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MOTIVATING LEARNERS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: DO WE NEED A NEW THEORY OF LEARNER SUPPORT?

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IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: DO WE NEED A NEW THEORY OF LEARNER SUPPORT?

Abstract

This paper calls for a new theory of learner support in distance learning based on recent findings in the fields of learning and motivational psychology. It surveys some current learning motivation theories and proposes that models drawn from the relatively new field of Positive Psychology such as the 'Strengths Approach', together with Dweck's Self Theory and Anderson's insistence on proactive support, could be developed into a 'Proactive Motivational Support' (PaMS) theory. Such a theory might enable distance educators to support learners more successfully than existing models of learning skills development and remedial support. The paper then reports on further findings from experiments (one previously described in Open Learning), using these approaches in the UKOU. These findings confirm the previous results, showing significant increases in retention which, in the context of the UKOU's funding arrangements, appear to be at least self-financing.

"There is nothing" Keller remarks, "as practical as a good theory." Or to put it another way in a statement often ascribed to Friedrich Engels, "Theory without practice is sterile; practice without theory is blind." It is a little curious therefore that there appears to be little theory involved in learner support in distance learning. An examination of practice in the UKOU suggests that its support is based largely on student supporters' experience of both their own learning and of learners they have worked with. This is not of course necessarily unconstructive but, as T.S Eliot reminds us, 'There is, it seems to us, / At best, only a limited value / In the knowledge derived from experience. / The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies, / For the pattern is new in every moment'.

What theory there is seems to be based primarily on two approaches:

- identifying weaknesses in learners and suggesting ways in which they may be overcome, i.e. remediation
- advising learners on the development of learning skills

- using basic Rogerian counselling skills in the dialogue with learners.

But both these approaches may be problematic:

Remediation - As Anderson suggests (2003) "Remediation may work in the short term but will demotivate learners for high achievement in the long run. The best that remediation can help anyone to become is mediocre". Where the effects of remedial support are followed up to measure its effectiveness the results are sometimes disappointing as shown in a report from the London School of Economics where students receiving maths remedial classes were found not to have benefited (Times Higher Education Supplement p.7, 14 April 2006). In practice remedial approaches may set up more barriers in front of already disadvantaged learners by demoralising them.

Learning skills – the evidence for learning skills development may also be unclear or at least somewhat circular. A good student will be deemed to have acquired good learning skills but the only way it can be demonstrated that someone has good learning skills is if they are a good student. So it may not be clear what a good learning skill really is.

A search through the literature on learning skills also reveals some uncertainty about what learning skills are and how they may be most effectively developed. Gibbs (1981) gives examples which suggest that learners can learn effectively in many different ways – for instance the studies which suggest that students who take notes in lectures do no better than students who don't. Gibbs suggests that there may be no clear fixed set of learning skills appropriate to all circumstances and all learners, and that the important thing to do is to help learners experiment and develop study methods that work for them.

Finally the related field of learning style evaluation where it was argued that learners will learn more effectively if they find their personal learning style, is becoming discredited as evidence now suggests that it is not effective in promoting learning. (Richardson et al, 2002; Hall and Mosley, 2005).

There is however one clear agreement in much of the literature, summed up in the quote from Morgan et al (1982), 'Study skills training that does not consider motivation... may result in little skill improvement'. This is reinforced by a finding from the US (Barrios, 1997) which suggests that students who receive stress and self-efficacy training have higher retention rates than students receiving learning skills training.

Learning motivation

Thus in searching for a new theory of learner support it would seem useful to look at learning motivation. Most educators would agree on the central importance of motivation to a learner's success. Indeed some educators argue that motivation is not only a necessary condition for success but is also a sufficient one. A learner (it is argued) who is fully motivated will overcome barriers of situation and time, find ways of developing appropriate skills and be able to deal with the stress of study with very little extra external support –the 'independent learner' concept.

