



Goh Xiang Tian, Dance educator. IG: Gohxiangtian

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What keeps us dancing?

Looking into the causality of intrinsic motivation

Charmaine Tay, July 2020

In a society where pursuing further studies or a career in the arts is generally frowned upon by many, one might wonder what does it take for dancers to keep dancing despite living under constant societal pressure to leave the industry. In 1985, psychology researchers Deci & Ryan introduced the Self-determination theory (SDT), explaining the motivation behind choices people made, or in other words, why people do what they do⁵. Understanding this can give us an insight to our students' learning behaviours, stemmed from their levels of motivation.

The theory proposes regulations of behaviour that sit on a continuum of self-determination, consisting of gradations of motivated behaviour, classed in degrees of being controlled or autonomous.

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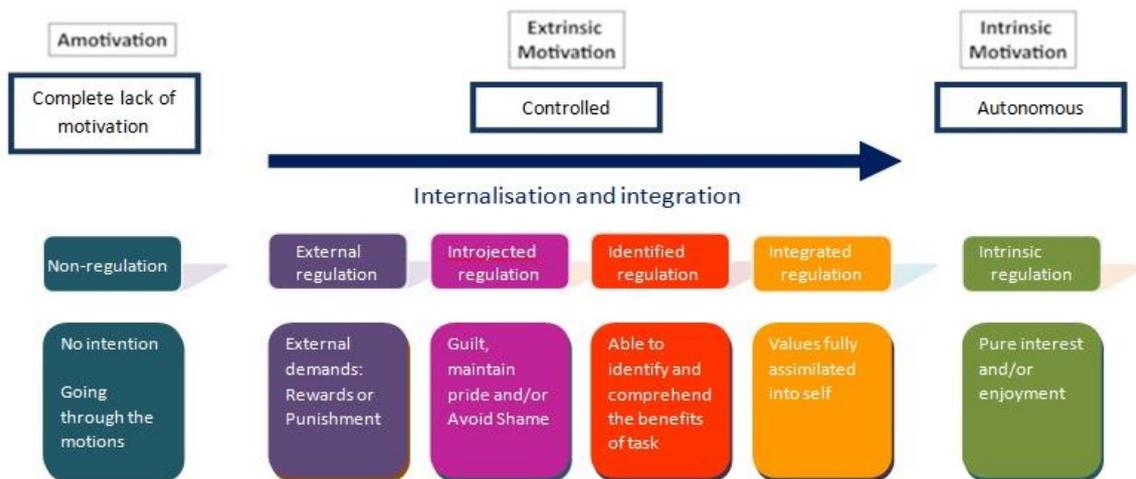


Table 1. Self-determination Theory Continuum

Amotivation: Amotivation exemplifies a total lack of intention to perform a task and a complete absence of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational regulations.

Extrinsic motivation: Extrinsic motivation is when an individual performs a task for reasons other than their own, and these are referred to as controlled sources of motivation. Externally regulated behaviours are driven by rewards or to avoid punishment. Poor maintenance of motivation is expected once the incentives are withdrawn in these externally regulated behaviours⁷. However, when students start to identify and internalise the benefits and values of certain behaviours, it becomes integrated to the students beliefs, therefore producing higher levels of motivation, albeit extrinsic.

Intrinsic motivation: Intrinsic motivation implies that an individual is performing a task out of interest and enjoyment. An autonomous source of motivation does not require external incentives to reinforce actions taken in the process of achieving the goal, as doing the task will already be rewarding enough⁹. Thus, intrinsic motivation is seen to represent the most self-determined form of motivation.

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Shifting between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

Interestingly, when external rewards are introduced for intrinsic activities, the rewards become a controlled regulation for the student to perform and would thus display less qualities of self-determined behaviour⁸. *(Think about the stickers you give out to your students at the end of class and how they would behave when you withdraw this external incentive!)*

Inversely, threats, evaluations and deadlines has also been seen to shift motivation from intrinsic to extrinsic⁶. Given that intrinsic motivation is the ideal form of motivation for producing self-determined behaviours, understanding what comprises intrinsic motivation can assist us in supporting or enhancing our students' level of motivation when we teach.

Research into intrinsic motivation has led to the postulation of the Basic Needs Theory (BNT)⁶.



Goh Xiang Tian with fellow dancers

Photo credits: Goh Xiang Tian, Instagram dancers

Basic Needs Theory

The BNT is a sub-theory that sits within the self-determination theory framework. It proposes the cultivation and nurturing of the 3 innate psychological needs¹⁵, namely,

- i. **Competence:** The belief in oneself to perform a task well

This stems from how good the dancer thinks they are at dancing and positive feedback from teachers²⁰. Research has shown that negative feedback had tendencies of undermining intrinsic motivation²¹. It is also important to note that feelings of competence only arises when individuals felt responsible for the success of their performance¹⁶. *i.e. winning a competition amongst other good dancers rather than winning a because you are the only competitor in the category.*



Goh Xiang Tian
Photo credits: VOUX

- ii. **Autonomy:** Having the freedom to follow their inner interest

When a dancer is free to pursue their interests or follow their inner choices, they feel a sense of self-initiation¹² and are more likely to be intrinsically motivated when they dance. *i.e. learning dance because they are interested rather than being forced to class by their parents.*

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iii. **Relatedness:** The feeling of being included and belonging

When an individual feel like they can relate to their dance mates, the dance context/environment and when they felt like their dance teachers were approachable and caring, it boosts the sense of intrinsic motivation¹³. This shows not only the importance of relatedness but also the merit of autonomy supportive teaching¹⁰.

How can we apply the Basic Needs Theory to dance teaching?

Autonomy supportive teaching takes into consideration the basic psychological needs of the student, increasing the intrinsic motivation when the needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness are well-satisfied. Dance students who have reported higher levels of need satisfaction showed positive emotions, cognition and behavioural consequences when learning¹⁴.

Autonomy supportive teaching is evident **when opportunities for choice is present, explanatory rationales are provided, acknowledgement of efforts and feelings are recognised and when teachers use more informational rather than pressuring language², while displaying patience when students are learning¹⁷.**

Here are some things we can start think about when conducting dance classes:

- Do I understand my student's goals for attending the class?³ How can I support that effectively? **(Autonomy)**
i.e. For self- improvement/ to fulfil school credits/ to please parents/ for leisure
- Does what I say build or diminish my student's competence?¹⁸ **(Competence)**
i.e. Constructive feedback rather than negative criticism
- Do I make my students feel like they can easily approach me when they have a question?¹¹
(Relatedness)
- Do I provide my students with rationales when I give instructions?¹⁹ **(Autonomy and relatedness)**
i.e. Explaining to the students that dance combinations have to be repeated multiple times in order for muscle memory to occur
- Do I recognise the effort and progression of the student?¹ **(Competence)**
- Am I patient with my students when they are learning?⁴ **(Autonomy and Relatedness)**



Goh Xiang Tian
Photo credits: Back alley Creations

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Taking into consideration the basic psychological needs satisfaction of our students, our language and actions in the studio can facilitate in the enhancement of intrinsic motivation levels amongst young dancers in Singapore. This is especially so when extrinsic sources of motivation can be limited in our society. Hence, preservation of an autonomous source of motivation will help students to return back to dance consistently.



Currently a dance science and anatomy lecturer at the dance department, as well as a body conditioning, advance ballet and jazz at the musical theatre department of LASALLE College of The Arts. Charmaine also coaches competition group and elite programme at City Ballet Academy for local and international dance competitions. Charmaine is the first Singaporean to graduate with a MSc in Dance Science from Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in 2013.

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