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# Teaching Motivation that Works: Structuring Graduate-Level Research Support Workshops to Foster Centered, Focused Self-Sufficient Learners

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# Teaching Motivation that Works: Structuring Graduate-Level Research Support Workshops to Foster Centered, Focused Self-Sufficient Learners

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## CHAPTER 6

# Teaching Motivation That Works:

## Structuring Graduate-Level Research Support Workshops to Foster Centered, Focused, Self-Sufficient Learners

Wendy C. Doucette

All too frequently, instruction librarians' only opportunity to teach students distills down to the fifty-minute, one-shot, make-or-break experience. We disseminate the essential information as requested—how to use the library, how to search the databases, and so on—with little time to explain why all the pieces fit together and why they are important. Worse, well-intentioned librarians often strive to cover as much as possible in these sessions, oversaturating and frustrating their student audience.

Even in settings of brief duration with no follow-up, another approach is possible. Rather than attempting to demonstrate everything at once, we can interject effective, real-life motivational tactics into the session by highlighting the underlying purpose of the process demonstrated. In other words, we can focus not simply on “what” or “how” but on “why.” Providing this context and structure not only grounds students, it clarifies and demystifies the process. Understanding that purpose and method are as important as data better empowers students with strategies to pursue their own needs independent-

ly. This chapter focuses on graduate students, particularly those in doctoral programs, but with a little creative thinking, these strategies could also be adapted for application with undergraduate learners.

## The Problem of Motivation

Even for experts, evoking appropriate, directed student response is a dauntingly difficult task, as Dupont, Galand, and Nils demonstrate in their excellent overview of factors concerning motivation and engagement.<sup>1</sup> After much research and effort, Jayaraman Parameswari and K. Shamala conclude the same,<sup>2</sup> as do David Litalien, Frederic Guay, and Alexandre Morin over the intricacies of conflicting contexts for the external motivations of graduate students.<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Mueller, Miriam Flickinger, and Verena Dorner, provide a helpful summary of the many facets of this question<sup>4</sup> and structure their investigation to include this complexity: “Based on *students’ mixed arguments* in describing the relationship between extrinsic academic motivation and their decision *for or against* a PhD, we formulate the following *competing hypotheses*,” namely whether “extrinsic academic motivation is negatively [or] positively related to the intention to earn a PhD.”<sup>5</sup>

In creating our instruction program, our objective is not to analyze why our students behave as they do. While the topic is unquestionably interesting, we do not engage in the long debate known to all who have encountered Carol Dweck’s (and others’) career-spanning research over the effects of mastery (internal) orientation and goals versus those which are performance-oriented (external). Likewise, we leave the finer points of Self-Determination Theory and Achievement Goal Theory to others.

## Empathy as a Core Value

When serving our own students, we begin with empathy.<sup>6</sup> The pursuit of higher education is difficult enough for traditional undergraduates; for graduates, the additional challenges of maintaining a home, holding other employment, and caring for children (or parents or both) are often overwhelming. In one-on-one consultation sessions with the author, a number of international students (usually male) have revealed the financial pressure on them not only to graduate and begin successful careers but to continue to send money home on the meager salary of a graduate student. American female single-parent graduate students likewise self-report the same financial pressure. The bottom line is that whatever the additional circumstances, graduate school is hard enough for everyone. Because we know graduate students are often stretched

to the breaking point, we take a holistic approach and respect our students' motivations as their own private concerns.

With the onslaught of requirements and deadlines facing graduate students, we are well aware of the reluctance to commit to learning anything deemed "extra." As subject specialists, program professors fulfill the critical roles of instructor and mentor within the student's chosen program of study. As Niall Hegarty diplomatically states, "Although professors may be motivated by their realm of instruction, they are not however employed for their motivational skills."<sup>7</sup> Our graduate-level research support workshops incorporate multiple voices and perspectives into teaching what Nella Roberts and Maria Plakhotnik call the "how-to' insights to navigate through [doctoral students'] long journey."<sup>8</sup> This commitment to teaching "everything else, or how to get out of grad school" fulfills a critical support role.<sup>9</sup> As Cheryl Polson states, "The quality of the graduate experience and success can vary significantly . . . and is a function, in part, of the student services made available to them."<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the bounty or surfeit of practical support given within individual programs, the graduate workshop series provides a common platform for learning the essential "how-to" skills necessary for completing graduate school.

