

**‘How many marks is this worth and how will it affect my grade?’**

**The motivation, drive and desire to learn in school**

**John Sarte**

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## **My motivation to study motivation**

As a high school physics teacher, I became aware of a noticeable number of students very interested in the marks and grades reported to them. Their preoccupation with getting grades, it seemed, was so important that it eclipsed wanting to understand what they would be taught or wondering why they should want to learn it. After the question ‘What mark did I get?’ or ‘What mark did you get?’ the following question was essentially ‘Can I get a higher mark?’ And these questions initiated conversations about half-marks and overall percentages rather than a thoughtful reflection about what was learned, what was missed and why it might matter.

It appeared to me and a few of my colleagues that some students, including those we believed were the most academically capable, would be satisfied with a ‘good’ grade, for instance, an ‘A’ if they wanted it, regardless of whether or not they learned anything of importance and whether or not they learned it well. They wanted the grade more than descriptive feedback and more than learning something new or challenging. That is not to say that these students only cared about the grade all of the time. When asked to think about their motivation to do school work, students identified multiple factors including expectations from family and friends as well as an ambition to attend university (Sarte & Hughes, 2010). The use of grades was associated with student stress and many students found it difficult to ignore their marks and grades in the class.

Of course, not all of my students were motivated to get good grades. Other students appeared to be really engaged with learning new ideas and challenging the teacher’s knowledge. They did not need the compensation of marks or scores in exchange for their work. Many of these students were at least as well-rounded and reliable in comparison to the marks-driven students who quibbled over every half-mark and percentage point. In addition, there were a few

students who appeared neither motivated to get the grade nor to learn something new in class. They were un-motivated and perhaps even de-motivated by the system of rewards and punishments prevalent in their schooling experiences (Sarte & Hughes, 2010).

While it was likely that some of these students faced a myriad of problems and difficulties in and out of school to make classroom learning very challenging or at least relatively unimportant, it was also possible and highly probable that these students were motivated and enthusiastic in other areas of their lives. For instance, one student was an exceptional baseball pitcher and another was a brilliant guitarist yet, at the same time, they both struggled with learning prescribed Physics concepts. Similarly, perhaps other students were highly motivated to learn in areas such as Drama, Art, History or Literature but not so keen in Science.

Thinking about all of these students and how my practice might encourage each individual's motivation to learn, I wanted to study the concept of motivation in the context of the classroom. In my previous inquiries, I was drawn to the research involving the facilitation of intrinsic, autonomous motivation and an understanding of how extrinsic motivators, incentives and disincentives, could have a detrimental effect on intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Kohn, 1996). However, my purpose in this paper was not to continue with my previous inquiry using already familiar understandings of motivation predicated on a particular body of work largely drawn from the field of psychology. Instead, my aim was to re-consider my conceptions of 'motivation' and 'drive'<sup>1</sup>. In order to de-familiarize myself with my prior understanding of students' motivation to learn in the classroom, I used two philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Pink (2009) discusses the concept of motivation as 'drive' by focusing largely on the research conducted or influenced by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. In this context, 'drive' and 'motivation' are taken to have the same meaning, however, in a different discourse, such as psychoanalysis, 'drive' is distinct from 'motivation'.

approaches – *deconstruction* and *interdiscursive translation* – to gain new insights into motivation.

### **Motivated/unmotivated: Witnessing deconstruction<sup>2</sup>**

Initially, my conception of the motivation to learn is largely based on the psychological investigations conducted by Edward Deci, Richard Ryan and their colleagues spanning forty years beginning in the 1970s. A typical understanding of motivation is that it propels an individual to undertake a particular behaviour or activity. Motivation is *intrinsic* when the individual values the behaviour for its own sake and enjoyment. Motivation is *extrinsic* when the individual feels compelled or controlled to do an activity due to his or her expectation of a reward or punishment contingent on the performance of the activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research in this area demonstrates that in certain situations extrinsic motivators diminish an individual's intrinsic motivation to undertake an activity and reduce the quality of the performance (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Pink, 2009).

