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LEARNER GOAL ORIENTATION AND LEARNING

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Abstract:

Motivation issurely one of the most potent of the factors that affect student learning. Teachers can affect student motivation in ways that either facilitate or obstruct learning. This paper describes the causes there of. The topic furnishes specific suggestions for fostering positive student motivation. Janzow and Eison confirmed that students displayed two basic orientations toward their studies: a grade orientation (working for the grade) or a learning orientation (working to learn). Some students are interested only in the grades they get rather than in learning really. Actually that is partially true; Students are usually interested in learning something from their classes, but they are strategic enough to realize that what counts is the grade they earn, not what they learn. Achievementgoal orientation is a general motivation theory, which points out the fact that the type of goal toward which a person is working has a tremendous impact on how they pursue the goal. .

Key Words: Motivation, Achievement, Goal Orientation, Mastery Learning, Grade

INTRODUCTION

Achievement Goal Orientation

Recent theory and research in educational psychology hasbuttressed the Janzow and Eison model with a more general theory called Achievement Goal Orientation (Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Ames and Archer, 1987). Achievement goal orientation is a general motivation theory, which points out the fact that the type of goal toward which a person is working has a tremendous impact on how they pursue the goal. The learning oriented students in Janzow and Eison's model, individuals have a "mastery goal orientation". In the achievement goal orientation literature the learners are willing to put forth a lot of effort to "master" a skill or concept. In general, folks with a mastery goal orientation will work very hard, persist in the light of difficulty and frustration, will take risks and attempt things that they don't already know how to do, all in the service of mastering the task at hand. On the other hand the grade oriented students in the Janzow and Eison model, who are in the more general Motivational Model, are described as "performance goal oriented." Individuals of appearing competent or at least avoiding appear incompetent. As such, they are less likely to persist if they make an error or have to put forth tremendous effort because either of these two outcomes would label them as incompetent. They prefer to perform tasks that they know they can do, they're reluctant to take risks and they desire to do better than everyone else.

Some of our students (the mastery oriented ones) are interested, willing to try novel things, make queries in class, and look forward to new ideas. They are such fun to teach because they almost teach themselves. And we have come across students who are only interested in what is required for the grade. They are no fun to teach because they don't appear to share our enthusiasm for thecontent or the thrill of discovery in the discipline.

This area of motivational research is getting a lot of attentionin. Researchers are looking at the goal orientation of studentsfrom both sides. They evince interest in what causes a student to be oriented in one way as opposed to the other. And they're interested in the effect that each orientation has on learning. Pintrich and Shunk (2002) conceive all our students are mastery oriented all the time.

When the model was initially proposed, the goal orientations were thought to be related to personality types or continuing personal attributes; learners were either mastery oriented or performance oriented as a matter of temperament.

Table 1: Comparison of Sample Behaviours of Mastery versus Performance Oriented Students

Mastery Oriented Students	Performance Oriented Students
Main interest is in learning the skill/content	Main interest is in appearing competent or better than others regardless of level achieved
Willing to take on difficult tasks beyond present capability	Sticks to tasks that are familiar, known quantities
Views mistakes as learning opportunities	Views mistakes as evidence of lack of competence and thereforeto be avoided

In some situations a person might show a mastery orientation (for example, when engaged in a favorite hobby) and in other situations the same person might display a performance orientation (for example, during an exam). Of course, nothing in psychology is ever so easily divided into two types, and subsequent theorists came to assert that these two orientations were not opposed to each other on the same continuum but rather that a person could have both types of orientations even within the same situation. So, for example, if my hobby were playing tennis (which it is) and some more skilled player agreed to play a match with me. One might have

both mastery goals (to try out a lot of new strategies against this better player) and performance goals (to not want to look stupid or clumsy in front of her) all in the same match.

Students might also exhibit that same set of conflicting orientations in our classes. Sometimes in the heat of an exciting discussion of a complex topic, we might glimpse some mastery goals as students struggle to keep up with the flow of ideas and yet seem excited and want to get their opinions heard. At the same time we might see the same students only taking down what the teacher says as that's the "truth" of the matter. Or they might at the end of this wonderfully stimulating discussion ask thedreaded questions "so, will this be on the test?" or "so, what's the right answer?" — a sure sign of performance goals (of wanting to be right).