However so far most research into learner motivation in distance learning appears to centre on asking students for their reasons why they are studying. There seems to have been little research on the effect of learner motivation on student retention or how learner motivation can be changed by institutional activity. There is some limited evidence that concentrating on learner motivation can increase learner success. For example Visser (1998) used a motivational model based on Keller's ARCS model of motivation (Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction) to develop a motivational messaging system which sent messages to distance students at regular points during their studies. She found an increase in retention over a control group, but the group sizes were very small.

Nevertheless given the near-universal belief amongst educators in the efficacy of motivation in distance learning, it is worthwhile to review the current state of knowledge of learning motivation and make some suggestions for possible ways forward.

Theories of learning motivation

There are a number of theories of learning motivation of possible interest to open and distance learning educators such as:

- 'Self-Determination theory'
- 'Epistemological Identity Theory'

- ‘Achievement Goal theory’
- ‘Expectancy Value theory’
- ‘Self-perceived Competence theory’
- ‘Self-Concordance’ model
- ‘Self-Efficacy theory’
- ‘Interest Development model’
- Keller’s ARCS model

- and others which tend to be similar.

Different theories may apply to different aspects of the distance learning situation. For example:

(i) Self-Determination Theory (Vansteenkiste, 2004) might be the most immediately applicable theory to distance learners. This emphasises the role of ‘Autonomous Study Motivation’. Autonomy here implies that learners’ motivation depends on them having some freedom about their study behaviour. This freedom is promoted by choice, participation in the processes of learning and recognition of the learner’s feelings, both positive and negative. Autonomous Study Motivation is contradicted by deadlines, surveillance, guilt-invoking diktats and ignoring the learners’ negative emotions.

Clearly there are difficulties here given the emphasis in much distance learning on rigid progress markers such as fixed assignment submission dates. However there is some evidence from the UKOU that courses which allow the students the most freedom in terms of choice of material to study, options and general participation in the course structure, tend to have the maximum student retention (Crooks, 2005). But while distance educators often pay lip-service to choice and participation there seems to be little recognition of the learner’s feelings – especially negative feelings. There seems to be little appreciation in the literature that distance learners may sometimes experience anxiety, hopelessness, boredom, disappointment and anger and that strategies may be needed to help learners overcome such feelings. For example, nowhere on its extensive websites for learners does the UKOU have anything that admits that learning can be a painful and disappointing process. It is almost as though educators believe that admitting that such feelings can exist will in itself cause learners to experience those emotions. It sometimes feels as though much distance learning support material is written with a ‘perfect student’ in mind, one who is already independent, fully up to speed with IT, and ready to explore the use of blogs wikis podcasts and so on – and of course fully motivated to learn.

(ii) Epistemological Identity Theory. It has been suggested (Mansell et. al. 2004) that the most effective model of motivation for learning is the ‘Epistemological Identity’ motivation

theory, which is essentially about learners being able to say 'I'm convinced this particular learning is exactly right for me'. Thus perhaps one of the most effective ways of ensuring learners' motivation is to make certain that they are on the right course for them in terms of level, content and outcomes. This deduction is certainly congruent with the finding from surveys of withdrawn students in the UKOU which consistently present 'wrong course choice' as the second most important reason for dropping out after 'insufficient time' and supports the contention that merely using course descriptions to try to get potential students on the right course may not be nearly enough to ensure their motivation (Simpson, 2004).

(iii) Achievement Goal Theory (Skaalvik, 2004) may also have things to tell distance educators. According to this theory there are three different types of goals:

- Mastery Goals – associated with reaching competence
- Performance Goals – associated with demonstrating competence to others
- Performance Avoidance Goals – associated with avoiding looking inadequate.

Research suggests (Skaalvik, op cit) that students with Mastery Goals tend to do best. Such goals are promoted by having short term objectives, 'private' assessments (i.e. assessments not seen by other students), and training in planning and self motivation. Performance and Performance Avoidance Goals are those associated with overt competition, perhaps with other students. They may be less helpful in promoting motivation for some students (although there may be cultural differences here) but the theory as yet does not seem to suggest other ways in which students might be encouraged to change their goal strategies, apart perhaps from the use of formative assessment.

