Motivation Theories in Action: Project Based Learning

Yan Yang, PhD
Associate Professor, Educational Psychology

Abstract

The objective of this presentation is to introduce a project based learning method in distance education and examine its effectiveness in student learning. The intended audience is online teachers who wish to improve teaching effectiveness and motivate student learning through project based learning. Learning abstract educational psychology theories can be challenging to students, particularly when instructor proximity and simultaneous class interactions are absent in online classes. Students often complain about the challenges of learning educational psychology theories, and they are at a loss when it comes to the actual roles motivation theories play in real life situations. This presentation delineates a project based learning technique to improve student understanding and mastery of the abstract theories through a case study. Two class projects were introduced to the students in an online class, together with detailed project guidelines, grading rubrics, and discussion forums. Student project results showed improved student learning and motivation.

Keywords: Project based learning (PBL), educational psychology teaching, motivation theories in action, distance learning.

Introduction

As a learning model that organizes learning around projects that involve having students find challenging problems or issues, design methods to approach the issues/problems, and find solutions based on their newly acquired knowledge of the theories (Blumenfeld et al., 1991), project-based learning can give students the opportunity to work relatively independently over an extended period of time and to culminate in projects aiming to resolve the issues. Two class projects were introduced to the students in a graduate-level educational psychology class since the beginning of a semester, together with detailed project guidelines, grading rubrics, and discussion forums where students could ask and answer any project-related questions as well as share resources. Students were to pick one of the two projects based on their personal interests and needs. Both projects involved three stages, each of which required students to resolve a realistic problem/issue concerning them through their newly acquired knowledge of a motivation theory of their choice. Project results showed improved interest in learning about motivation theories and effectiveness in connecting the theories with real life situations.

Project 1: Acts of Motivation

PURPOSE: Actively put two of the three major motivation theories (i.e., Expectancy-Value, Causal Attribution, and Goal Orientation) into practice in your personal/professional life.

TASK: In this project, you will intentionally apply two of the three motivation theories to your personal/professional life. You will first identify a motivation-related issue, describe your intentional acts of motivation based on your newly acquired knowledge, something you will have done to motivate others (for example, students, children, parents, spouses, colleagues or friends) over this semester, evaluate how effective your acts are, and make future plans to incorporate motivation theories in real life situation. Finally, you will synthesize the two motivation acts and reflect on what you have learned from these intentional acts overall.

CRITERIA: Your project report will be graded mainly based on the following criteria: 1) theory summary 2) acts of motivation 3) theoretical connection 4) clarity. Grading rubrics are available for more detailed information.

Project 2: Field work

PURPOSE: Actively put two of the three major motivation theories (i.e., Expectancy-Value, Causal Attribution, and Goal Orientation) into practice in attempting to resolve issues raised in your work/home environments.

TASK: In this project, you will intentionally apply two of the three designated core motivation theories to analyze two different motivation issues and propose solutions in your personal/professional life. You will first identify and interview at least two different individuals who are directly involved in each motivation related issue of your concern. Based on the motivation theories of your choice, you will then design interview questions to find out their motivational states and propose ways to motivate these individuals over the semester based on the new knowledge you will have gained from the designated three motivation theories. Finally, you will synthesize the two field work experiences and reflect on what you have learned from this experience overall.

CRITERIA: Your project report will be graded mainly based on the following criteria: 1) theory summary 2) field work 3) theoretical connection 4) clarity. Grading rubrics are available for more detailed information.