



Competition and Motivation



Different Kinds of Motivation

In Self-Determination Theory, Ryan and Deci (2000) distinguish between [intrinsic motivation](#) and [extrinsic motivation](#). They argue that in comparison to extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation fosters higher-quality learning and creativity. Hence, promoting intrinsic motivation in classrooms is productive for children's learning.

Competition in Classrooms

Direct and Indirect competition

Classrooms are social environments where multiple students co-exist. These students may compete with one another on tasks, such as assignments or exams. Ross and Van den Haag (1957, in Deci & Ryan, 1985) regard such activity as [direct competition](#), where people struggle against one another. However, students can also compete against objective standards, such as a personal best or pre-set target. This is known as [indirect competition](#).

Motivation, Direct and Indirect Competition

Research in psychology suggests that direct competition can undermine intrinsic motivation. In one study, participants were given puzzles to solve with another person in the room (an assistant of the experiment), and were told to either compete against the other person or to work as quickly as they could (E. L. Deci, Betley, Kahle, Abrams, & Porac, 1981). Those told to compete against the other person were less intrinsically motivated to solve the puzzles than those who were told to work as quickly as possible.

In contrast, indirect competition can increase intrinsic motivation. Vallerand, Gauvin and Halliwell (1986) introduced a balancing task to participants, either encouraging them to find new ways of balancing to do better across eight timed trials, or to beat the scores of peers. When participants were then left alone in the room after the timed trials, those encouraged to find new techniques spent more time revisiting the task than those encouraged to beat their peers. However, how indirect competition impacts intrinsic motivation depends on whether people experience it as an opportunity for feedback and improvement or as a pressure to beat the standard (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In the former case, indirect competition boosts intrinsic motivation. In the latter case, very

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similar to the participants competing against a peer standard in the experiment by Vallerand, Gauvin and Halliwell (1986), indirect competition diminishes intrinsic motivation.

Takeaways:

Based on these theories and studies, teachers should strive to encourage indirect competition in the classroom as opportunities for students to improve themselves. A smaller emphasis on direct competition also opens an opportunity for more collaborative work between students, which many psychologists believe to be constructive for learning (Slavin, 1987) 😊



Key terms:	
Intrinsic motivation:	Doing something for its inherent satisfactions (Ryan & Deci, 2000)
Extrinsic Motivation:	Doing something to attain a separable outcome not inherent in the activity itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000)
Direct Competition:	Where people contend with one another, with each person attempting to maximise his or her successes in the competition area. May also involve weakening others' attempts at success (Ross & Van den Haag, 1957, in Deci & Ryan, 1985)
Indirect Competition:	Where people try to perform against an objective standard (Ross & Van den Haag, 1957, in Deci & Ryan, 1985). Indirect competition can be informational or controlling. Informational indirect competition: Competition is used as an opportunity to improve themselves. Aids intrinsic motivation. Controlling indirect competition: Competition is used as a pressure to beat the standard. Weakens intrinsic motivation.

References

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