## Andragogy, Not Pedagogy

The most important role of the graduate research and instruction librarian and the embedded librarian for the Graduate Thesis and Dissertation Boot Camp is keeping students on track and moving forward in order to graduate on schedule. We serve students from every degree program. Ranging from their early twenties to their early fifties, our students, international and domestic, come from diverse backgrounds. They have extensive work experience or none at all. They have previous master's or other advanced degrees or are in graduate school for the first time. They possess a multiplicity of specialties, aptitudes, and differences, amounting to what Elaine Cox calls "an abundance of prior life and work experience."<sup>11</sup> Despite all these differences, they all share the same common goal: successful completion of coursework leading to capstone or thesis or dissertation and graduation. Even students with previous advanced degrees confess they don't know how graduate school works.

Like all academic librarians, we receive standing or ad hoc invitations from faculty to teach library instruction to graduate students. At East Tennessee State University,<sup>12</sup> we go one step further by supplementing these opportunities by offering our own permanent workshops. Given every semester, this comprehensive program of research-level support covers a wide spread of essential topics. Begun in Fall 2015 with six workshops, the series grew to

nine in Spring 2016 and will expand to eleven in Fall 2017. The underlying framework of the entire program rests on the concept of andragogy.

Although he did not author the term, Malcolm Knowles popularized the concept of andragogy in his 1970 book, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*.<sup>13</sup> Almost fifty years later, the essence of the theory is still valid: pedagogy as a slow, incremental model for the long-term education of children versus andragogy as a self-motivated, point-of-need response to the immediate learning requirements of adults. To the category of “adult,” I include undergraduates as equally worthy beneficiaries of performance-based library instruction.<sup>14</sup> As Chan Sang puts it, “Active learning is more effective than passive learning, regardless of age.”<sup>15</sup>

## Contextualizing Content for Real Life Structure

The adult-focused concept of andragogy allows us to structure our graduate-level research support workshops for graduate students and faculty in a way that meets their schedule. While the piloted additional weeknight session students begged us to offer were discontinued due to poor attendance, the mainstay Saturday five- to six-hour sessions remain the core of the program. After working together for most of a day, students form a *de facto* cohort. Meeting face-to-face in a high-tech, research-oriented space (the library’s collaborative wireless classroom) creates a supportive learning environment with a social component and peer support especially beneficial for students in online-only programs. We schedule the workshops four to six weeks into the semester, aiming for the sweet spot after students have settled into classes and before midterms.

Our adult learners want to make enduring changes in the way they approach information literacy, engage with research, and create satisfactory work-life balance. Based on a “problem-centered orientation to learning,”<sup>16</sup> we strive to appeal to visual learners through presentations and posters, to auditory learners through discussion, and to kinesthetic learners through direct participation.<sup>17</sup> In the registration process, registrants are given the opportunity to state in their own words why they are coming and what they want us to cover. Through the sign-in sheet and initial introductions, we can begin to form a sense of the composition of the day’s group. Zorn-Arnold and Conaway correctly stress the value of this seemingly insignificant step of getting to know the day’s participants before beginning the session.<sup>18</sup> Feeling comfortable, relaxed, and heard, students are prepared to receive our message in a grade-free, advisor-free, committee-free, judgment-free zone.

The Library's ownership of the program allows us to showcase our knowledge base as subject specialists in our own domain. Although it is certainly not a prerequisite to offering any sort of workshop, all of the librarians who teach the workshops hold faculty status and are professional researchers and postgraduates. Faculty instructors who are subject specialists teach our workshops by invitation.

## *Content*

Andragogy allows us to unify the seemingly disparate pieces of a large-scale academic writing project as part of a whole. For our stressed students, the best motivational strategy is to equip them not only with information but with solutions to the immediate practical challenges common to all graduate students. The content we deliver needs to be timely, relevant, and applicable to real-life. This deliberate grounding allows students to “consciously practice making insightful connections across their courses, organizing information into meaningful units, and finding personal relevance in what they learn.”<sup>19</sup>

We contextualize every workshop we offer, demonstrating the import and value of each piece. There is, frankly, very little value in things that are extremely useful—citation management, for example—without explaining not only how to do it but why it is important and what larger function it serves.

The graduate-level research support workshops address points-of-need at various stages, from those of first-semester students to more seasoned graduates. Piloted first among a series of offerings in the Thesis and Dissertation Boot Camp in Spring 2015 with two workshops (“Organize Yourself” and “Academic Searching”), the series opened to all graduate students and faculty in Fall 2015 with six workshops. Content is evaluated every semester with edits and new offerings based on instructor and student feedback.

