There is no single, overarching theory of motivation. In fact, there isn’t even a clear definition of what motivation is or what it actually does for learning. The prevailing theories, however, suggest that motivation...

- influences what learners pay attention to or focus on;
- directs their attention to the task at hand and makes them less distractible;
- helps them persist when obstacles are encountered;
- helps them monitor their own learning.

Three of the most well-supported and useful theories of motivation for educational purposes are described below. Corresponding pedagogical approaches for promoting positive motivation are offered.

### Value-Expectancy Theory

Suggests that motivation is a function of the value a learner places on a goal or its outcome and the learner’s expectation for success. Motivation is low (or non-existent) when a learner assigns little value to the goal or does not expect to successfully complete the goal.

**Factors Affecting Motivation**

**Value,** may be derived from:

- satisfying a need (e.g. belonging to a community, approval, feeling competent, avoiding failure, cognitive balance...)
- expected outcome (e.g. grades, extra credit, praise, future job opportunities...)
- intrinsic quality of the task (e.g. novelty, variety, appropriate level of challenge, interesting to self, academic or professional pursuits...)
- choice and control

**Expectancy,** influenced by:

- prior experience with the goal
- self-efficacy with respect to the goal
- difficulty of the goal
- match with the learner’s current skill set
- encouragement from others
- attributions about success and failure
- beliefs/attitudes about learning

**Pedagogical Suggestions**

Create a safe, welcoming classroom environment: learn names, set discourse ground-rules, reward risk...

Set clear expectations: learning, engagement, attendance, grades...

Assign activities that are professionally relevant, interesting, provocative, beautiful...

Give students choices: approaches to learning, project topics, grading schemes...

Determine students’ prior knowledge using background questionnaires, pre-tests, knowledge probes...

Pitch lectures, assignments, and assessments at the appropriate level, i.e. challenging but doable.

Offer frequent, learner-centered feedback early in the semester. Low-stakes/ungraded assignments are particularly helpful.

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1 Cognitive dissonance (or disequilibrium) occurs when a learner’s current world view conflicts with new facts, ideas, or beliefs. Many theorists propose learners strive to re-establish balance by reconciling belief systems.
**Attribution Theory** suggests that motivation depends on the continuous causal inferences learners make about why events occur. Learners are most motivated when they feel they are in control of these events.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors Affecting Motivation</th>
<th>Pedagogical Suggestions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dispositional factors:</strong></td>
<td>Give students choices and let them experience the consequences of their choices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal, controllable factors such as personality, character, ability...</td>
<td>Ask students to critically reflect on their learning through journaling or learning portfolios; ask them to regularly respond to instructor and peer feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Situational factors:</strong></td>
<td>Ask students to assess their study habits and then have them correlate what they find with their exam performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External, uncontrollable factors such as environment, luck, other people and their habits and beliefs...</td>
<td>Use a fixed grading scheme so that students have substantive control over their final grades.</td>
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2. There are two important attribution errors worth keeping in mind: **Fundamental attribution error** is a cognitive bias in which people put too much emphasis on internal, dispositional factors when explaining other people’s behaviors rather than explaining them in terms of situational factors. For example, when a student fails to turn in a homework assignment, a teacher often assumes that the student was too lazy (dispositional) to finish the homework, without sufficiently taking into account the situation that the student was in. **Self-serving bias** is the tendency for people to attribute internal, dispositional factors to their own successes and external, situational factors to their failures. For example, a student who does well on an exam may attribute her success to good study habits (dispositional). If she does poorly, she may attribute her failure to the teacher (situational) who made the test too tricky.