More recently the researchers studying goal orientation have refined the model to accommodate some of the discontinuities they were seeing in some of the results. The first refinement came with the split of performance orientation into two subtypes (Middleton and Midgley, 1997): performance approach orientation and performanceavoidance orientation. Performance approach took the drive to appear competent and put it in a positive light.

Individuals with a performance approach orientation want to be the best, to appear to be the most competent. As a result, they will endeavour hard and put in a great deal of effort to excel their peers. They don't have learning per se as a goal, but they will work to learn, just for the wrong reason. Individuals with a performance avoidance orientation are trying to avert committing mistakes and appearing incompetent. They are the ones more likely to hold back and not take risks in order to mitigate their chances of failing. They tread on the known path, the unchallenging tasks, and they frequently are reluctant to show their work to others until it's perfect.

The second major modification of the goal orientation theory was the addition of a fourth orientation: work avoidance (Meece, Blumenfeld, and Hoyle, 1988). These are the folks who

will perform only as much as they absolutely have to. They will put as little effort into their work as they can. These are the ones that know down to the last point where they stand with regard to the grade and somehow manage to get exactly the minimum number of points necessary to get the passing grade. Their attention to detail and their understanding of the course requirements is often more accurate than the instructor's. If only they would expend that much effort in the actual learning!

The research on goal orientation discloses a lot of veryinteresting differences in the way a student acts banking on the goal orientation operating at the moment. Goals influence what a student chooses to study, how strategic they are in their study patterns, how persistent they are in the face of difficulties, and whether or not they are willing and able to go beyond the course requirements. Obviously we would like to have an entire class of mastery oriented students. But we don't.

Fostering a Mastery Orientation

Mastery Oriented Students. We can commence with looking at the mastery oriented group and attempting to discern the reasons behind their orientation toward these goals. The broader literature on motivation denotes some tentative insights into their behavior. One theory of motivation holds that students are motivated to engage in behaviors 1) thathave value to them and 2) where they have a reasonable expectation to succeed. Behaviors imbibe value because they are intrinsically interesting, novel, or curiosity arousing, because they have an immediate use in solving an individual's current problem, because they contribute to the long range plansof the individual, because they are valued by the social group of which the individual is part, and because they pose a challenge to the learner's skills. If the tasks that we are setting for our learners fit any of these molds,they are more likely to want to master them.

Expectations of success at a task are influenced by past experiences of success, the perceived difficulty of the task, the persuasiveness of others who are encouraging us to continue, initial

feedback on success, and the degree to which the demands of the task fit the skills of the individual. If the tasks we are setting for our learners have any of these characteristics, the learners are more likely to be willing to take them on. In light of this theory (known as expectancy value theory) our learners are more likely to adopt a mastery orientationif the task on which they're working fits these two sets of criteria. What is encouraging to instructors is that we have a lot of control over both of the two sets. We can choose tasks our students' value and we can structure the learning situation so that their probability of success is a reasonable one. Certainly we can continue to support their efforts while they work on the task so that they are encouraged by their progress.

Another motivation theory that relates to the mastery goal orientation we'd like our students to adopt is self- determination theory. This theory asserts that individuals are more motivated to work at a task if there was an element of choice or control involved. Individuals who have choices associated with their efforts are more likely to adopt a mastery orientation. This theory relates nicely to the expectancy value theory because if an individual has choices about what and how he'll work, he can choose tasks that interest him and which he feels competent to perform — the aspects of expectancy value theory just discussed.

The ultimate theme that comes from students who adopt a mastery orientation has to do with safety versus risk and the consequences of failing. When learning, one can never be in a risk-free environment since learning is a risky entity. It involves attempting something you don't already know how to do, hence the risk. However, if the benefits of succeeding outweigh the costs of failure, taking a risk is worthwhile. So in a learning situation an instructor should work to minimise the cost of failure. There are many ways of doing this. First and most influential is the reaction that the instructor has to student failure. If the instructor reacts to a student error with interest and support rather than criticism and withdrawal, students are more likely to view their mistakes in a constructive light. Second is the consequence of making a mistake. If it only

results in demerits, students will attempt to hide their mistakes and miss the opportunity to learn from them. If on the other hand mistakes are followed by additional opportunities to learn without severe penalties, students will be more willing to identify their mistakes and correct them. Thirdis the model that the instructor presents to the class when he or she makes a mistake. Rather than becoming defensive or trying to bluff through an error, if the instructor acknowledges the mistake and models how someone should approach correcting that mistake, the students have learned a very good lesson about how they should cope with their own mistakes. Fourth is to offer credit for making progress, not just reaching a preset criterion. Helping students become reflective about their learning so that they base their self-worth on how far they've come rather than on how they compare with others is an important component of getting them to adopt a mastery orientation. Fifth is to encourage the development of a learning community in the class where everyone is expected to make progress and encouraged to help everyone else make progress. The bottom line on encouraging students to adopt a mastery orientation involves giving worthwhile assignments where the focus is on learning and making progress rather than being perfect.