(iv) *'Self-perceived Competence Theory'* (Pajares, 2004) may also have lessons for distance educators. Students were asked how competence might be achieved whether through effort, ability, luck or unknown causes. Researchers found that roughly 20% of students had illusions of their own incompetence – they felt that success was due to luck and unknown causes and felt generally helpless. Roughly 60% of students had realistic views of their competence and another 20% held illusions that they had high levels of competency. Perhaps helping students with unrealistic views of their competencies to develop a more rational view of themselves would help their motivation. But the theory does not suggest ways in which this might be achieved.

(v) Self-Concordance Model. This theory suggests that there are four different kinds of motivation:

1. External – driven by outside forces
2. Introjected – acting in order to avoid guilt and anxiety
3. Identified – based on subscription to the underlying values of the activity
4. Intrinsic – driven by curiosity and pleasure.

Findings suggest that external and introjected motivations are associated with lower self-esteem, more drug abuse, more television consumption and acting in a narcissistic and competitive manner (Kasser and Ryan, 2001). Examples from current TV 'Reality Shows' may come to mind. Identified and intrinsic motivations are possibly more effective in promoting successful learning.

All these theories, whilst offering helpful explanations of learning motivation, do not easily lead to practical methods for educators to use in helping learners enhance their motivation. As Marx said, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it.' However there are some models which might suggest methodologies to promote learning motivation. Two in particular may be useful and have some evidence for their success on other learning situations:

- Positive Psychology – the 'Strengths approach'
- 'Theories of Self' (Dweck)

Positive Psychology and the 'Strengths Approach'

Positive Psychology is essentially the study of people's well-being and strengths. It contrasts with classical psychology's concentration on people's unhappiness and weaknesses. It is concisely described in Boniwell (2005) '*Positive Psychology in a Nutshell'* although the most authoritative book currently on the topic may be the *'Handbook of Positive Psychology'* by Snyder and Lopez (2002). Positive Psychology takes as its starting point questions, not of what makes people miserable, but what makes them happy. "Positive Psychology … is the scientific study of optimal human functioning [that] aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals …to thrive. [It is the] psychology of happiness, flow, and personal strengths." (Seligman, 1999).

The 'Strengths' approach to learner support arises from findings from positive psychology and is partly based on studies by Anderson and Clifton (2001) in the US and published by the Gallup organisation. It centres on enhancing learner motivation by emphasising the importance of self-esteem as a vital factor in learning progress. Its fundamental tenets are that:

1. Research suggests that people do best when they focus on their strengths rather than their weaknesses.
2. Focusing on weaknesses and trying to improve performance by trying to overcome them is not a particularly effective way of improving success.
3. The key to success is rather to identify and build on existing talents and see how they can be transferred to the skills that are needed for effective study.

Anderson and Clifton use the strengths approach in face to face groups, using group discussion techniques and work sheets to help students identify and explore their strengths, and then apply them to their situation.

The Strengths Approach is derived from findings in the field of positive psychology about how successful people work:

- top achievers fully recognise their talents and develop them into strengths,
- they apply their strengths in roles that suit them best,
- they invent ways to apply their strengths to their everyday tasks (Hill, 2000)

- and findings from research into the value of strengths:

- following strengths encourages insight and perspective on your life
- following strengths generates optimism
- strengths provide a sense of direction
- strengths help to develop confidence
- strengths generates a sense of vitality
- strengths help build resilience.

(Clifton and Anderson, op cit 2001).

Implications for learner support in open and distance learning

The strengths approach suggests an alternative way forward to the emphasis on remedial learning skills development. The argument of this paper is that whilst learning skills may be a factor in student success, a much more important one is learner motivation. Without appropriate focus on motivation, learner support for developing or remediating learning skills may be largely wasted. This may be similar to the strengths suggestion that learners should be encouraged to identify their strengths and apply them to their learning.

Such an approach also feels congruent with the nature of open learning – that the aim of distance educators should be to encourage learners in their strengths, rather than the remedial approach of identifying weaknesses and offering prescriptions for overcoming them. As Anderson suggests "The best predictor of student retention is motivation. Retention services need to clarify and build on motivation and address motivation-reducing issues. Most students dropout because of reduced motivation".