For instance, an experiment conducted by Deci (1971) found that a monetary incentive reduced the time and interest that college students committed to working on a puzzle when the compensation was no longer offered. This finding was especially interesting because in contrast the students who were never offered money increased their time working on the puzzle. Likewise, marks and grades seemed to act like a reward (or punishment) diminishing students' curiosity, intrinsic motivation to learn, and effort to think about new ideas. Hence, the student's

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<sup>2</sup> Biesta (2009) accepts that deconstructions are continuously occurring and that there are opportunities to *witness* them. Anyone interested may “bear witness to events of which the condition of possibility is at the very same time the condition of impossibility” (p. 394).

question: 'If this isn't for marks, why should I do it?' In this way, an individual appeared to be either motivated or unmotivated (and potentially demotivated).

Sometimes students are motivated to work in class but other times they are not. As a teacher, I am interested in fostering students' motivation to learn or at least not reduce it. But what does it mean to be motivated or unmotivated anyway? Is there a clear distinction or a definite transition where a motivated individual becomes unmotivated? Perhaps there is no motivated/unmotivated binary. In this way, I am interested in the *deconstruction* of the binary.

Although Derrida (1988) insists that deconstruction is neither a method nor a form of analysis or critique, it has nevertheless been taken up as a method. For instance, Lather (1996) describes a *double reading* or process of *deconstructive moves* in her effort to make sense of the issue of accessible/inaccessible language.

First, I perform an oppositional reading within the confines of a binary system, by reversing the binary accessible/inaccessible. Second, I perform a reflexive reading that questions the inclusions/exclusions, orderings/disorderings, and valuations/revaluations of the first move of reversal, as some effort to reframe the either/or logic that is typical of thinking about the issue at hand. (p. 526).

Following this approach, I will first take the binary of *motivated/unmotivated* and reverse the normal opposition that privileges the motivated students and subordinates the unmotivated. Second, I will demonstrate that the distinction between the two terms is permeable, thus, to be unmotivated is to be motivated (and to be motivated is to be unmotivated).

Motivated/unmotivated is an unequal binary where we, as teachers or researchers, are interested in understanding whatever motivates learning and then developing programs that facilitate a motivation to learn in school.<sup>3</sup> In this binary, it is assumed that being motivated to

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<sup>3</sup> Schools tend to equate evidence of learning with assessments and evaluations, specifically, test scores and grades. It may be true, at least some of the time, that assessments and evaluations adequately reflect learning, but it does not follow that marks and grades should be taken as sufficient evidence of learning. Unfortunately, being (un)motivated to learn in class is often conflated with being (un)motivated to get good grades.

learn is the normal or preferred state. For instance, in our culture we tend to talk positively about 'drive' by associating it with success, mastery, and purpose (Pink, 2009). Moreover, it becomes apparent that motivation or drive is discussed in relation to *lack of motivation* or *lack of drive* and this 'lack' is perceived as a problem.

What if to be unmotivated is brought to the fore of the binary and to be motivated is subordinated? In this case, I might think more about those unmotivated students who have been compared to 'slugs' by some frustrated colleagues. In considering those students who appear neither motivated to learn nor driven to get good grades, I observe that many of them nevertheless exhibit signs of motivation. For instance, most of them still show up for class. And they make sure their physiological needs are fulfilled, for example, they eat and sleep. In addition, some students who appear to care little about their grades sometimes ask very provocative questions, nevertheless are engaged in group activities, or are passionate and exceptional in other areas of their lives. Clearly unmotivated students are very much motivated albeit in areas outside the realm of learning prescribed curricular outcomes and getting grades.

On the other hand, can I also say that motivated students are unmotivated such that the border in the motivated/unmotivated binary dissolves? Some of the students who appear to be the most motivated are driven to get good grades but that does not necessarily mean they are motivated to learn. When confronted with an opportunity to learn something difficult, they might challenge a curriculum or pedagogy if it threatens their potential to earn marks congruent with what they expect. These students are not motivated to learn as much as they are motivated to get good grades. Learning becomes incidental, a potential by-product of acquiring grades.

For students driven by grades, a classroom experience devoid of worthwhile learning opportunities could go unnoticed or unquestioned provided acceptable marks and grades are

attained. Moreover, these students may be reluctant to pursue new, unique and challenging experiences that might undermine their pursuit of good grades. Consequently, a student can be motivated to get good grades but unmotivated to learn. At the same time, another student may be particularly unmotivated in the acquisition of marks and grades, but be otherwise motivated to learn in other instances. Therefore, there is no clear distinction between being unmotivated and being motivated; every individual is simultaneously motivated and unmotivated depending on the particular set of behaviours and actions involved; to be unmotivated or motivated simply suggests various degrees of motivation.

