student achievement across American and Korean cultures.

Motivation

Motivation is a dynamic process of inner urges and changes that stimulate behaviour to achieve these needs, mediated by the environment and individual (Kudrinskaia & Kubarev, 2013; Melnic & Botez, 2014; Petty, 2014; Wurf & Croft-Piggin, 2015). Melnic and Botez (2014) outline the duality of motivation, as it can be separated into negative and positive forms, driven by punishment or praise. Further subdivisions of motivation are intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the former is understood as the individual's choice to perform an activity for the inherent fun or challenge it presents to the individual (Kim & Kim, 2015; Melnic & Botez, 2014; Petty, 2014). Intrinsic motivation has been strongly correlated with successful learning and job satisfaction, as it gives life and nourishment to activities involved in everyday engagement (Chen, Chang & Liu, 2012; Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999). Factors that are external to the activity itself are known as extrinsic motivators, taking into account the expectation of response or reward (Melnic & Botez, 2014; Petty 2014). Extrinsic motivation provides a stimulus for individuals to motivate themselves but has not been shown to be effective in controlling the behaviour of others, as it is only as effective as the

strength of the relationship it has with the individual's attitudes, behaviour and perceptions (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999; Lepper, Corpus & Iyengar, 2005; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Petty, 2014).

Intrinsic and extrinsic factors are most effective when accompanied by a collective goal, as opposed to being individually focused (Browning, 2014). This further supports the humanistic principle that, given the ideal environment, humans wish to contribute to an entity larger than themselves and the most-adaptive behaviour is one of strengthening relationships in a community (Browning, 2014; McElroy, 2013).

Eccles and Wigfield (2002) proposed four types of motivational theories, expectancy focused, reasons for engagement, integrating expectancy and value constructs and, lastly, integrating motivation and cognition. Expectancy is conceptualised as the beliefs held by a person concerning the perceived difficulty of the task and their level of self-efficacy (Brown et al., 2015). Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002) define self-efficacy as an individual's judgement of specific abilities based on past success or failure. Cerino's (2014) findings have implications for the importance of self-efficacy in mediation of motivation, as it did not significantly impact procrastination, which is inconsistent with the literature and suggests further research is needed to determine the impact of self-efficacy. Reasons for engagement are encompassed in self-determination theory, where individuals are driven by desires for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Brown et al., 2015). Motivation theories that integrate expectancy and value are dependent on individuals' self-efficacy and the perceived impact on the individual's self-concept, intrinsic value, perceived usefulness for future circumstances or the consideration of the impact of success or failure (Brown et al., 2015). The final type of motivational theory integrates motivation and cognition, specifically the influence motivation has on students' developing self-regulatory behaviours (Brown et al., 2015; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002).

General motivation

Self-determination theory is grounded in the modern understanding of intrinsic and extrinsic factors as responsible for an individual's behaviour (Browning, 2014). Maslow's original hierarchy of needs provides an understanding of human motivation, whereby five levels of needs, beginning with physiological and culminating in self-actualisation needs, are undertaken by the individual on a road of adopting adaptive behaviours (Melnic & Botez, 2014; Otway & Carnelley, 2013; Petty, 2014). McClelland's need for achievement theory (Petty, 2014) is derived from the notion that an individual will continue to navigate their environment to find ways in which to succeed. Overcoming obstacles stimulates motivation and increases self-esteem (McElroy, 2013; Petty 2014). McClelland's theory of motivation outlines two groups of people, one whom have developed characteristics to overcome adversities and the other who have no desire to overcome obstacles (Petty, 2014).

Cognitive evaluation theory (CET) attributes motivation to the effect of rewards, both intrinsic and extrinsic, the individual and their personal feelings of self-determination (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999). According to cognitive evaluation theory, when rewards are perceived as 'controlling', meaning the individual feels pressured, there is a detrimental impact on intrinsic motivation, whereas

'noncontrolling' rewards are perceived as informational and have a positive impact on intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999). Eccles et al. (1993) suggest students' development of work avoidance attitudes in later years of school may be attributed to the rigidity and increased control on choices in schools, as students' autonomy needs are further developed.

Academic motivation

Modern theories of education are embedded in cognitivist and constructivist perspectives and, as a consequence, behaviourist insights on motivation are increasingly less relevant to educators (Koludrović & Ercegovac, 2015). Learning motivation is a causal relationship culminating the efforts focused on learning activities (Melnic & Botez, 2014). Students who marry intrinsic goals with their choice of study are more likely to receive instant gratification (Petty, 2014). Students are driven by social and esteem needs to achieve academically – when an individual has a sense of belonging their self-esteem rises and they become more motivated to perform well (Petty 2014).

Tangible rewards should be used sparingly with students from pre-school to tertiary education, as research shows they have a detrimental impact when used in conjunction with interesting tasks (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999). Deci, Koestner and Ryan (1999), instead, encourage educators to use informational rewards by adopting less-controlling teaching styles devoid of unnecessary pressures while striving to acknowledge desirable behaviour, promote freedom in undertaking tasks and highlight interesting components. Lepper, Corpus and Iyengar (2005) found a strong negative correlation between intrinsic motivation and work avoidance attitudes in students. Gose, Wooden and Muller (1980) have shown motivation to be more influential than intelligence in predicting variance in academic achievement.

Öztürk's (2015) research on Facebook as a useful learning tool sheds light on the unreliable influence of social aspects on motivation and the insignificant impact self-respect, social acceptance and acculturation have on positive academic outcomes. It was found that teaching and cognitive presence on social media platforms were reliable predictors of higher motivation (Öztürk, 2015). Students' perceptions of educators' openness and availability have been suggested by researchers to have favourable impacts on students' intrinsic motivation (Koludrović & Ercegovac, 2015; Öztürk, 2015).

Motivation and self-actualisation correlation

Kim and Kim (2015) suggest the most academically motivating factors are intrinsic factors associated with self-actualisation, suggesting that instant gratification is crucial to the learning process. Maslow (1970) deliberates on the notion of the intertwining relationship between intrinsic factors and self-actualisation, as he suggests self-actualisation complements processes that have been internalised.

In order for students to strive for higher needs, such as self-actualisation, they must first meet the lower needs, for example, have a nutritious diet, safe home environment and have high self-esteem (Melnic & Botez, 2014). Learning motivation inherently has a component of curiosity surrounding the purpose of learning, this means if an individual is engaged in academic activities they are engaged in higher needs of self-actualisation (Melnic & Botez, 2014).

Conclusion

Humanism is increasingly important in academic motivational theories and, as a consequence, self-actualisation needs are crucial in motivating students to achieve academically. Successful students are those who have a deep understanding of what drives them intrinsically and marries their internal drives to an activity. Intrinsic motivation is the most reliable predictor of sustainable motivation, as individuals receive instant gratification when engaging in an activity for the purpose of the inherent entertainment or stimulation they encounter in doing it. This enquiry into motivation and the effects of self-actualisation needs proposed by Abraham Maslow repurposes educators as facilitators of future communities and individuals' skill sets to contribute to needs of the community.

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