Identifying learners' strengths

There are a number of difficulties in identifying a learner's strengths:

1. They may not be aware of their particular strengths. For example, a woman with few formal qualifications at home looking after children, may well have developed high levels of stress and time management skills, but may be unaware of them, or how

important such skills are to successful learning and how they might be transferred to 9
the study environment.

2. They may see strengths as weaknesses. For example a person who finds it easy to ask for help may see that as being dependent and weak when in fact such a talent can be very helpful in learning.
3. They may have been told by authority figures that a particular strength is a weakness, or at least not a strength. For example a person who is good at networking may have been told as a child to stop chatting in class and not realise that collaboration with others can be a very useful talent for study.

Anderson and Clifton identify a list of about 30 strengths, but not all of these are necessarily relevant to learning, and in any case what can be explored in a face to face course over several weeks is not going to be possible in the very limited contact available in distance education. Boniwell suggests that the key to a practical strengths approach is via an initial contact with a new learner, emphasising the positive during that contact. According to her, an advisor should adopt a nine point approach:

1. Emphasise the positive during initial contact
2. Focus on existing assets and competencies
3. Draw out past successes and high point moments
4. Encourage 'positive affect' (hope and elevated thoughts)
5. Identify underlying values, goals and motivation
6. Encourage narration (life story, putting life in perspective, making sense of it)
7. Identify resources, protective factors and potentials of learners
8. Validate effort rather than achievement
9. ONLY THEN, if possible, talk about uncertainties, fears, lack of skills

(Boniwell, 2003).

Boniwell suggests that a practical way of using this approach might be for an adviser to ask student "Would you be willing to tell me a little about yourself? Tell me a bit about your life history. I'm particularly interested in things that you've done that you thought were successful – things that you felt you did well." Once someone has opened up on this topic a little the adviser will hopefully be able to identify a student's strengths (perhaps even those they weren't aware they had) which relate to learning.

Putting the strengths approach into practice.

As yet there is not a great deal of evidence for a strengths approach in distance education. There is some evidence in conventional learning settings – for example in the work of Cohen et al. (2006). They undertook a study amongst disadvantaged students in a US school. Their aim was to strengthen these students' social identities through undertaking simple 'self-

affirmation' exercises, by writing about their values. A group of Afro-American students reduced the achievement gap between themselves and a group of European American students by about 40% points. Importantly the scale of the intervention was quite slight but the effects were substantial and long lasting. As one of the experimenters noted, "The technique is like flicking a light switch, releasing the motivation and abilities that the students had all along".

There is some evidence from within distance education. A pilot project - the Proactive Student Support (PaSS) project - using a strengths approach to learner support, was conducted from 2002 in the UKOU and reported in Open Learning (Simpson, 2004). The project consisted of a simple proactive telephone contact, using a strengths approach, to an experimental group before the start of the course. The report noted that this contact increased retention at the end of the course by an average of nearly 4% over a balanced control group (a group with the same 'predicted probability of success' (Simpson, 2005) as the experimental group.)

The experiment was repeated in the years 2003, 2004 and 2005 and the overall results are shown in Table 1:

Year	**Total students in trial**	**Increase in retention rates of the experimental group over the control group (% points)**
2002	2866	3.9%
2003	1363	5.1%
2004	987	4.3%
2005	10130	7.6%

Table 1 Results of the UKOU Proactive Student Support Project

The 2005 result is included here for completeness but the trial was a little different from the others in that it was the result of an attempt to mainstream the project across the university – hence the much larger student numbers involved. However the result may be less reliable as the control group in this trial was not balanced in the same way as previous trials – they were simply the students who could not be contacted after two attempts. It may well be that these 'elusive' students are already more likely to dropout than contactable students.

Nevertheless the results are statistically significant to considerably less than 1%, which suggests that the effect of the contact is a very real one and that it produces at least a 5% improvement in retention. Simpson (op cit) noted that the government grant to the UKOU was dependent on the number of students completing courses each year and thus this

project brought funding into the UKOU from government. He demonstrated that the funding thereby brought in was greater than the cost of the project by a factor of up to 4 times, so that the project was not only self-funding but made a surplus to the UKOU. Furthermore he suggested that it was possible to show that the benefits to government and students also far outweighed the original investment in the project (Simpson, 2005).