### **From motivation to desire to drive: An interdiscursive translation**

I will now continue to elaborate a conception of motivation by applying an *interdiscursive translation*. Interdiscursive translation provides distance and unfamiliarity with a preconception to permit rethinking (Ruitenbergh, 2009). Interdiscursive translation does not accomplish this by studying the meaning of words in different languages, such as translating from English to French, but rather by changing discourse. Therefore, in order to rethink my existing conception of motivation, I will consider motivation in terms of *desire* and *drive*. This reflects a shift from a psychological discourse to a psychoanalytical discourse.

#### ***Motivation in psychology***

In at least one branch of psychological discourse, motivation theory and research is used to understand methods for encouraging people to do more acceptable behaviours and less unwanted behaviours (Deci et al., 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Pink, 2009). Influenced by behaviourist and positivist theories, researchers study the effects of tangible external incentives on particular behaviours (Deci, 1971; Deci et al., 1999; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991;

Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although there is research that demonstrates the importance of intrinsic, autonomous motivation, many institutions remain fixated on extrinsic rewards because it appears plausible to manipulate rewards and punishments in order to elicit and manage profitable behaviours and outcomes (Pink, 2009). In schools, for instance, student conformity to a teacher's curricular and behavioural standards may be rewarded with praise and good grades that may later be useful in acquiring scholarships, admission to coveted post-secondary programs and employment opportunities. Another example is the use of merit-based pay to financially reward teachers if their students meet or exceed certain testing standards (Jones & Egley, 2007). Policy-makers employing this scheme believe that money will provide teachers with sufficient incentive to act in ways that will improve their students' test scores.

According to Pink (2009), there is a potential problem with emphasizing extrinsic motivation over intrinsic motivation. Research has shown a detrimental effect on intrinsic motivation when rewards and punishments are linked to a particular activity which an individual already enjoys for its own sake (Deci, 1971; Deci et al., 1999). For example, if a student already likes to read novels, then the use of grades as compensation for reading an assigned book may lead to a decrease in her enjoyment of reading. Perhaps the grade signals to the student that she is not as good a reader as she believes. If her intrinsic motivation to read decreases, then the student will become less likely to read a novel unless there is an incentive (e.g., reading the novel leads to a higher grade). Similarly, as other activities are assessed and evaluated in school, the student's intrinsic motivation in these activities diminishes and she becomes increasingly concerned with the incentives.

This leads to the question: 'How many marks is this worth and how will it affect my grade?' In response, the teacher may feel forced to validate certain assignments by making it

worth marks or to evaluate every bit of the student's work in order to extrinsically motivate (push) her to complete the assignments. Unfortunately, this only reinforces the student's preoccupation with the grade as a reward or a punishment.

This conception of motivation, with its emphasis on studying the effects of external control, implies that teachers can use the research to devise some universal strategies to facilitate and encourage the ideal classroom situation that balances the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of students. In other words, teachers should be able to allow students to remain intrinsically motivated in work they enjoy but introduce appropriate extrinsic motivators to encourage learning when students are not already very interested. I do not dispute that a teacher has an important role in the classroom environment, but I am wary of a perspective that positions the teacher at the centre of the learning experience and ignores the critical significance of the learner as well as other factors, such as social, economic and cultural conditions.

### ***Motivation in psychoanalysis***

To think about motivation with reference to psychological studies is productive but limiting at the same time. Therefore, I now shift my discussion of motivation to a discourse based on Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. In Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse, motivation is considered in terms of *desire* and *drive*.

Jacques Lacan was a French psychoanalyst who followed the work of Sigmund Freud. Lacan elaborated on Freud's psychoanalytic theory by emphasizing the importance of language and narratives. He believed that understanding a patient's motivation is particular and specific, unique to each case. In his analysis of Lacan's work, Brown (2008) states that "the notion of desire... explains my motivation in terms of something that I want to acquire, even if I am not

quite sure what this thing is exactly” (p. 408). Brown is referring to the ‘lack’ or gap between the physiological *needs* of the subject<sup>4</sup> and whatever the subject *demand*s.

