Motivating Adult Learners to Persist

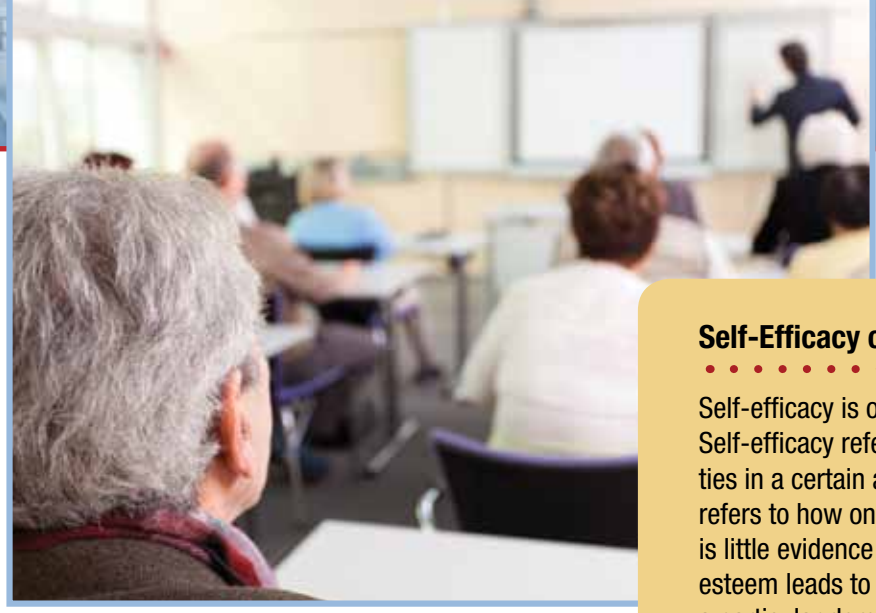
dults lead complex lives with limits on the amount of time they have to engage in formal learning. This reality, combined with the amount of effort and practice needed to develop one's literacy skills—generally many thousands of hours—makes supporting persistence one of the most challenging aspects of designing effective adult literacy instruction. The average adult learner's duration in a literacy program is nowhere close to the length of instruction and practice needed.

How can programs and instructors help motivate students to persist in their efforts? This section explores insights from research about how to shape learning environments—instructional interactions, structures, systems, tasks, and texts—in ways that encourage persistence.

Psychological studies have identified an impressive array of factors that contribute to individual motivation—including self-efficacy, self-control, goal orientations, and interest, among others. Although each of these factors is discussed separately below, it is important to keep in mind that they interact with one another in complex ways to influence a learner's motivation. For example, the goals people set are related to their self-efficacy—their perceived ability to perform well on a task—and the value they assign to the task.

Building Learners' Self-Efficacy

When learners expect to succeed, they are more likely to put forth the effort and the persistence needed to perform well. More-confident students are more likely to be more cognitively engaged in learning and thinking than students who doubt their capabilities. Indeed, self-efficacy is a strong predictor of many educational and health outcomes and has been associated with better literacy skills.



Self-Efficacy or Self-Esteem?

Self-efficacy is often confused with global self-esteem. Self-efficacy refers to learners' beliefs about their abilities in a certain area, such as literacy; global self-esteem refers to how one feels about oneself generally. While there is little evidence that enhancing students' general self-esteem leads to increases in achievement, self-efficacy in a particular domain—such as education or health—relates positively to outcomes in that domain.

It can be expected that some adults enter literacy education questioning their ability to learn to read and write. Moreover, beliefs about self-efficacy can decrease in middle age and older adulthood, although this tendency may vary among individuals. Such beliefs can be modified, however, through experience with tasks in which realistic goals are set and progress is monitored relative to those goals.

Setting Appropriate Goals

Goals are extremely important in motivating and directing behavior. Adults often have very general ideas about why they need or want to learn to read and write. To motivate persistence and success, instructors need to help learners break down their learning goals into short-term and long-term literacy goals. If learners set near-term goals, not just distant ones, they are much more likely to experience success, which enhances self-efficacy. Supporting learners' awareness of progress week-by-week can motivate persistence, as learners reach their near-term goals and recognize that these are the path to reaching long-term goals.

There are also different types of goals, the choice of which can influence learning outcomes:

- When a learner holds a **mastery goal,** he or she engages with a task in order to improve ability; the goal is to truly master the task. When students hold this type of goal, the point of comparison is the student him- or herself. That is, the student compares his or her present performance to past performance to gauge improvement.
- When a learner holds a **performance-approach goal**, the goal is to demonstrate his or her ability relative to others; the students compare their performance to that of other students, with the goal of demonstrating greater competence.