However we must be cautious in ascribing these results solely to the strengths approach. The project used a wide range of advisers to make the contact and they were briefed to use a simple strengths approach using the suggestions from Boniwell noted above. But it was not possible to monitor their activities in sufficient detail to be sure that they were using the approach exactly as briefed. And it is perfectly possible that any contact of a reasonable friendly nature would have had a similar effect.

Thus, although we can be sure that the proactive contact increased retention by around 5% on average, we cannot yet ascribe the increase with certainty to the use of the strengths approach. Perhaps, for example, the main effect of the strengths approach was to increase the advisers' confidence through having a theoretical framework in which to place their perception of proactive contact. Further work is needed to be sure that it is the strengths approach which is making the difference to learners.

Self Theory

There remains another theory of motivation that may be important not just to learners but to learner support staff as well. This is the 'Self Theory' due to Dweck (2000). This may be illustrated by asking readers of this article to ask themselves two questions:

Q1. You have a certain amount of intelligence and can't do much to change it.
Answer Yes or No
Q2. Success is made up of X% intelligence and Y% effort
Give values for X and Y.

The answers to these questions determine the reader's Theory of his or her Intelligence:

i. If you said Yes to 1 and your value of X was greater than your value for Y (i.e. you think that on balance your intelligence is more important for success then effort) then you are an 'entity' theorist. 'Entity' theorists believe that their intelligence is largely fixed and cannot be changed by effort.

ii. If you said No to 1 and your value of X was less than your value for Y then you are an 'incremental' theorist. 'Incremental' theorists believe that their intelligence can be increased by effort.

This of course is a huge over-simplification of a complex theory. In particular it leaves the terms intelligence and success undefined. In the former instance Dweck appears to be using the word intelligence very much in lay terms as a person's perception of their innate ability, rather than in any technical or psychological definition. Success seems to be similarly defined to be in terms of a person's realisation of their potential rather than in terms of external achievement.

But whatever the definitions involved, the theory may have implications for both students and academic and support staff in higher education. It suggests that both students and staff may tend to fall into entity and incrementalist groups with implications for the way students study or staff support students:

(i) Students

- Students with an 'entity' theory may have high self-esteem and expect easy achievement (they may feel that they have an 'entitlement' to success). They may be less likely to undertake preparation (they may behave as 'dreamers' – that things will come out right by luck) and may give up more easily.
- Students with an 'incremental' theory may have a lower self-esteem but may be more resilient and persevering.

(ii) Staff :

- Staff with an entity theory of intelligence may tend to believe that either students have got what it takes, have first class minds, are the right stuff, (whatever phrase is used), or they haven't. In Anderson's phrase, they will be 'Survivalists' and will believe in the 'survival of the fittest'. If a student shows signs of failing through lack of motivation then survivalists will probably believe that there is little they can do about it.
- Staff with an incremental theory are more likely to believe that students failing through lack of motivation can be helped through increased support. In contrast to survivalists they will be 'Supportists'. In particular supportists are more likely to see the difficulties that students can face in motivation may stem from their background and not be an inherent part of their personality.

The difficulty, as Anderson (op cit) points out, is that institutions with high prestige are often survivalist in approach because they can afford to be. There is therefore a tendency amongst staff in supportist institutions to be drawn into survivalist attitudes as such attitudes are identified with institutions having a higher status. Thus one of the most difficult problems in applying a strengths approach to learner support is the possibly ambivalent attitudes of support staff. Or as Johnston and Simpson (2006) put it -'The biggest barrier to student retention is the institution itself'.

Lastly Dweck found that it is more effective to praise students' efforts rather than their achievements. Indeed she found that praising achievement could actually be counterproductive, as when students thus praised ran into subsequent difficulties they tended to give up more easily, believing that they had reached the ultimate level of what their intelligence could achieve. She suggested that students need to be persuaded that final success can be achieved through resilience and persistence, overcoming setbacks by learning from them and going on. Of course many good tutors in open and distance learning already unconsciously take this approach with students, for instance when marking assignments. However they may be unlikely to be as rigorous in praising effort at the expense of achievement as Dweck suggests they should.