How are *need*, *demand* and *desire* related in psychoanalysis? According to Hill (1997), a need can be fully satisfied at least temporarily. For instance, food can remove the pain of hunger and provide the pleasure of being satiated. In contrast to need, demand cannot be satisfied because what is demanded is “an object that does not exist... [or] will not be given” (p. 64). For example, a demanding child might ask for milk at breakfast and on receiving it ask for an apple, sliced but not peeled, and on receiving it ask for pancakes with syrup, and on receiving it... etc. It is through demanding and not being satisfied by the *other*, specifically the motherer<sup>5</sup>, that the child realizes his or her separateness and sense of self. Demand may then transform into desire as the subject becomes aware of the gap (lack) between what he or she might want and what the other offers.

Although demand can never be satisfied, desire, if satisfied, changes its object (Hill, 1997).

Desire is another word for ‘lack’, for something that is missing: the object of desire. Desire can change its object, and desire often hides – although it will be revealed in dreams, slips of the tongue and symptoms – but it always organises the subject’s life in a far more comprehensive way than we ordinarily believe. (p. 65)

Desire is essential to the subject’s life because it motivates the subject to act and behave in particular ways in an attempt to acquire the object of desire.

If ‘desire’ refers to ‘lack’, what is ‘drive’? In Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, desire is distinct from drive (Brown, 2008). If we are able to obtain the object of our desire, then desire

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Subject’ refers to ‘person’ or ‘individual’ (Hill, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> The *motherer* refers to the one who takes care of the child, such as the mother, the father, or an older sibling (Hill, 1997).

changes its object; therefore, we always desire what is lacking. Drive, in contrast, allows for the subject to experience *jouissance* or enjoyment when the goal of the drive is achieved.

“Jouissance is always a compensation, an attempt to patch up shortfalls in the categories of ‘demand’ and ‘desire’” (Hill, 1997, p. 59). In other words, although we can never really satisfy a demand or a desire, at least we experience *jouissance* whenever a drive is satisfied.

Brown (2008) uses Žižek’s account of Lacanian theory to explain that “drive is a learned acceptance, or an attitude, that the missing element that activates desire cannot, or need not, be captured” (p. 410). Drive is an attractive substitute for desire because, unlike the object of desire, the object of drive does not change when it is acquired; therefore, drive can be satisfied repeatedly. The subject is driven to acquire the object to produce *jouissance*. And since the subject experiences enjoyment he or she is willing to perform the task again. In a sense, the object becomes irrelevant because the subject primarily seeks *jouissance*. Having learned there is repeated enjoyment to be experienced through drive, the subject may become less interested in desire (where capturing what is lacking is elusive).

Through this psychoanalytical discourse, it is possible to reconstruct my conception of motivation. For example, I might differentiate between a *desire for learning* and a *drive for grades*. When learning is the object of desire, as students construct, interpret and formulate new ideas, satisfaction is only temporary because students would continuously desire to learn more. In other words, students who desire learning realize there is a significant lack or gap in what they understand. Every time they believe they have learned something they wanted to know, new questions and gaps surface (the object of desire changes).

In contrast, the students who are driven by grades experience enjoyment when they get the grade they want. Moreover, the drive for grades becomes a repeating loop because even

when one grade is obtained and jouissance is experienced, there are many more marks and grades to be acquired. Many things – projects, quizzes, tests, etc. – are assessed and evaluated from elementary through post-secondary school; marks and grades are pervasive. And each good grade achieved produces jouissance for the student. For some, this jouissance realized in the drive for grades is much more tempting than the desire for learning (where the payoff is more desire, more lack). It is then understandable why grades-driven students might argue about their mark when it fails to produce jouissance. For instance, while the teacher may believe the student is worried about a half-mark (or some trivial difference), jouissance is at stake for the student; therefore, the student believes it is worth trying to argue for the additional mark.

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory further suggests that desire “is a property of language” (Hill, 1997, p. 65) because desire is symbolized by words. However, the words or *signifiers* are not our own because language is shared; our words come from the big other (Hill, 1997). The ‘big other’ refers to the other of language, its words and signifiers (Hill, 1997). The big other imposes limits and constraints on the subject such that the subject’s identity is constituted by the big other (Dashtipour, 2009). Therefore, perhaps intrinsically motivating behaviours and actions are intrinsic with respect to the big other rather than with respect to the subject.

The extent to which desire originates in the subject is questionable (Žižek, 2006).

