Let’s stop motivating, let’s help discover the meaning of learning

Thousands of articles, dozens of theories of motivation, many years of debate: so why have we still not been able to solve the problem of motivation? Why are we still struggling to find the one and only motivation recipe?

Perhaps it is because there is no single answer, no one size fits all. Perhaps it is because what we really need is not to motivate: after all, there are as many motives as there are people, i.e., learners. Rather we need to help learners find the right motives to enable them to discover the meaning of learning. Such becomes a motivation to do something, to move forward, to learn, to change. In other words, we need to help learners discover a unique motive for learning that is valid only to them, however effective and efficient.

Maybe this is what will help us solve the dilemma of motivating learning. Let us recall a classic childhood case: a child who, engaged in an activity he likes, in a game, does not see or hear anything around him. Or oneself. When you want something badly and strive to do it, to achieve it, to have it, you spare neither energy nor time. Why do that? Maybe because you saw the meaning in it, because you did something that was relevant and meaningful to you. Could the same logic apply to incentivizing the motivation to learn?

In learning activities, too, we should let the learner first find the meaning of the future activity, the meaning for them, instead of immediately shoving the learning material at them and explaining how the activity will be useful or how it is generally important.

Does this really mean that teachers are no more needed in this case? What would an adult educator do at that time, you ask? He or she will create an environment that enables learning and stimulates it, or add new learning opportunities, new learning tools and technologies to the existing one. In a sense, the adult educator will do what they have always done, just indirectly, without “spoon-feeding” the learner, but rather through allowing the learner to choose the “dish” and “eat” it themselves at their own pace. In such a circumstance, it would be up to the imagination and competencies of us, adult educators, to decide how many “products” are available in that environment to be used to create the learning “dish”. By learning this way, all learners will reach the learning goal, they will “arrive” at the same place, just by walking their own path of meaning.

To live meaningfully is to be able to set goals and objectives for one’s life or activity and to pursue them purposefully. According to Viktor Frankl (2013), the search for meaning is the ultimate human aspiration and the main motivation in life. Is this the case at all stages of human
life? Is the search for meaning and meaningful activities also relevant for senior people? How does the understanding of meaning, the search for meaning, and the desire to find it in general change with age? To what extent can meaning be a motivating factor for activity? What are the theoretical and practical models of the search for meaning? How do they work at an older age, when people have often already completed their working and professional careers, raised children, and helped them live independently, and sometimes experienced the loss of relatives or friends? Answers to these questions were sought in the lecture-discussion “Finding Meaning” held at the Spiritual Development Department of Šiauliai University of the Third Age.

Based on the theory of generations, together with the lecturer Dr. Rasa Pocevičienė, Associate Professor at Šiauliai State College, the participants investigated the meaning as understood by different generations. They looked into how to better understand each other, build relationships based on trust and tolerance, and live in harmony with others and with oneself. Reflecting and analyzing their own experiences, the participants made effort to identify their own meanings, why it was necessary for a person to find the meaning for themselves, and how and in what ways others could help them in this search.

These discussions helped the participants understand that one needed to find the meaning oneself, that no one else can “put it” in or “bring it” to us, because the meaning is not primarily objective. This is to say that there is no single clear meaning that fits all. In other words, there is and can be no universal meaning. We create the meaning ourselves. Sisyphus, a well-known character in Greek mythology, seems to be rolling a stone up a mountain to no avail and never reaching the top, and that he will never reach it. The question is, is his work meaningful? Most of us would inertly say no, but there may be no single answer here. For some, the work may seem meaningless, but for others, in this case Sisyphus himself, it may even be highly meaningful. This means that an activity that has little meaning or result in general for others, for society, etc., can be highly meaningful, motivating and encouraging for the person doing it, incentivizing them to continue even if they fail, and perhaps even to strive to do more.

Having recognized that finding the meaning is a very good motivator of our activities, the participants concluded that learning activity, among many activity types, must be meaningful. Only then will motivation follow, because it stems from the meaning, or rather from the perceived meaning. However, this idea also encourages us to model the entire teaching/learning process in a different way. This means that when learning, we should first answer to ourselves, and perhaps to others, whether this specific activity is meaningful to me, what makes it meaningful to me, and only then set goals for ourselves and look for activities that enable us to achieve the goals.
Since engaging the personal system has the most impact on discovering the meaning, the learner, having set their own goals, will also look for ways to succeed in achieving them and attempt to identify and overcome difficulties, monitor their own progress, evaluate it, set new goals and pursue them. It is a cognitive system that generates learning (Marzano, 2005). Conversely, if learning goals and objectives are further set for the learners, and activities are planned to achieve them, the learners with minimum participation in the decision-making and in organizing their own learning will be deprived of meaningful learning, and thus a meaningful life.

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Such provides us with one framework: stop motivating. Instead, let learners discover their own meaning of their learning. And what do you think about this? Please share your thoughts, doubts and opinions.

Literature:

The article was authored by an Epale expert, associate professor Dr. Rasa Pocevičienė, the Head of Management and Communication Department at Šiauliai State College. Learning innovations and their implementation, knowing the learner, self-directed learning and development of self-directed learning skills, the balance of freedom and responsibility in the learning process, ensuring and improving the learner-centered learning process are just some of the scientific interests and research subjects of the article author, Rasa Pocevičienė. The results of the author’s research have been published in more than 60 various scientific and methodological publications in Lithuania and abroad, and presented at more than 50 scientific and methodological conferences, including international ones. Moreover, these ideas are disseminated through delivering unique courses, workshops, trainings, through developing projects, consultancy and introducing innovations in the educational practice.