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Developmental and Adult Basic Education Motivation and Optimism/Helplessness Model

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Abstract: Students in Developmental and Adult Basic Education often have very specific motivational needs; however, there is no model of motivation that describes these students' experiences. This model synthesizes motivation research on those populations as well as motivational theories and models from psychology (including K-12 educational psychology).

Introduction

As educators, we are concerned about our students' motivation for learning. As adult basic and developmental educators, this concern is deeper. Developmental and adult basic education (ABE) at a college is made up of a series of courses, tutoring, and student support services intended to assist students who have been identified as needing to develop skills in order to be successful in college or the workplace (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Boylan, Bonham, & White, 1999). Therefore, the classes these students take are remedial in nature and tend to focus on math, writing, reading, and study skills. [For the remainder of this paper, I will use the term ABE to refer to both adult basic and developmental education classes and students. At some colleges, both sets of students are served by the same department (labeled adult basic education), while at others they are separated into adult basic education and developmental education.] Also, successful completion of these classes is often mandatory before a student is able to take college-level courses at the college. As a result of the low-skill levels of the students and the mandatory nature of the classes, the motivation levels of the students in these classes are particularly low (Moore, 2005; Roueche & Roueche, 1993; Smittle, 2003), if as varied as other student groups (Beder & Valentine, 1990). Few adult education researchers (see Wlodkowski) have theorized as to how adults experience and develop motivation in the general adult education classroom, let alone in the ABE classroom. Educational theories of motivation have primarily been proposed in relation to the K-12 system. While we know ABE students are lacking in motivation and/or primarily extrinsically motivated (Roths, Lemos, & Goncalves, 2014) to take ABE classes, there is no theoretical model of ABE academic motivation to assist educators and researchers in understanding the motivational needs of this distinct population. In this paper, I discuss the characteristics of adult ABE students and the research that has been done on this specific population. I then explore three theories of motivation and where ABE students are likely to fit in the theories. Finally, I combine the theories of motivation into one motivation theory for developmental education students.

The ABE Student Population

Significant portions of our college population take ABE classes. In the 2007–2008 school year, 20% of first-year undergraduate students took remedial courses in public or private institutions (Sparks & Malkus, 2013). Out of first-year undergraduates, higher percentages of

minority students enrolled in remedial classes (e.g., 19.9% of the White student population in comparison to 30.2% of the Black student population). In the college setting, many ABE students feel marginalized and unimportant, which often prompts them to avoid asking for help and to attend fewer classes (Moore, 2005). In a study of attitudes toward remedial classes, students characterized their “initial feelings toward remediation as fear, embarrassment, or disdain. Many of them admitted to originally connecting remediation with being ‘dumb’ or ‘not trying’ hard enough. Others saw it as a ‘waste of time’ or a delay of core coursework” (Bachman, 2013, p. 18). As might be expected, ABE students, who have low-skill levels in the course content, “are typically characterized by a lack of motivation” (Roueche & Roueche, 1993, p. 58). They “often have low self-esteem, especially in regard to academic work” (Smittle, 2003, p. 12), lack the ability to provide their own feedback about their performance (Wambach & Brothen, 2000), have adopted a passive learning style (Turnbull, 1986), and have an external locus of control (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Smith & Price, 1996). Perhaps the most in-depth investigation of ABE student motivation is Morrison’s (1999) study that compared developmental and nondevelopmental first-year students. She found that developmental students are particularly lacking in motivation and may need extra assistance in developing their motivation for college. This is often a daunting task; “Teachers indicate that motivating students to learn and to participate in learning activities may be the most difficult task, especially in working with developmental students” (Smittle, 2003, p. 12).

Foundational Motivation Theories

The Developmental and Adult Basic Education Motivation and Optimism/Helplessness Model is based upon existing research and theory in ABE as well as psychology and adult education. By synthesizing Rea’s (2000) Model of Optimal Motivation for Talent Development—which incorporates expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975/2008), and reversal theory (Apter, 2007)—learned optimism (Seligman, 2006), Wlodkowski’s (2008) adult motivation theory, and research on ABE students, I have developed a Developmental and Adult Basic Education Motivation and Optimism/Helplessness Model.

Model of Optimal Motivation for Talent Development

Rea (2000) incorporates elements of expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975/2008), and reversal theory (Apter, 2007) into his Model of Optimal Motivation for Talent Development. Rea builds his model in three steps. He begins with expectancy-value theory, but also incorporates the concept of affect, which is the “students’ emotional reaction to a learning task” (p. 190). With a positive affect, students enjoying the task will be more curious and/or controlled, while a negative affect such as apathy or overexcitement may undesirably affect attention and persistence. So, in Rea’s model, motivation can be represented in an equation: “motivation = expectancy x value x affect” (p. 190).