The problem for the hysteric is how to distinguish what he or she is (his true desire) from what others see and desire in him or her. This brings us to another of Lacan’s formulas, that ‘Man’s desire is the other’s desire.’ For Lacan, the fundamental impasse of human desire is that it is the other’s desire in both subjective and objective genitive: desire for the other, desire to be desired by the other, and, especially, desire for what the other desires. (p. 36)

Žižek’s reading of Lacan considers that the subject’s desire is the other’s desire. In this sense, some students are driven to get good grades because initially they desire the other’s attention, perhaps the attention of a parent or a teacher. Through language (e.g., praise) students perceive

that the other will desire them if they achieve good grades. Moreover, students desire grades because others (e.g., teachers, peers, and universities) desire grades. Furthermore, the *desire* for grades may become the *drive* for grades as students experience *jouissance* for their effort (discussed previously).

Žižek (2006) goes on to discuss a woman's desire and the request 'Protect me from what I want.'

In this case, 'Protect me from what I want' means: 'Precisely when I seem to express my authentic innermost longing, "what I want" has already been imposed on me by the patriarchal order that tells me what to desire, so the first condition of my liberation is that I break the vicious cycle of my alienated desire and learn to formulate my desire in an autonomous way.' (p. 39)

In this passage, Žižek indicates that the attempt to express one's own desire will only identify the desire imposed by the big other. Yet he also suggests that the subject can "learn to formulate [one's] desire in an autonomous way" (p. 39). Perhaps there is an opportunity to critique and question an individual's motivation if it is understood that desire is dependent on the big other (language). If the subject realizes that the big other has many desires – some dominant, others recessive and many conflicting, then he or she may at least choose a desire rather than have one imposed which might explain variations in motivation.

For instance, a student may want high grades because he or she knows that others want high grades. Through the other the student believes that high grades lead to more schooling and, ultimately, to a job where money and status are earned in place of grades. On the other hand, another student might want to become an environmental activist and leave school at an opportune time to organize protests, block corporate development and raise ecological awareness. This student is influenced by the other who desires a healthy environment, clean water and organically grown foods no matter how illusory. In this case, the subject's *fantasy* maintains the desire that is not as secure as the drive to get a job through schooling.

Lacan sees both fantasy and gap (surplus) as positive elements. The fantasy structures the reality that the individual perceives and lives. The gap serves as the motivation (a performative flavoring) that gives the fantasy meaning. (Brown, 2008, p. 409)

The fantasy offers the subject a way to desire an object that might be very difficult to obtain. So an environmental activist can remain motivated even when governments fail to adequately respond to climate change or a corporation devastates an ecosystem.

## **Conclusion**

I have demonstrated in this essay how my conception of motivation changed with respect to students' learning. My interest in motivation began when I noticed that some students were more focused on getting good grades than they were on learning new ideas. Based on particular psychological studies, I understood motivation as a drive that propels an individual to act or behave in a particular way. I also had some understanding that motivation could be intrinsic or extrinsic. I also believed that for many students grades were eroding their motivation to learn.

In order to elaborate my conception of motivation, I attempted to bear witness to the deconstruction of the motivated/unmotivated binary. It no longer seemed reasonable to label some students as motivated and other students as unmotivated. All students were motivated to varying degrees at different times and in different contexts. But to expect all students to be motivated to learn a specific prescribed learning outcome in every class was absurd. Moreover, to believe teachers can force students to learn using marks and grades as incentives was ludicrous or at least much more complicated than it appeared to be.

Finally, I used interdiscursive translation to distance myself from my preconception of motivation. I shifted to Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse in order to think about motivation in terms of *desire* and *drive*. I realized that the motivation to learn could be considered a *desire for*

*learning* while the motivation to get grades could be a *drive for grades*. The distinction between desire and drive enhanced my understanding of why some students appeared preoccupied with getting the grade rather than on learning. The experience of *jouissance* made the drive for grades satisfying and more enticing in comparison to the uncertain task of learning the curriculum.

Based on this inquiry, I believe psychoanalytic theory can offer even more insights in understanding the concept of motivation. Some further questions on the motivation to learn include: If it is possible to develop a *drive to learn*, what might it look like? How might a student experience *jouissance* when learning occurs? To what extent might it be possible for the subject to formulate his or her own desire independent of the (big) other? Could the notion of fantasy be productive in understanding why a subject might want to learn?

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