Performance Oriented Students. If we look closely at the behavior of students who are displaying performance approach, performance avoidance, or work avoidance orientations, we might be able to speculate on the type of environment that might encourage them to move in the direction of mastery orientation. For example, students who are performance approach oriented want to be better than everyone else in their peer group for they may see that as the only way to gain attention and recognition for their efforts. Is it possible that by providing them attention and recognition for their own progress, and their own effort, we may end up weaning them away from comparison with others as their benchmark of achievement? Certainly the research on collaborative versus competitive reward structures seems to indicate that minimizing competition and rewarding collaboration results in better learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1985)

for a whole variety of reasons. Recent efforts towards shifting grading methods away from norm referenced comparative forms of grading to criterion referenced individual achievement grading will also help move the students' focus away from how they compare with others to how much progress they have made and how much further they need to go. Even the shift to portfolio type grading as opposed to tests as the basis for grades plays a role in shifting student attention toward mastery. In the case of performance avoidance oriented students, their goal is to play it safe and only do what they know will be successful. We must ask ourselves why they are adopting that orientation at this point. What is it about failure that is so bad that it must be avoided at all costs? In reality there is nothing wrong with failure; the problem lies in our reaction to an interpretation of failure. For many individuals, failure is an indication of lack of ability. For others failure simply means that they don't know how to do that specific thing at this specific time. In fact a much healthier interpretation of failure is that it is an opportunity for learning. So why do our students work so hard to avoid it? Possibly the answer lies in the reactions of their teachers and the modeling of how to react to failure, as noted earlier.

First of all, teachers should focus on wrong answers not as failures, but more accurately as misunderstandings. No student sets out to give a wrong answer; as far as they're concerned, they're giving a correct answer. They may just be answering a different question. So instructors should take errors as "teachable moments," opportunities for learning to occur, and react accordingly. That provides students with a different model of how to react to mistakes with renewed determination to understand rather than with resistance or frustration. The same opportunities present themselves when instructors make mistakes. They give the instructor an opportunity to model how to cope with a mistake in a positive way rather than becoming defensive and worried.

For students who have go in for performance avoidance orientation, the answer seems to be transforming the classroom climate into a safer place, one where errors are accepted as

occasions to learn rather than behavior to hide. Positive instructor comments, joint pursuit of the solution, and a supportive community of learners are all strategies that might coax a performanceavoidance individual over to a mastery orientation.

Finally we have our work avoidant students. First we should examine our own attitudes toward these students and their behavior. In reality they may not just be lazy; they may be trying to be strategic in the use of their resources. After all, ours is not their only course or source of work Students live real lives outside the classroom and the circumstances of those lives often take precedence over the artificial deadlines of academia. We can hardly criticize them for wanting to get the biggest bang for their buck; we certainly do that ourselves. Perhaps we should examine more closelywhat we're asking them to do. Is the value of the task obvious? To us, yes, but may be not to the students. If they understood and accepted its value, perhaps they would be more willing to put effort into it. Is the amount of benefit equal to or greater than the amount of work they will have to put into it? Is there a way to structure the tasks so that the focus is on the critical aspect of the task? For example, in many math-based classes, like statistics, the secret to success is the initial set-up of the problem. If the students don't get that part right, nothing else will be right. However, from long years of schooling, the students are more likely to focus on getting the right answer by whatever means. If the key to success is getting the problem set-up right, why not focus most of our students' efforts (and their grade) on that? They can certainly work through one problem completely to show that they know how, but why not make the bulk of their work revolve around the key skill of problem analysis? Another example of cost/benefit analysis in a course like statistics is to consider what exactly do professionals in the field do when working in this area? I can tell you with absolute certainty that no one in psychology knows the formulas for all the statistical tests we use, even the ones we use most frequently. If that is true (and it is), then why should students spend their limited time memorizing formulas?