Dweck and colleagues used her approach in an experiment in a New York school. She took two groups of disadvantaged adolescent students, and taught one about how the brain works and taught the other that their intelligence was malleable. The second group showed significant increases in grades and study motivation over first group, maintained for at least two years (Dweck et al, 2007).

What was important about this project was that the intervention was very short and yet the effects were marked and long-lasting. As Dweck noted "..the effects are far beyond what you might expect from the simplicity of the interventions".

Proactive Motivational Support (PaMS)

It may be that the best way forward for distance educators to help enhance the motivation of their students will be to use an eclectic mix of these two theories, concentrating on using a mix of techniques suggested by the theories according to the students in front of them.
But there is one further element that must be taken into account – the need for contact to be proactive; that is, the institution needs to take the initiative to contact its students rather than waiting for students to contact it. As Anderson (op. cit.) says, "Student self-referral does not work as a mode of promoting persistence. Students who need services the most refer themselves the least. Effective retention services take the initiative in outreach and timely interventions with those students."

If we take these elements - Dweck's Self Theory, Boniwell's Strengths Approach and Anderson's taking the initiative to contact students – all together, we might have a theory of learner support - 'Proactive Motivational Support' or PaMS which could be developed and tested against more conventional student support techniques.

PaMS would have the following characteristics. It would be

- individual – it would be focused on individual student needs rather than a top-down one-size-fits-all approach

- interactive – it would allow learners to interact with their support rather than be a take-it-or-leave-it approach
- motivational – it would be informed by and use both Self Theory and the Strengths approach.

Evaluating Proactive Motivational support

I have been conducting a very small scale experiment with students that I teach on an introductory UKOU maths course. The normal strategy for supporting students on this course is to teach them through relatively lengthy and therefore necessarily infrequent telephone tutorials. I largely rejected this approach and used much more frequent and much shorter proactive motivational contacts using both the phone email and letters, after starting by attempting to persuade students that they were all 'hard-wired' for maths and that (after Dweck) their mathematical intelligence was malleable and could be developed by effort. Indeed I tried to persuade them that the more effort they had to make the better their long-term mathematical development would be. To an extent that surprised me I found that I was not attempting to teach them, although of course I answered their questions where they arose.

Then after starting with Dweck's approach I focused all the time on their motivation using the strengths approach advocated by Boniwell.

The results are shown in Table 2:

Year	**% of students completing course**	
	My tutorial group % pass (number of students) (Proactive Motivational Support)	Whole course % pass (number of students) (Conventional teaching support)
2006	93.3% (15)	71.1% (398)
2007	92.3% (13)	62.3% (403)
Av.	**92.8%**	**66.7%**

Table 2 Results of using Proactive Motivational Support on an introductory UKOU maths course.

It can be seen that in this study the Proactive Motivational Support approach showed an increase of around 25% points over the conventional approach. The group sizes here are too small to draw definitive conclusions from this study. Neither was it possible to balance the groups for predicted probability of success. However the results do suggest that there may at the very least be a case for Proactive Motivational Support and that the study should be extended. Indeed at the time of writing there are two further PaMS studies under way in the

UKOU involving much larger numbers of students. It is hoped that the results of these studies will become available in 2009.

Conclusion

There is some evidence then that combining the three approaches of Self Theory, the Strengths Approach and Proactive Support into the one theory of Proactive Motivational Support may be more successful in supporting learners for success then conventional approaches based on identifying weaknesses and emphasising the development of learning skills. But much more evaluation of PaMS is needed to be certain of that.

Nevertheless the basic philosophy behind the approach is one that is congruent with the ethical aims of open and distance learning. If a learner is enabled to be fully motivated by this approach, then it is likely that they will explore issues of suitable preparation and learning skills development for themselves, be more persistent when facing difficulties, and become an effective independent learner, doing whatever they need to succeed.

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