- When a learner holds a **performance-avoidance goal,** the student's goal is to avoid appearing incompetent or "dumb." Such students would want to avoid appearing to others that they have poor literacy skills.

Learning environments can be structured in ways that encourage learners to set different types of goals. If a teacher emphasizes the importance of mastering literacy skills, learners are likely to adopt mastery goals; if a teacher emphasizes relative ability (i.e., the teacher inadvertently makes comments that position adult learners as "good" or "bad" readers), learners are likely to adopt performance goals.

Adopting mastery goals predicts positive outcomes that include persisting at tasks, choosing to engage in similar activities in the future, and using effective cognitive and self-regulatory strategies. Performance-avoidance goals consistently predict negative outcomes, including increased use of self-handicapping strategies and poor achievement. Results for performance-approach goals are mixed, with some studies finding that they are related to positive outcomes and others finding the opposite.

In addition, learners can have certain beliefs about intelligence that can affect their self-efficacy and as a result their personal goals for learning. Students who hold an incremental view of intelligence believe that intelligence is malleable and that it is possible to learn just about anything. These students are likely to adopt mastery goals. In contrast, students who believe that intelligence is fixed so that a person cannot effectively learn more than they are naturally capable of learning are likely to adopt performance goals.

It appears possible, however, to alter beliefs about intelligence. For instance, feedback that focuses a learner's attention on how learning happens—for example, on the use of strategies, effort, practice, and the general changeable and controllable nature of learning—can foster more incremental views of ability with positive outcomes.

Offering Feedback in Ways that Motivate

Self-efficacy requires having fairly accurate perceptions of one's current competencies. Overestimating one's ability to read and understand a text, for instance, will not lead to engaging in the behaviors needed to develop new skills. Underestimating one's abilities may lead to coping or hiding behaviors that prevent the learner from making use of his or her existing skills.

To develop accurate perceptions of their competencies, students need to receive clear, specific, and accurate feedback. The feedback should be appropriate to the learners' needs and be specific about the area that should be improved.

Assist learners in managing errors. Students of all ages can find errors demotivating. Research suggests the benefits of error management—that is, leading adults to expect errors as a part of the learning process and then providing strategies for coping with errors and learning from them. Instructors need to know how to recognize and correct ingrained negative attributions by providing feedback that stresses the processes of learning, such as the importance of using strategies, monitoring one's own understanding, and engaging in sustained effort even in the face of challenges.

Reframe explanations in ways that motivate persistence. Experiences with learning can trigger questions such as: Why did I do badly? (after receiving a low score on an evaluation). Why can't I understand this? (after failing to comprehend a paragraph). Why can't I write sentences that make sense? (after being unable to write a coherent short story). The "attributions" students form in response to such questions—in other words, how they explain the reasons for their successes and failures to themselves—will either motivate them to persist or discourage them from doing so.

A learner who is experiencing difficulty comprehending a text, for example, will be more likely to persist if he or she attributes the difficulty to something external (for example, a boring text), something uncontrollable (being ill), or something unstable (feeling depressed that day). A learner who experiences success at a task will be more likely to persist if progress is attributed to something internal (for example, personal enjoyment of reading), controllable (practice, spending a lot of time working on the text), and stable (a belief in one's ability as a reader).

When a student does not experience success—for example, if he or she is unable to make sense of the overarching point of a short story—instructors can help the learner employ reading strategies that can elucidate the story's meaning and also provide a different frame for thinking about the reasons for the learner's difficulties and errors. With repeated reframing, instructors can help learners develop attributional styles that allow learners to employ strategies and skills that are more likely to lead them to persist.

Model literacy strategies. Vicarious experience—such as observing others successfully perform specific tasks or use specific strategies—is another way to frame learners' attitudes toward learning and increase self-efficacy. For instance, instructors or students might model literacy strategies or other learning behaviors.

Using Assessments Appropriately

While assessments are important, the ways in which they are administered and the feedback presented can affect learners' motivation in either positive or negative ways. Stressing the importance of assessments and tests can lead students to adopt performance goals—goals in which a student compares his or her progress to that of others. As discussed previously, these goals are related to some problematic academic outcomes, particularly when students are preoccupied with the goal of avoiding appearing incompetent. When students are focused on how they compare to others academically, they may use less-efficient cognitive strategies and engage in various self-handicapping behaviors.