The Spring 2017 series consisted of the beginner workshops, “How Academic Research Works,” “Academic Searching,” “Time and Project Management,” “Understanding Data,” and “Formatting APA Papers,” and advanced workshops, “Academic Publications and Presentations,” “Establish Your Professional Identity,” “Infographics for Academics,” and “Medical Searching.” Given on sequential Saturdays, students are free to choose as many workshops as they wish to attend. The designations of “beginner” and “advanced” are concessions to logistics; it is simply not possible to have a day longer than six hours without stressing both instructors and participants. Realistically, however, the separation makes sense. Attempting to teach medical searching without establishing some prior familiarity with academic searching overall is inadvisable. Students do tend to follow the full sequence and only rarely

sign up for an advanced workshop without having taken one or more in the beginner series first.

After welcome and introductions, we begin the series by stating that no matter how well they did as an undergraduate, nobody really understands how to succeed in graduate school until after they've completed the degree. It remains true that one has to learn by doing, but there are rules. (This is, in fact, the content of the first slide of the first workshop.) The starting workshop of the series, "How Academic Research Works" (HARW), presents the basics, such as plagiarism, copyright, and—based on demonstrated student need—literature review, in a behind-the-scenes contextual view explaining how academic research actually works.

HARW was created using the ACRL Information Literacy Framework. Given and heavily edited five times, this workshop remains the launching point for situating the student's role in the process. Core concepts from the framework, such as "Scholarship is a Conversation," take on new meaning when faced with the irrefutable evidence of oneself as an active scholar. Interestingly, the information within this workshop, particularly concerning the nature and purpose of literature review, is considered revelatory not only to new students but even to advanced students who have already completed the methodology courses required by their own departments. By explicitly framing the thesis or dissertation as an academic *narrative*, students understand not only the function of the pieces which make up the structure or project (thesis or dissertation) but their own agency as creators.<sup>20</sup> This level of consciousness reinforces Werner and Rogers' belief that through better self-positioning, "adult learners may better construct first-time dissertations more *mindfully* or in a more conscious manner with recognition of themselves, as learner and researcher."<sup>21</sup>

All of the workshops actively reference problem- and scenario-based assignments to address everyday, professional issues. When piloted, the workshop, originally titled "Organize Yourself," focused only on computer-related issues such as version control, file storage, and backups. Over time and with a greater direct understanding of how students address their computer issues, but more importantly, their current ability to attain the level of organization required overall to finish a project as daunting as thesis or dissertation, the workshop has shifted into two main parts. Now called "Time and Project Management," the first half ("The Easy Part") still addresses computing. The second half ("The Hard Part"), offers strategies for altering personal behavior with proven techniques such as the Pomodoro method and the Japanese philosophies of Morita therapy, *naikan*, and *kaizen*.<sup>22</sup>

Dupont, Galand, and Nils categorize two types of perfectionism: "Adaptive perfectionism, which refers to the setting of high personal standards, and maladaptive self-perfectionism, which refers to high levels of self-criticism



and doubt about actions.”<sup>23</sup> This distinction is intellectually interesting, but for our purposes, perfectionism of any kind tends to go hand-in-hand with procrastination. Perhaps the strongest anti-procrastination philosophy we recommend is Constructive Living. Popularized by Dr. David K. Reynolds, this application of Japanese Morita therapy distills down to a “just do it” mindset, where progress is made despite one’s emotional mindset.<sup>24</sup> In other words, wanting to or “feeling like” researching, writing, or making any type of progress toward a thesis or dissertation becomes irrelevant. By working regardless of emotional state, breaking unmanageable goals into small, achievable milestones, and understanding how all of the disparate pieces required to complete a graduate program come together, prospective graduates matriculate. Beyond establishing a self-directed, targeted, time-sensitive mindset capable of addressing impending academic goals and deadlines, this shift in personal ideology can result in changed lives as well.

## Partnerships and Satisfaction Ratings

The graduate-level research support workshops allow us to offer specialized services year-round to any interested graduate student or faculty member. Beginning our initial offerings as part of Thesis and Dissertation Boot Camp increased our value to the Graduate School, the organizer of Boot Camp. We leverage this partnership to successfully market the series each semester to all graduate students, graduate program coordinators, and faculty via the Graduate School’s mailing lists. In our exit surveys, 70 percent said they heard about workshops through the Graduate School. Eleven percent heard the Graduate Research and Instruction Librarian speak about them at Graduate Orientation, an event to which we are invited by the Graduate School. The remainder are recommendations via graduate coordinators, other faculty, or friends. As a result of personal contact with a graduate coordinator or after in-class library instruction, some coordinators and faculty have begun requiring students in specific programs to attend the beginner series. As a given, we advertise the workshops on the library’s webpage.

