

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY DISCOURSE BETWEEN DEWEY AND SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY: MOTIVATION IN THE WAKE OF MONETIZING EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this theoretical exposition is to bring two fields into discussion concerning the issue of motivation, in the new monetized context of education, through an encounter between John Dewey and self-determination theory. Using Dewey's *Experience and Education* as well as self-determination theory's most fundamental scholarship (e.g., Ryan and Deci 2000), we offer a contemporary parallel with Dewey's thoughts on "New" and "Old" education and examine it through the lens of self-determination theory. This interdisciplinary perspective combines educational psychology with philosophy of education to retheorize motivation as a critical response to the "New" educational shift toward monetization, which we argue should be resisted.

MOTIVATION IN THE WAKE OF MONETIZING EDUCATION

Education is on the cusp of a configurational shift, or, as some may argue, in the midst of it. In the last twenty years the direct influence of corporations and their interest in leading educational agencies has substantially increased with no signs of stopping.¹ The corporation has become a leader for systemic change in educational practice.² This systematic change's emphasis on the mighty dollar brings about many different obstacles for educators and educational theorists to consider, one of these being the way education's monetization affects both learners' and educators' motivation. Where does this shift to the focus of funds find such motivations? Looking through the lenses of both John Dewey and self-determination theory, we argue that this configurational shift undermines motivation. We start this discussion from the perspective of Dewey's "Old" and "New" education and examine how our current context resembles that of his day.

THE NEW OLD AND NEW EDUCATION

Throughout *Experience and Education* Dewey discusses differences between the “Old” (or “traditional”) and “New” (or “progressive”) education. When discussing these different educational approaches, he does not wholly throw out one approach in favor of the other:

[R]ejection of the philosophy and practice of traditional education sets a new type of difficult educational problem for those who believe in the new type of education. We shall operate blindly and in confusion until we recognize this fact; until we thoroughly appreciate that departure from the old solves no problems.³

Dewey claims that leaving the old type of education behind in itself solves no distinct issue, that in order to address present problems we have to create a solution to them rather than assuming the new education will get rid of them. Could his insight apply to our current confrontation with monetized educational contexts whose advocates want to eradicate old forms of education, especially public education?

We now find ourselves in a space comparable to Dewey’s in this shift from another “Old” to another “New,” where the “Old” is the public school system and the “New” is a system of monetization that is privatizing education in diverse ways. What significance does this shift have for the motivation of learners and educators? How monetization looks pragmatically for educators is complicated, but viewing these changes through the lenses of psychological theory may help facilitate effective practice and resistance.

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self-determination theory (SDT) formulates concepts of motivation based on the workings of Deci and Ryan.⁴ Their theory provides a broad framework for motivation, concerned mostly with understanding the motivations behind people’s behaviors. Within SDT, a main focus is how people interact with their respective environments and internalize motivations to act. SDT researchers specify that human motivation for behavior involves an interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, with extrinsic motivations having several different, increasingly internalized levels.

Within this continuum, the more internalized a motivation for acting becomes, the closer that motivation comes to being intrinsic.⁵ For example, a student may study for a science exam in order to avoid punishment by his or her parent (external regulation), but after the student starts processing the material, he or she may start to develop an interest in and desire to pursue a science-related career. Given this new identity, the student may engage in studying science because doing well in science will fulfill a future goal (identification). Further internalized motivations provide more benefits, such as engagement, greater persistence, and personal well-being.⁶ Intrinsic motivation and the pursuit of meaningful learning are themes that are recognizable within Deweyan theory as well.

DEWEY AND SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Dewey discusses how the educative environment can be an agent either to enhance or to squander a student's desire to learn: "Now in many cases—too many cases—the activity of the immature human being is simply played upon to secure habits which are useful. He is trained like an animal rather than educated like a human being."⁷ Dewey criticizes the practices of educators who force students into a particular prescribed curriculum, squashing their natural curiosity: "To predetermine some future occupation for which education is to be a strict preparation is to injure the possibilities of present development."⁸ Curriculum that is structured strictly for a particular occupation or mean, Dewey argues, is missing the point of education. It is within this too restrictive environment that the student's need for autonomy and competence is stifled, further restricting any internalized regulation. Through the lens of SDT, however, we allow for a more nuanced understanding of Dewey's theory of motivation. SDT mirrors Dewey's belief that the natural curiosities of the child are a valuable resource that also needs structure to flourish. Both SDT and Dewey indicate that in addition to autonomy a student needs structure and guidance.⁹ Dewey indicates that the structure provided by the "teacher" is the "very life of the group as a community," whereas SDT posits that this guidance and structure provide the basic need of competence for the student, allowing for internalization of motivation.^{10,11} Within a monetized system that provides external regulation and rigid structures, these intrinsic motivations are snuffed out before they have a chance to be explored. Education is seen as a mere product, and no longer as an experience.

The danger in further privatizing education and transitioning to a product-centered educational experience is found in transforming an educative experience into a meaningless activity with undue structure and limitations. Dewey describes external regulation/extrinsic motivation almost word for word when he says, "Individuals act capriciously whenever they act under external dictation, or from being told, without having a purpose of their own or perceiving the bearing of the deed upon other acts."¹² If students do not feel in control of their learning, or do not see the merits for their own life, they disengage. Extrapolate this to a student's educational experience seen as a mere means to an end, and no longer an educative, meaningful experience, and both SDT and Dewey predict that disengagement is sure to follow.

