



A Brief Guide to Self-Determination Theory

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Introduction

Self-Determination Theory can be used to explain the behaviour and performance of university students. This guide provides a brief introduction to the central tenets of Self-Determination Theory and a summary of the findings of a recent research project involving first year undergraduate students. A number of tips are also provided for practitioners who wish to adopt this framework to improve student experiences.

What is Self-Determination Theory?

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991) is a humanistic theory of motivation and well-being. The central premise of the theory is that individuals have innate tendencies towards personal growth and vitality that are either satisfied or thwarted by their immediate environment. The optimal conditions in which their innate tendencies are enacted are defined by the satisfaction of psychological needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy; in other words, the degree to which individuals experience a sense of ability, social connectedness and choice in settings that are important to them (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When these needs are fully satisfied, individuals exhibit optimal motivation and well-being. Conversely, when these needs are thwarted, individuals experience deficits in both motivation and well-being.

Why is it relevant to the experiences and performances of students?

Research suggests that Self-Determination Theory can be used to explain the behaviour and performance of university students (see Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). For example, within Self-Determination Theory, motivation varies along a continuum from intrinsic to external regulation. Intrinsic motivation refers to behaviour that is energised by the pleasure derived from engaging in the activity. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to behaviour that is energised by internal and external contingencies. The adaptive consequences of more autonomous (intrinsic) motives for students are well established (see Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004, for a review). For example, in comparison to controlling (extrinsic) motives, autonomous motives are related to more positive affective experiences associated with study, deeper level learning, greater use of meta-cognitive strategies (planning and time management), higher grades, and lower levels of course drop out.

How can Self-Determination Theory be used to understand the experiences of students?

Research suggests that first year undergraduates can be classified based upon the combinations of motivational regulation for attending university (Ratelle et al., 2007; Vansteenkiste et al., 2009). Groups that include more prominent autonomous motives also report more adaptive learning outcomes (e.g., use of meta-cognitive skills, academic performance, and persistence). A recent Pedagogic Research and Development Project (Higher Education Academy) illustrated that the motivational profiles evident amongst first year undergraduate students at a UK university accounted for differences in their university experience and engagement across their first year. The results are summarised in Table 1. The findings attest to the benefits of higher levels of more autonomous motives which provide the basis for a comparatively more positive student experience amongst first year undergraduates.

Table 1.

High autonomous and High controlled group (Group 1)	Low autonomous and Moderate controlled group (Group 2)	Moderate autonomous and Moderate controlled group (Group 3)
Highest enjoyment	Lowest enjoyment and decreases overtime	Moderate enjoyment
Joint lowest boredom	Highest boredom	Joint lowest boredom
Joint lowest anxiety	Highest anxiety	Joint lowest anxiety
Joint highest satisfaction	Lowest satisfaction and decreases overtime	Joint highest satisfaction

How can Self-Determination Theory be used to improve the experiences of students?

Research suggests that practitioners must promote more autonomous motives amongst first year students by ensuring their experience in higher education supports innate psychological needs. In support of this proposal, a burgeoning amount of research supports the positive consequences of perceptions of autonomy-supportive environments amongst students (see Ryan & Stiller, 1991, for a review). Those interested in practical strategies aimed promoting perceptions of autonomy-support in an educational context are directed to the work of Reeve (e.g., Reeve, 2006; Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999; Reeve & Halusic, 2009). Some of the strategies of autonomy-supportive teachers identified by Reeve are presented below and provide a starting point for practitioners.

1. Nurture students' inner motivational resources – Incorporate student interests, preferences and values in to learning activities and avoid external regulators such as rewards, directives, deadlines and compliance requests.
2. Rely on non-controlling language – Communicate using informational and flexible messages (i.e., information-rich and competence affirming), rather than controlling and rigid messages (i.e., coercive or pressurising).
3. Communicate value and provide rationales – When tasks do not appear to capture the interest of the student, identify and explain the use, value and importance of the tasks.
4. Acknowledge and accept expressions of negative affect – Acknowledge the students perspective by accepting that students will inevitably encounter rules and requests that are not consistent with their preferences and when they do so they will not engage fully.

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