The majority of those attending are graduate students (92.2 percent versus 7.8 percent faculty). While we warmly welcome our fellow faculty, graduate students are the intended audience. These students frequently make individual follow-up appointments with us as a result of this contact. This, in turn, often leads to appointments with “friends of friends.” International students, especially, leverage this peer network, bring unregistered friends to workshops and repeat topics as needed.

Of the 180 students who voluntarily completed exit surveys in Academic Years 2015–16 and 2016–17 (a 94.7 percent completion rate), only one person

said the information learned in the workshops was not valuable to them. We are extremely pleased with our 99.994 percent satisfaction rating.

We also gauge participant readiness to implement the techniques discussed in the workshops. To the exit survey question “How likely are you to act on what you learned today?,” 77 percent responded, “I’m starting today”; 23 percent answered, “I will eventually”; and (happily) 0 percent selected, “I’ll never get around to it.”

## Fostering Self-Sufficient Learners

Our definition of successful student motivation is a practical one. Our goal is to provide support to graduate students about the process of becoming successful master’s and doctoral candidates. By teaching the skills to fully own and manage the project and timetable, understand the parts of a thesis or dissertation, and write steadily and incrementally, regardless of the desire to do so or not, we hope to ingrain structure and method to what can otherwise seem a chaotic and random process. The stress on work-life balance is a healthy reminder to preserve the integrity of one’s personal support system of good health and strong relationships.

In addition to having formed a collegial, professional relationship with us as a result of participating in the workshops, participants receive access to a LibGuide that includes all of the links and references covered within the series.

Starting in Summer 2016, we created a motivation shelf of books on writing, research methodology and design, data visualization, combating procrastination, the neuroscience of creative work, kaizen, constructive living, and related topics. These titles are selected because of their clear “how-to” message. We have found the Palgrave Study Skills<sup>25</sup> series particularly helpful and have ordered a large part of this collection.<sup>26</sup> Many students, particularly international, have stated their preference for a how-to book they can read and study at leisure when they have free time.

The motivation shelf provides the additional service traditionally expected of libraries by going beyond merely providing an array of databases that can be accessed on demand. Putting the right book into the right person’s hand at the right time is a tangible manifestation that help is available here and now, not parceled out into academic articles or floating about in the internet’s ether. In addition to brightly colored signage, the motivation shelf is equipped with marketing information about the workshops and contains our contact information.

Roberts and Plakhotnik point out that “at times just knowing that actual and potential resources are available is comforting.”<sup>27</sup> We have found this to be true. Throughout the first semester we launched them, students nervously asked if the workshops would be offered again. We assured them that the

workshops would return later in the semester, next semester, next year, and that there would be plenty of time for students to take them. We also promptly remind them that we are available on demand for individual appointments at any time of the year, including summer.

### *The exponential and reciprocal benefits of motivation*

Turning motivation into something practical that can be taught, learned, and made immediately relevant has allowed us to grow beyond the micro role of librarian helping with reference and citations to fully engaging with the macro role of student service provider. We furnish students with the help they need when they want it. As Cox states, “The majority of learners are not ready for coaching until the easiness and familiarity of their everyday life is interrupted in some way.”<sup>28</sup> It is difficult to imagine any educational situation with higher stakes and less guidance than graduate school. Not only is it our commitment and our honor to provide the services we do, we are perpetually touched by the depth of gratitude we receive from our students for helping them attain their educational goals and move on to the next chapter of their lives. Unexpectedly, we have become the recipients of the enduring rewards of this endeavor by finding our own motivation renewed.

## Endnotes

1. Serge Dupont, Benoît Galand, and Frédéric Nils, “Factors Predicting Postponement of a Final Dissertation: Replication and Extension,” *Psychologica Belgica* 54, no. 1 (2014): 33–54, <http://doi.org/10.5334/pb.ac>; for more on motivation and self-determination theory, see: David Litalien, Frederic Guay, and Alexandre J. S. Morin, “Motivation for PhD Studies: Scale Development and Validation,” *Learning and Individual Differences* 41 (2015): 1–13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2015.05.006>.
2. Jayaraman Parameswari, and K. Shamala, “Academic Motivation and Locus of Control Among Engineering Students,” *Journal of Psychosocial Research* 7, no. 1 (2012): 163.
3. Litalien, Guay, and Morin, “Motivation for PhD Studies,” 11.
4. See their table: Elisabeth F. Mueller, Miriam Flickinger, and Verena Dorner, “Knowledge Junkies or Careerbuilders? A Mixed-Methods Approach to Exploring the Determinants of Students’ Intention to Earn a PhD,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 90 (2015): 81, <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2015.07.001>.
5. Mueller, Flickinger, and Dorner, “Knowledge Junkies or Careerbuilders?,” 78.
6. For more on the importance of empathy as a means of reaching students, see: Fiona Murphy, “Motivation in Nurse Education Practice: A Case Study Approach,” *British Journal of Nursing* 15, no. 20 (2006): 1133, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2006.15.20.22300>.
7. Niall Hegarty, “Adult Learners as Graduate Students: Underlying Motivation in Completing Graduate Programs,” *Journal of Continuing Higher Education* 59, no. 3