To avoid demotivating students, instructors should:

- Present the results of assessments privately. Presenting assessment results in a public manner is conducive to students adopting performance rather than mastery goals.
- Encourage students to focus on effort and improvement whenever possible. Motivation is strengthened if students feel they can improve if they work hard at a task. Intrinsic motivation is enhanced when students are rewarded on the basis of their improvement rather than on absolute scores.
- Allow the student to take an assessment again if he or she does not receive an acceptable score.

Approaches to Avoid

Research suggests that teachers can contribute to learners' negative framing and explanations in a variety of ways, including by:

- Communicating, intentionally or unintentionally, to learners that a reading problem is internal to them. Teaching practices that could build negative internal attributions include labeling readers and writers as strong or struggling; making obvious assignments of readers and writers to working groups by skill level; and encouraging some learners to excel, while exhibiting low expectations for others.

- Providing inadequate or no feedback, which can signal that skills are inherent and immutable. For example, if a teacher responds to an answer with, "No, that is wrong—try again," and does not provide feedback or suggestions for development, then the student may develop or apply a maladaptive attribution (e.g., "I must not be very smart"): an internal, stable, and uncontrollable attribution for failure that is unlikely to enhance motivation to read.

Incentives and Motivation

Intrinsic motivation refers to undertaking a behavior for its own sake, because one enjoys it and is interested in it, with a high degree of perceived autonomy. Students who are more intrinsically motivated or perceive their behaviors as autonomous show better text recall and college course grades, among other positive outcomes. Intrinsic motivation is affected by whether rewards are given for performance, the degree to which the learner values the activity or task and is interested in it, and whether there are opportunities for choice about ways to participate in it.

There is debate about whether students' intrinsic motivation to perform a learning task is undermined if an external reward is offered (for example, if a student is paid for getting good grades). Some argue that extrinsic incentives do not harm students' intrinsic motivation, while others maintain that they ultimately lower it. The case against external rewards has been confirmed in a synthesis of 128 experiments. External rewards can lead to problem-solving that is more rigid, less flexible, and slower. Large financial incentives, in particular, can lead to lower performance. One possibility is that rewards thwart the person's sense of autonomy and control and thus their intrinsic motivation.

The conditions under which rewards or incentives affect adults' participation and persistence in literacy instruction are unknown, however. State and federally funded adult literacy programs at times offer incentives for enrollment. For example, many adult education courses, which include various courses in literacy, are provided free of charge in the city of Philadelphia. In this case, the "incentive" is an opportunity that makes it possible for adults to enroll in the courses; the payment is provided prior to enrollment, enabling adults who might not be able to afford the class otherwise to enroll. When these "opportunity enhancers"—such as support for child care, coverage of costs of enrollment, or replacement of lost wages—are used up front to minimize barriers to participation, they may not have the negative impact documented for simple external rewards.

By contrast, other programs provide incentives upon completion of programs or during participation. In some instances such systems may have positive effects. For example, the state of Tennessee recently implemented a program in which students received cash incentives for participating in adult education classes; the results of a nonexperimental study suggested that the introduction of rewards was related to achievement and to passing the GED examination among welfare recipients.

If external incentives are offered, it is important to implement them in a way that does not diminish intrinsic motivation. External rewards should be presented so that students perceive them as providing information about their progress rather than as controlling their behavior. Also, the reward should be contingent on the student's having learned specific literacy skills or reached a goal, rather than for simply engaging with or completing a literacy task or course. For instance, if the reward provided by an adult education course is a job referral, then the job referral should be offered for having learned specific skills—such as being able to write a coherent essay—and not for merely having completed a set of tasks, such as completing all course exercises. In this case, the learner's intrinsic motivation is less likely to be undermined because he or she is likely to see the reward as a natural consequence of having learned specific skills.

The impact of various types of incentives on persistence in adult literacy instruction is a complex issue, and further research is warranted to determine the particular circumstances under which some types of incentives might motivate certain learners.

Providing Choice and Autonomy

When learners believe that they have some control over their own learning, they are more likely to take on challenges and to persist with difficult tasks, compared with students who perceive that they have little control over their learning outcomes. A con-

trolling or pressured climate in a classroom, home, or work group is known to decrease motivation to perform a variety of behaviors.

Providing people with choice about what activities to do and how to do them can increase intrinsic motivation, provided that the number of options offered is not overwhelming. Experiencing higher levels of perceived self-control predicts numerous positive outcomes, among them engagement in school and academic achievement. The amount of autonomy a learner desires, however, appears to depend on how competent and self-efficacious he or she feels. If the task is new or especially challenging, an individual may appreciate having little autonomy.

