Once into learning, always into learning?

by Julia Gorges
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Without a doubt, academic achievement is important. Good students acquire higher levels of education, have more opportunities for advanced education, obtain demanding (and well-paid) jobs, and continually participate in education to expand their skills and knowledge. The so-called “Matthew effect” has been found to apply to generations of adult learners all over the world – as it says in the Bible, “For unto every one that hath shall be given.” In other words, those who already have a great deal receive even more. Thus, one’s level of education determines one’s lifelong learning – or does it?

Perhaps we should take a closer look at factors other than cognitive ability and grades that may help explain why people do or do not participate in education: their beliefs, thoughts, goals and self-concepts – in short, their motivation. Psychologists turn to motivation when trying to understand why people choose a particular task, persist in the face of difficulties, and put effort into an activity. Obviously, motivation can be high or low. Beyond that, much research deals with different kinds of motivation and different reasons for engaging in a task. For example, we sometimes act because we want to earn a reward, and sometimes we just enjoy an activity regardless of its consequences.

And let’s face it: People with higher levels of education and demanding jobs may be very active in pursuing education, but they may not necessarily enjoy it. Some kinds of jobs require more ongoing education and training than others. Actually, most participation in educational activities is job-related. Back in 1961, Cyril O. Houle, pioneer in adult education, suggested three major reasons why adults learn: Some wish to expand their knowledge and skills, while others use education as a means of achieving non-educational goals or as an opportunity to participate in a social activity. Thus, people’s reasons for pursuing education are manifold and go well beyond motivation to learn. You might say that it doesn’t matter why people participate in education, as long as they do.

However, there is another aspect that should be kept in mind. While education may be quite beneficial, some people may be deterred by either monetary or psychological costs, such as the effort required or fear of failure. People may refrain from pursuing education because their cost-benefit analysis produces a negative result.

You may not consider this a problem. After all, as they say, you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink. If people choose not to participate in education, that’s fine, leave them alone. However, evaluations of the costs and benefits of education are highly subjective. People from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to underestimate the benefits and overestimate the costs, and as a result, they may opt not to pursue further education.

Yet research shows that the return on education is especially high for individuals of low socioeconomic status. As we move towards a knowledge society, we really cannot afford to waste
the potential of so many. We therefore need to find ways to encourage people to participate in education who are hesitant about new learning opportunities and who take a careful look at the cost-benefit ratio.

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When we were young, there was no need for a cost-benefit analysis; education was compulsory. However, there were reasons why we went to school, aside from the fact that it was required by law. Some of us went because we wanted to see our friends, others to live up to our parents’ expectations. Some of us actually enjoyed studying. Educational psychologists call this latter kind of motivation a mastery goal orientation; mastery goals encourage us to strive to develop our competence and skills. Having mastery goals is associated with a range of positive outcomes and side effects of learning. Students with mastery goals feel good when they engage in academic learning activities. Mastery goals make expanding one’s knowledge and skills a benefit in itself.

What does all of this have to do with lifelong learning? An anecdote told by Ken Bain, author of “What the Best College Teachers Do”, addresses that point. When his niece was five years old, she asked him hundreds of questions about astronomy while they were taking a car ride. At the age of twenty, she hated the college course in astronomy she was taking. Ken Bain concludes, “Something tragic had happened to her since that car ride so many years ago. She had gone to school” (2012, p. 45).

If we succeeded in fostering mastery goal orientation in our children and students, they would develop a positive way of thinking about learning throughout their lives. Students with mastery goals would not find themselves slogging through primary and secondary school, mustering their last ounce of strength to complete their final exams, and then just go with the flow, do whatever external demands ask for, when it comes to further education for the rest of their lives. Education could become an enjoyable activity rather than one forced upon us by external demands.

Unfortunately, we know surprisingly little about the development of motivation to learn throughout the life course. Most researchers focus on compulsory school settings, whereas adult learners’ motivation has rarely been addressed. What happens along the way? How do children and adolescents grow up to become lifelong learners? We don’t yet know the answers to those questions.

We do know, however, that mastery goals help, and that we can foster mastery goals by emphasizing students’ individual gains in knowledge and skills. With mastery goals, we are more likely to enjoy ourselves in educational settings and to embrace new learning opportunities. We can just be curious without always having to ask ourselves: What’s in it for me? Mastery goals can motivate us to pursue lifelong learning no matter the circumstances, and no matter our level of education.

Even if you are not an educational professional or a researcher: The next time you encounter someone who is participating in some form of education, or consider pursuing further education yourself, remember what you have just read about motivation. You may want to think about engaging in lifelong learning the enjoyable way.

“Who likes to learn new things: measuring adult motivation to learn with PIAAC data from 21 countries”

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