The second step to build Rea’s (2000) model takes his first motivation equation and adds the element of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975/2008), which Rea terms “optimal achievement motivation” (2000, p. 192). Rea expresses this in another equation: “*optimal achievement motivation as flow = optimal expectancy as high challenge–high skill x optimal value as spontaneous interest–future importance x optimal affect as excitement–calmness*” (p. 195).

In his third step, Rea (2000) incorporates reversal theory (Apter, 2007). Rea states, “Ideally, students should experience a dynamic balance of reversals between the playful paratelic and serious telic modes” (p. 202). These modes are seen plotted on a reversal chart with pleasant

and engaged academic experiences producing serious focus and fun experiences, whereas disengaged or frustrating academic experiences produce anxiety and boredom. He uses the term “serious fun” (p. 202) to describe the balanced reversals that students will go through when experiencing optimal motivation. This means students need to be serious about what they are learning, but also playfully exploring the new material. If everything in the classroom is always new and challenging, but there are no serious intentions, the students will “burnout.” If things are too focused on “control and mastery” (p. 202), things will become boring. Therefore, serious fun is essentially a flow experience. This means optimal achievement motivation is serious fun, in which the telic and paratelic are dynamically balanced. They do not move back down the reversal continuum to boredom or anxiety.

Developmental education students have likely not experienced optimal achievement motivation for the discipline in which they need remediation, if in any academic discipline. For example, any talent a student did have in reading likely stagnated in a reversal between boredom and anxiety because he/she did not experience any element of serious fun in the classroom.

Learned Optimism

In educational settings, learned helplessness (Seligman, 2006) has been found to be a viable explanation for students’ behaviors when they “attribute failure to the role of external factors and to ignore the role of motivation” (Dweck & Reppucci, 1973, p. 115). Students internalized the belief that they will fail no matter what they do (Dweck & Reppucci, 1973; Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Seligman (2006) states that in learned optimism, “What is crucial is what you think when you fail, using the power of ‘non-negative thinking.’ Changing the destructive things you say to yourself when you experience the setbacks that life deals all of us is the central skill of optimism” (p. 15). Therefore, ABE students are more likely to have developed learned helplessness in relation to academic skills than learned optimism. If one has had repeated experiences of failure in a particular context (e.g., the math classroom), one may expect to fail in any other math classroom one enters (or even any classroom one enters). Again, education researchers have found this to be the case in both children (Dweck & Reppucci, 1973) and adults (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011). However, Seligman (2006) states that one can develop learned optimism. This is the part of the theory that is potentially exciting for the classroom, because it follows that one could develop resiliency out of passivity.

Adult Motivation Theory

Educational motivation theories tend to be tested and refined in relation to children. Those theories are often extended to explain adult motivation in the classroom without reference to appropriateness. However, Wlodkowski (2008) synthesizes both motivational and adult learning theories. In Wlodkowski’s view, “Responsibility is the cornerstone of adult motivation” (p. 96). This means that because adults are held accountable for their actions in a way that children are not, competency is the core of adult motivation. The basic elements of Wlodkowski’s synthesis include the student’s desire to be treated as a responsible adult (ability to be self-directed), and second, that adults want to learn things that fulfill a need. Consequently, success is more important to adult learners than to children because adults are more goal-oriented. Wlodkowski (2008) states, “If adults have a problem experiencing success or even expecting success, their motivation for learning will usually decline.” (p. 100). Therefore, the highest level of academic motivation is “*success + volition + value + enjoyment*” (p. 101). If students find the learning to be enjoyable, they value what they are learning, they want to learn it, and they experience success, they will be intrinsically motivated.

Wlodkowski's (2008) adult motivation theory is particularly relevant to ABE students who tend to range in age from the cusp of adulthood to into the golden years. Again, the ABE student is not likely to experience a lot of motivation for the developmental classroom through the lens of this theory. A student may only come into the class with some value for the content and little to none of the history of success, volition, or enjoyment.