Building a sense of learner autonomy and control does not mean abandoning adults to learn on their own; there are a number of ways that instructors can give their students autonomy without sacrificing best practices such as providing specific feedback, offering explicit and clear modeling of strategies, and monitoring progress, all of which develop proficiencies and so support greater autonomy.

The choices allowed can be quite small and still have important effects on motivation. For example, instructors can encourage adult learners to choose whether they want to work on a reading passage individually or in small groups, choose the order of activities during a class session, or choose the genre of the next text they will read.

Providing a rationale for a task or behavior also can support perceived autonomy. For instance, one study found that providing a meaningful rationale for doing an uninteresting activity, acknowledging that participants might not want to do the activity, and minimizing the use of controlling language led to increased reports of autonomy.

Values

A person may persist with a task that is not initially intrinsically interesting if it is valued. Value refers to learners' beliefs about whether a domain or task is enjoyable (intrinsically interesting), useful, important to identity or sense of self, and worth investing time in.

These dimensions work together; a less-than-skilled reader may nevertheless approach a difficult reading task with strong motivation to persist if the task is interesting, useful, or important to his or her identity. One study, for example, illustrated the value that adolescent readers attached to various texts because those texts taught them important life lessons or provided information necessary for fitting in with a group or social network.

Although valuing an activity is important for learning in the context of compulsory education, it is vital for persistence in adult literacy education. If adult learners develop and maintain positive values about the literacy activities they engage in—if they believe that the courses are useful, important, interesting, and worth their time—they will be more likely to persist with learning. More research is needed, however, on the approaches instructors can use to help adult and adolescent learners develop these values over time in relation to language and literacy activities they may not already value.

Using and Inspiring Learners' Interests

Adult learners are likely to put forth more effort and stay engaged in tasks they find interesting. Researchers have made a useful distinction between personal interest and situational interest, and both types have implications for motivating adult learners.

Personal interest is the interest that learners bring into classrooms; it represents their longstanding preferences. When students are personally interested in topics covered in reading passages, recall of the main ideas of the passages is enhanced and subsequent motivation in reading related texts is maintained.

Research on motivation has found value in giving readers opportunities to choose texts that connect with or expand their interests. When young readers are more engaged by the topic of a text, for whatever reason— whether they're trying to solve a problem or simply reading for amusement—they are more motivated to continue reading. Similarly, interest in the topic or purpose of a writing task predicts better writing performance among students in secondary schools.

To support persistence in adult literacy learners, instructors can use easy and cost-effective ways to learn about students' personal interests—for example, asking them to write on a sheet of paper (to be shared with the instructor only) five topics they find personally interesting and five they view as boring. Instructors can use this information to select texts, tasks, and assignments that will be meaningful and engaging to learners.

Situational interest is inspired by a particular event or characteristic of an experience, such as the features of a text or task. For example, a student who has not previously expressed any interest in writing persuasive essays might be become interested if the exercise is presented in a manner that inspires interest (e.g., the opportunity to experience the value of a persuasive essay for college or job applications, changing public opinion, or simply self-expression).

Using Digital Media

Digital media are a promising way to give access to a broad range of text genres and topics to stimulate interest in reading and writing for all students, including adults. The use of digital technologies—to expose learners to genres and topics, to scaffold their learning with prompts and other supports, and to help them practice—is likely to motivate their interest in at least three ways: technologies are novel, they can ease the unpleasant parts of practice, and they can empower the learner through development of valued, relevant digital literacy skills.

Strategies that literacy instructors can use to enhance learners' situational interest include:

- offering learners meaningful choices, such as allowing them to occasionally choose from among several texts in addition to other reading practice that is required;
- using well-organized texts;
- using texts that include vivid imagery;
- using texts about which learners have some prior knowledge;
- encouraging learners to actively and creatively think about the material they are reading; and
- making sure learners understand the material by providing them with relevant cues—for example, prompting them while reading or providing tools to help them organize the content and make sense of the material.

The real challenge, however, is moving learners from situational to personal, or sustained, interest in a way that inspires them to persist even when they face challenging reading tasks.

Encouraging Collaboration and Cooperation

Cooperation or collaboration in the classroom can motivate learners to persist and attain their goals. Learning environments and experiences that help establish positive

relations with others while developing competence in particular skills also shape engagement, motivation, and persistence.

Collaborative arrangements in which students work together to plan, draft, revise, or edit their texts can have a positive impact on the quality of their writing, but students need clear direction about what they are expected to do as they work with others. Opportunities to collaborate during reading and writing also can increase motivation, although more needs to be known about how to structure collaborations effectively.