In order for learning to be meaningful, Dewey explains that the student needs to understand the merits of the task at hand. He uses the example of a child who prefers to eat candy rather than nutritious foods. He argues that the child needs to be made conscious of consequences as a justification of the positive or negative value of certain objects. . . . it is obviously the part of wisdom to establish consciousness of connection. . . . what is desirable is that a topic be presented in such a way that it either have an immediate value . . . or else be perceived to be a means of achieving something of intrinsic value.¹³

In essence, Dewey theorizes that in order for a learning task to be “meaningful” to a student, it has to be relevant to the student’s needs and goals. Intrinsic motivation becomes more likely when the educator offers a rationale that helps a student internalize the merit of an educational task. Within SDT, internalization of extrinsic motives is necessary for quality learning and engagement, so that “when students’ basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported in the classroom, they are more likely to internalize their motivation to learn and to be more autonomously engaged in their studies.”¹⁴ Dewey and SDT concur that educators can inspire students to internalize motivation, but are these ideals feasible within an educational structure motivated by strongly by money?

A TRULY NATIONAL SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

“Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state and yet the full ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?”¹⁵ Dewey asks this critical question in *Experience and Education*, and although he does not explicitly answer it, his theory strongly suggests that his answer would be a resounding “no.” Within this current educational shift, we are moving from a public education system to a “national state”-conducted education structure dominated by corporate interests. Not only does this style of education radically alter motivation, it also interferes with pedagogical creativity by imposing powerful restrictions on educational practitioners that damage their motivation. For instance, at least 15 percent of charter schools in the United States are for-profit and are run by hedge fund managers. These hedge fund managers put the interests of corporations ahead of educators’ interests and effective pedagogy.¹⁶ Because of this, educators largely do not have agency concerning their own creativity and educational practices, which may in turn prevent intrinsic motivation. Both SDT and Dewey can help make us more aware of the troubling motivation mechanisms within that system.

Dewey explains that the educator is a critical part of the social group in a classroom. When the educator exercises “control,” “it is done in behalf of the interest of the group, not as an exhibition of personal power. This makes the difference between action which is arbitrary and that which is just and fair.”¹⁷ Once again Dewey returns to the idea that structure can be provided without being overly forceful or denying students’ and teachers’ autonomy or freedom, for “without rules there is no game.”¹⁸ Something very similar is asserted within the literature of self-determination theory when it comes to the balance necessary to provide for effective student autonomy.¹⁹ When SDT researchers discuss the same dichotomous thinking in their own literature, while alternatively promoting the balance of autonomy and control, they focus explicitly on how extrinsic rewards and punishments can undermine intrinsic motivation:²⁰

Research revealed that not only tangible rewards but also threats, deadlines, directives, pressured evaluations, and imposed goals diminish intrinsic

motivation because, like tangible rewards, they conduce toward an external perceived locus of causality. In contrast, choice, acknowledgment of feelings, and opportunities for self-direction were found to enhance intrinsic motivation because they allow people a greater feeling of autonomy.²¹

Given a monetized system, where educators are pressed for time and motivated solely by external means, what will be the ramifications for their own motivations to improve their instruction? Dewey and SDT postulate that, with inflexible external regulations and a lack of freedom, eventually intrinsic motivation for both educators and students will ultimately, in essence, be extinguished.

CONCLUSION

Within this new configuration described above, there is a greater focus on charter schools, pumping out costly PhD degrees, and a growing amount of student debt as education costs increase and force students to take out insurmountable loans.²² Where the school system is changed to a market system and a degree is simply an added skill on a resume instead of a valued experience, students or educators will no longer see the educative experience as having any merit or value outside of its necessity within a market system. Through the work of Dewey and SDT on the values of internalized motivation and the need for the appropriate freedoms, it is clear that for education to be successful and truly educative there needs to be a change in where the value is located in education. We are slowly headed toward a system where the most advanced degrees will be given to the highest bidder, destroying any intrinsic desire for further learning or critical engagement with and in the curriculum. As much as reform and progress are beneficial in education, the direction of our education system to a further monetized structure will lead to the destruction of education (and motivation) as we know it.

NOTES

1. James M. Giarelli, "Educational Theory and Practice at the Fin de Siècle: From Pre-School to After-School," *Educational Studies* 49, no. 4 (2013): 303–315.
2. Giarelli, "Educational Theory and Practice," 313.
3. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 25.
4. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68.
5. Ryan and Deci, "Self-Determination Theory," 69.
6. Ibid.
7. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 5.
8. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 362.

9. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 134.
10. Ibid.
11. Ryan and Deci, "Self-Determination Theory," 69.
12. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 75.
13. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 242–243.
14. Christopher P. Niemic and Richard M. Ryan, "Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness in the Classroom: Applying Self-Determination Theory to Educational Practice," *School Field* 7, no. 2 (2009): 139.
15. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 97.
16. Bruce Baker and Gary Miron, "The Business of Charter Schooling: Understanding the Policies That Charter Operators Use for Financial Benefit," National Education Policy Center, 1.
17. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 55.
18. Ibid.
19. Ryan and Deci, "Self-Determination Theory," 72.
20. Ryan and Deci, "Self-Determination Theory," 70.
21. Ibid.
22. Giarelli, "Educational Theory and Practice," 313.

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