How do you frame your instructions?

Have you ever thought that how you phrase your instructions or present a task to your students could actually affect their motivation? Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon & Deci (2004) carried out three field experiments with high school and college students. They tested the self-determination theory hypotheses that **intrinsic** (vs. **extrinsic**) goals and **autonomy-supportive** (vs. **controlling**) learning climates would improve students' learning, performance, and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The learning of text material or physical exercises was framed in terms of intrinsic (community, personal growth, health) versus extrinsic (money, image) goals, which were presented in an autonomy-supportive versus controlling manner.

It was found that

- Engaging in learning behaviours with an intrinsic goal (viz., personal growth, health, or community contribution) resulted in more learning and better performance than did engaging in the behaviours with an extrinsic goal (viz., money or an attractive image).

- Students are more able to fully attend to and grasp the importance of an intrinsic goal for their learning when they feel free to decide for themselves to learn (autonomy-supportive) rather than feeling forced to do so (controlling).

- Although intrinsic goals had a main effect when administered in a controlling context, they had a synergistically positive effect when administered in an autonomy-supportive context because the context allowed people to experience the congruence of pursuing an intrinsic goal that is closely aligned with their basic psychological needs.

Implications:

- The findings have important implications for designing optimal learning environments.

- Presenting tasks in terms that are consistent with satisfaction of **basic psychological needs** (whether via the content or the context of the task) led to positive learning-related outcomes.

- Teachers' use of intrinsic goals for framing learning activities and their providing autonomy-supportive learning climates have significant effects for students becoming more fully dedicated and more genuinely engaged in learning activities.

- To enhance students' learning and performance, teachers could:

  o Frame instructions to students in terms of intrinsic goals (community, relationship, personal growth, health, enjoyment) instead of extrinsic goals (money, image, fame, to avoid punishment, tangible rewards, to pass or excel in exams/fitness tests).

  o Use phrases such as, "you can," "you might," "if you choose," and "we ask you to," instead of phrases such as "you should," "you have to," "you'd better," and "you must." to facilitate a autonomy supportive versus controlling climate.

Key Definitions

Autonomy-supportive	Environments that minimize the salience of external incentives and threats, avoid controlling language, and acknowledge the learners' frame of reference (Black & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Connell, 1989).
Basic psychological needs (satisfaction)	People's innate needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For a high level of intrinsic motivation people must experience satisfaction of these needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001).
Controlling learning climates	Environments with strong salience of external incentives, threats, controlling language and no acknowledgement of learner's frame of reference.
Extrinsic goal	Goals with strongly salient extrinsic content (e.g., wealth, image, and fame).
Intrinsic goal	Goals with strongly salient intrinsic content (e.g., relationships, growth, community, and health).

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