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8. Nella A. Roberts and Maria S. Plakhotnik, "Building Social Capital in the Academy: The Nature and Function of Support Systems in Graduate Adult Education," *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education* 122 (2009): 49, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ace.333>.
  9. Dupont, Galand, and Nils, "Factors Predicting Postponement," 35; Litalien, Guay, and Morin, "Motivation for PhD studies," 12.
  10. Cheryl J. Polson, "Adult Graduate Students Challenge Institutions to Change," *New Directions for Student Services* 102 (2003): 59, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ss.90>.
  11. Elaine Cox, "Coaching and Adult Learning: Theory and Practice," *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education* 2015, no. 148 (2015): 29, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ace.20149>.
  12. Located in Johnson City, Tennessee, East Tennessee State University (ETSU) has approximately 11,000 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.
  13. Malcolm Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (New York, NY: Association Press, 1970), 305–06.
  14. For more on performance-based active learning, see: Jonathan Stolk and Janie Harari, "Student Motivations as Predictors of High-Level Cognitions in Project-Based Classrooms," *Active Learning in Higher Education* 15, no. 3 (2014): 231–47, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1469787414554873>.
  15. Chan Sang, "Applications of Andragogy in Multi-Disciplined Teaching and Learning," *MPAEA Journal of Adult Education* 39, no. 2 (2010): 33.
  16. Tracy Carpenter-Aeby and Victor G. Aeby, "Application of Andragogy to Instruction in an MSW Practice Class," *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 40, no. 1 (2013): 10.
  17. Doris Lee, John McCool, and Laura Napieralski, "Assessing Adult Learning Preferences Using the Analytic Hierarchy Process," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 19, no. 6 (2000): 551, doi:10.1080/02601370050209078.
  18. Barbara Zorn-Arnold and Wendy Conaway, "The Keys to Online Learning for Adults," *Distance Learning* 13, no. 2 (2016): 2.
  19. Meera Kommeraju, Steven Karau, Ronald Schmeck, and Alen Advic, "The Big Five Personality Traits, Learning Styles, and Academic Achievement," *Personality and Individual Differences* 51 (2011): 476, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.04.019>.
  20. Goddu references the importance of narrative learning as the inclusion of "reflect[ion] on his or her own life experiences." Kevin Goddu, "Meeting the CHALLENGE: Teaching Strategies for Adult Learners," *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 48, no. 4 (2012): 173, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2012.734004>.
  21. Thomas P. Werner and Katrina S. Rogers, "Scholar-Craftsmanship: Question-Type, Epistemology, Culture of Inquiry, and Personality-Type in Dissertation Research Design," *Adult Learning* 24, no. 4 (2013): 163, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1045159513499549>.
  22. Developed by Francesco Cirillo, the official home of the Pomodoro Technique is <https://cirillocompany.de/>. Dr. David K. Reynolds has devoted his career to writing about Morita therapy and naikan. Dr. Robert Maurer has written clearly and concisely on kaizen.
  23. Dupont, Galand, and Nils, "Factors Predicting Postponement," 34–35.
  24. Nearly thirty years after the fact, the author continues to sincerely acknowledge

- David K. Reynolds' 1984 *Constructive Living* as the book that prevented me from leaving graduate school when I was struggling to write my dissertation.
25. "Palgrave Study Skills," Macmillan Publishers LTD, [www.palgravestudyskills.com](http://www.palgravestudyskills.com).
  26. One caveat: this British series occasionally refers too specifically to details about O Levels for our comfort. If the advice is too UK-specific and no longer general recommendations about research or writing, we will choose to not purchase a title for fear of confusing students in our American university.
  27. Roberts and Plakhotnik, "Building Social Capital in the Academy," 48.
  28. Cox, "Coaching and Adult Learning," 33.

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