Elements of the Model

As discussed above, the Developmental and Adult Basic Education Motivation and Optimism/Helplessness Model is based upon Rea's (2000) Model of Optimal Motivation for Talent Development, Seligman's (2006) learned optimism, and Wlodkowski's adult motivation theory. It is my contention that students in remedial classes have experienced, and may continue to experience, a state of "anxious boredom" (the antithesis of Rea's concept of "serious fun") in which they experience reversals of anxiety and boredom with few to no experiences of fun or focus in relation to that particular discipline. (See Figure 1.) These experiences of anxious boredom would thereby lead a student to develop learned helplessness (Seligman, 2006). However, once students start experiencing serious fun, learned optimism develops. Combine this with Wlodkowski's (2008) theory that when a student experiences "success + volition + value + enjoyment" (p. 101) the student is at the highest level of academic motivation. Therefore, I propose that the more one experiences success, uses one's volition, and values and enjoys the tasks, the more one learns to be optimistic. I posit that the more a student who has been caught in the anxious boredom reversal experiences these elements of success, volition, value, and enjoyment in a classroom, the higher the anxious boredom reversal moves on the pleasant/unpleasant hedonic tone axis, thereby lessening the extremes of the anxiety and boredom. (See Figure 2.) As the anxious boredom reversal rises and gets smaller, it comes to a point where the student has the possibility to switch to a pleasant hedonic tone. I have termed this the "point of possibility" because this is where the student may begin to move into elements of serious fun. (See Figure 3.) The student may slide back down into boredom or anxiety, but he or she now has the possibility of experiencing serious fun. The more the student experiences and seeks out serious fun, the more optimistic the student becomes about new academic experiences. This allows the serious fun reversal to become larger and rise into an even more pleasant hedonic tone, eventually leaving the anxious boredom reversal behind. Once the student is no longer experiencing anxious boredom, it disappears, looking like Rea's (2000) original model of serious fun. (See Figure 4.) Therefore, the student engages in prolonged periods of serious fun reversals and has high levels of optimism for the tasks related to the discipline.

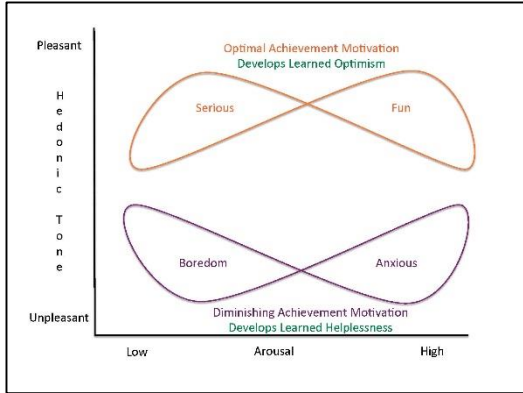


Figure 1. This figure depicts serious fun and anxious boredom reversals, as well as their relationship to learned optimism and learned helplessness.

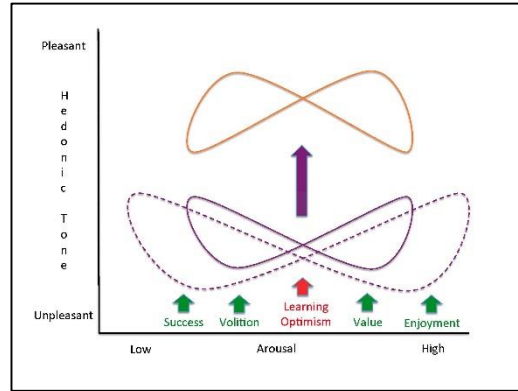


Figure 2. The anxious boredom reversal is being raised into more pleasant hedonic tone and is reduced to a reversal with smaller extremes.

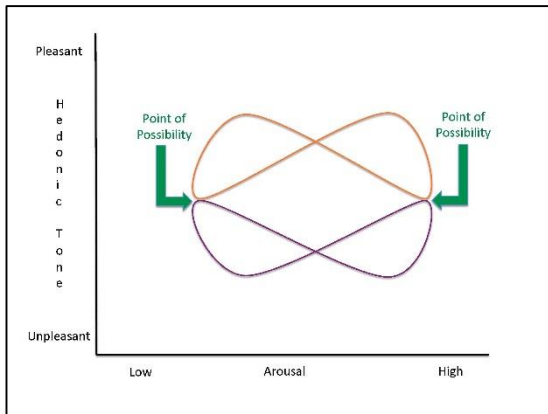


Figure 3. This smaller anxious boredom reversal rises to the point of possibility, where the student begins to experience elements of serious fun.

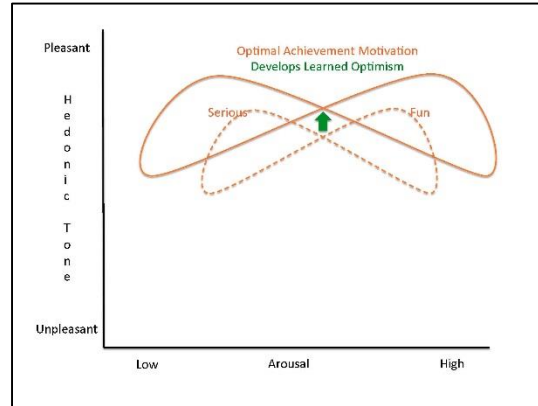


Figure 4. The student's experience of serious fun expands into wider extremes of arousal, and anxious boredom disappears.

Thus, the student is now experiencing high motivation for the task or discipline, and he/she is no longer stuck in learned helplessness and anxious boredom. It is my hope that this Model will help practitioners and researchers better understand the motivational possibilities and needs of students in remedial coursework, thereby making the classroom experiences of these students more positive.

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