A professional in the field knows how to look the formulas up or use computer software to do the actual calculations. The important task that cannot be automated is knowing which statistic to use when That'sthe professional aspect of the task and that's what I'd want my students to focus on so that's where the grade is focused.

There are some students whose work- avoidance orientation is not so lofty as efficient resource allocation. Some really are just trying to slide by. In their case an instructor may not be able to effect a change in orientation. Perhaps the best one can do with those studentsis to minimize the aggravation that you feel when interacting with them. Since their goal is to know what they have to do for a given grade, perhaps the best way of dealing with themis to make those criteria very clear and readily available to them so they can meet the standards without having to constantly ask about the requirements. A clear syllabus, easy to understand and track, that's available 24/7 on a class website might be the best answer to dealing with their needs. However, that doesn't mean that we are giving in; it means that the criteria we set for our students are focused on the most important things we want them to learn. If they're only going to put in the minimum necessaryeffort, at least let's focus that effort on something we think is worthwhile even if they don't agree.

Achieving PERFECTION

A few hints are given below to encourage a mastery orientation

- Choosing knowledge and skills that are worth learning;
- Pitching the tasks you set for your students just beyond their base capability but well within their reach and expect them to succeed;
- Making the classroom a safe place to take the risks involved in learning by the way you treat students' attempts to learn;

- Encouraging the building of a community of learners in your class, where everyone supports everyone else'sattempt to learn;
- If possible, providing give the learners some choices in what orthe way they learn;
- Being a good model of a mastery-oriented learner in all youdo yourself;
- Accepting the fact that yours is not the only or even the most important venue in which your students function. (*Marilla Svinicki)*

The interaction between student characteristics and instructional method

The interaction between student characteristics and instructional method has for years been a plausible hypothesis in education. However, in their review of studies of aptitude treatment interaction, Cronbach and Snow (1969) found many methodological problems and little conclusive evidence supporting interaction effects. While maximizing academic achievement in college is an obvious goal of college educators, few studies have attempted to directly alter aspects of the college environment in order to use interaction effects to increase academic achievement.

In an earlier study, Domino (1968) studied the academic performance of high- and low-scorers on the Achievement-via Conformance (Ac) and Achievement-via-lndependence (AI) scales of the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) (Gough, 1957) to test the hypothesis that conforming and independent achievement orientations are differentially related to academic achievement. The results not only supported this notion but indicated that, for students high on one achievement dimension and low on the other, there was a distinct interaction between the student's achievement orientation and the demands of the college environment. On the other hand, the results indicate that teaching style has no interacting effect on original thinking; to elicit original thinking from students one must begin with students whose achievement orientations are conducive to independent, original thinking. In other words, teaching

conforming students by a conforming style did not produce original achievement in the way that teaching independent students in an independent style produced increased factual achievement.

The lack of any teaching style main effect indicates that neither the conforming nor independent teaching style is uniformly better in producing achievement for all students. However, the interaction effects are teaching effects in the sense that a teaching style appropriate to the students' orientations did produce achievement and satisfaction. This result supports the position that favors adapting teaching methods to the particular needs of the student and suggests that no one teaching method will be a panacea for teaching all types of students. One important reservation on these results is that only students with extreme achievement orientations were used, approximately 11% of the student body. Thus, while the results are conclusive for this segment of the student body, the degree to which the interaction effects are important for the entire group has not been explored here.

CONCLUSION

Individuals are more motivated to work at a task if there was an element of choice or control involved. Individuals who have choices associated with their efforts are more likely to adopt a mastery orientation. The research on collaborative versus competitive reward structures seems to indicate that minimizing competition and rewarding collaboration results in better learning (It may go well to provide students with the type of educational setting that will most effectively utilize their potential and also expose them to diversity of achievement orientations, this is a question for future research. In any case, future explorations of ways to maximize learning should consider teacher-student interaction as well as the possibility of student-student interaction. In addition, the effect of teaching style on students with less extreme achievement orientations must be investigated. Such research promises to help colleges provide students with the type of educational setting that w ill most effectively utilize their potential for learning Positive instructor comments, joint pursuit of the solution, and a supportive community of

learners are all strategies that might coax a performance avoidance individual over to a mastery orientation.

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