

Goal Theory: Fueling Motivation for Deeper Learning

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Goal Theory is the label used in educational psychology to discuss research into motivation to learn. Goals of learning are thought to be a key factor influencing the level of a student's intrinsic motivation.

Main axes of goal theory

Research in goal theory has identified the following dichotomies:

Mastery/performance

Mastery orientation is described as a student's wish to become proficient in a topic to the best of his or her ability. The student's sense of satisfaction with the work is not influenced by external performance indicators such as grades. Mastery orientation is associated with deeper engagement with the task and greater perseverance in the face of setbacks. Ames (1992). Mastery orientation is thought to increase a student's intrinsic motivation.

Performance orientation is described as a student's wish to achieve highly on external indicators of success, such as grades. The students' sense of satisfaction is highly influenced by their grades, and so it is associated with discouragement in the face of low marks. Performance orientation is also associated with higher states of anxiety. In addition, the desire for high marks increases the temptation to cheat or to engage in shallow rote-learning instead of deep understanding. Performance orientation is thought to increase a student's intrinsic motivation if they perform well, but to decrease motivation when they perform badly.

Task/ego involvement

A student is described as task-involved when he is interested in the task for its own qualities. This is associated with higher intrinsic motivation. Task-involved students are less threatened by failure because their own ego is not tied up in the success of the task. Nicholls (1990)

A student who is ego-involved will be seeking to perform the task to boost their own ego, for the praise that completing the task might attract, or because completing the task confirms their own self-concept (eg. clever, strong, funny etc...) Ego-involved students can become very anxious or discouraged in the face of failure, because such failure challenges their self-concept.

Approach/avoidance goals

Not all goals are directed towards approaching a desirable outcome (e.g., demonstrating competence). Goals can also be directed towards avoiding an undesirable outcome (e.g., avoiding the demonstration of incompetence to others).

It is thought that approach goals contribute positively to intrinsic motivation whereas avoidance goals do not.

Other developments

Other researchers have adopted a more complex perspective on goals, arguing that there are many different kinds of goals individuals can have in achievement settings. For instance, Ford and Nichols (1987) extended this point of view into within-person goals and person-environment goals, which lays equal significance on learners per se and learning environment.

Nevertheless, all the theories are devoted to studying the types of goals as well as their impact on multiple facets of learning. In other words, research that takes goals as a dependent variable remains scarce. Such a strategy to take goals for granted could be defended on the grounds that one cannot deal with all aspects of so complex an issue and that the theorists possibly feel the question of how goals originate was not relevant to the models they developed.

On the other hand, young children are frequently ignored within this area, based on the assumption that they might not have a clear pattern of setting a goal or they even do not own a goal when starting a task. Klahr argued that although there are large adult-child differences in overall problem-solving performance, even preschoolers have rudimentary forms of strategies such as means-ends analysis that rely on the use of goals. Thus, expanding the subject selection range and focusing on the process of goal-setting are expected to be the two main tasks in future research direction.