Adults may also become more engaged if reading and writing activities provide opportunities to work with other adults to solve real-world problems. In addition to increasing the usefulness of literacy-based tasks and the sense of autonomy and control people have over their lives, these collective literacy activities may provide them with the community support needed to persist in developing their literacy even in the face of challenges.

One challenge to the motivating effects of group work is the possibility for actual or perceived negative perceptions and actions on the basis of differences, particularly race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class. (See "The Potentially Negative Effects of Stereotypes" on opposite page.)

Overcoming Systemic Barriers to Persistence

When designing adult literacy instruction, it is important to consider the contexts of adults' lives and how to remove demotivating barriers to access and practice. For adults to enroll and continue participating in adult literacy courses, they must perceive the courses as being important, useful, interesting, and worth the investment of time. They must also believe they can handle the short-term consequences of spending time improving their literacy, which may include temporarily having less time available for work and family.

Effective functioning in adulthood requires selectively allocating effort toward the most important and pressing goals in accord with the opportunities available. People allocate their cognitive, emotional, and physical resources to prioritize important goals, bal-

ancing responsibilities across work, family, community, and so on. In this light, lack of persistence in adult literacy instruction, while appearing to be a poor choice, actually may be a self-regulated, adaptive response to the constraints of competing demands and the need for trade-offs in life.

It should not be surprising, then, that the need for child care is a serious practical issue that affects participation and persistence. It is likely that programs to increase the availability of child care, particularly at no cost or at reduced rates, would facilitate the participation of many adults.

The Potentially Negative Effects of Stereotypes

Stereotype threat is an individual's concern that others in a group will judge her or him by a dominant stereotype. Stereotype threat is strong enough to disrupt performance and is typically heightened in situations in which individuals who might be connected with such a stereotype (e.g., "women are not good at mathematics") represent only a small number in the overall group.

In one study, for example, black college students who had demonstrated high capability in other testing situations performed poorly when told that their intelligence was being measured. Stereotype threats have also been documented among members of other racial and ethnic groups, as well as with respect to gender and cultural differences.

These findings have important implications for any adult literacy program or course in which groups come together from a variety of racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, as well as for mixed gender groups. Indeed, stereotype threat can compromise learning in adult populations because it can be triggered by age. In Western culture, education is most strongly associated with childhood and early adulthood, and adult participation in formal instruction may be perceived as not happening at the "appropriate" time.

Awareness of stereotypes may divert attention that is needed to perform well on a task. When stereotypes are activated—in other words, when the learner is made aware of features of the stereotype that are relevant to him or her—working memory resources needed for effective performance may be diminished by distracting thoughts. Stereotype threat can be activated by seemingly innocuous features of the learning situation, like reporting one's gender on a mathematics test.

Because worries about whether one will confirm a stereotype to some extent involve inner speech, interventions that steer learners toward verbalizations that help them to focus on the task at hand have been found to reduce stereotype threat.

Directions for Future Research

Although the principles outlined in this booklet are well researched with other populations and can be applied with adults, studies on motivation and adult literacy are scarce.

Research is needed to:

- identify instructional approaches that motivate engagement and persistence for adults with low literacy;
- develop measures of adult motivation and persistence so that better information can be gathered on how to motivate adult learners' persistence;
- understand more about learners' motives and circumstances—in terms of jobs, families, health issues, and other factors—in order to design better supports for persistence;
- understand how the features of texts and tasks affect motivation;
- examine group differences and similarities in the factors that influence motivation to persist. Although principles of motivation apply across populations, learners may differ in their persistence based on age and other characteristics;
- identify technologies that could aid persistence, and determine how technologies can best be introduced and their use supported in ways that increase rather than decrease motivation; and
- identify the conditions that affect motivation to enroll in adult literacy courses.

Learners can underestimate the amount of time and effort needed to learn a complex skill such as literacy. Research on employee training in the workplace suggests that "pre-training" geared toward establishing appropriate expectations for learning new skills can be helpful both for the learner and for those whose support will be instrumental to the learner's success. Family, peers, supervisors, and coworkers can exert important influences on motivation. The limited amount of research that has examined people's motivation to persist in adult literacy instruction shows that people were more likely to persist if they had a strong social support network. They were also more likely to persist if they had previously engaged in learning experiences after formal schooling and had a personal goal, such as helping their children or obtaining a more lucrative job.

In contrast, persistence was undermined by the demands of everyday life and low levels of social support. More needs to be known about how to help adult learners set appropriate expectations for their progress and encourage the social support system they will need to persist.