

Motivation Styles

<http://www.learnativity.com/motivation.html>

Adults engage in continual education for various reasons. Our unique motivations help us stay focused and stick with a topic until we solve the current problem and gather enough information to complete our current task.

Cyril O. Houle conducted one of the most famous studies on what motivates learners. He identified three subgroups to categorize motivational styles.

(1) Goal-oriented learners use education to accomplish clear-cut objectives.

(2) Activity-oriented (social) learners take part mainly because of the social contact. Houle wrote, "Their selection of any activity was essentially based on the amount and kind of human relationships it would yield."

(3) Learning-oriented learners seek knowledge for its own sake. "For the most part, they are avid readers and have been since childhood.... and they choose jobs and make other decisions in life in terms of the potential for growth which they offer."^[1]

Allen Tough simplified Houle's motivational model by suggesting that adults learn because of

- (1) an increase in self-esteem,
- (2) a sense of pleasing and impressing others, and
- (3) certain pleasures or satisfactions.^[2]

Recognizing our unique motivational styles can also help us identify the types of educational products and problems that will satisfy our needs. For instance, self-study programs are not going to motivate 'activity-oriented' learners unless the program contains some element of interaction. The more social the situation the better.

As certain things motivate, others discourage. Few things are more de-motivating than fear. Learning is, after all, a very emotional process. We must see, feel, and do. Fear, anxiety, and anger are emotional factors that negatively affect learning. On a physical level, stress can even cause cell assemblies to fire in unorganized patterns and ultimately inhibit transfer and retrieval. Our phase sequences can be in chaos.

Also, who likes learning something boring? If we don't care about a topic, we're less likely to stick with it and continue to learn. Even when we're interested in learning a topic, we're sometimes more motivated to play with the equipment or to daydream. We can get easily distracted from the task at hand and become more motivated to do something else perhaps not on task.

The big issues are relevancy and immediacy. Information has to be relevant to our current wants and needs, and it must feel useful to us. Most people don't have time to waste. We want to spend time learning what will make a difference now.^[3]

In one of the earliest studies of why adults volunteer for education activities, most said they do so to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for vocational and professional advancement. While today another common reason may be to stay ahead of the influx of information in our jobs, career success motivates us to learn. No matter the motivator, if we can learn more of what we want and less of what we don't, learning becomes more appealing.

1. Cyril O. Houle (1961). *The inquiring mind*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. Republished 1988.
2. Allen Tough (1979). *The adult's learning projects*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
3. Jane K. Vella (1997), *Learning to listen, learning to teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*. Paperback. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 16.