# GENERATING MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY OF LITERATURE AT UNIVERSITY

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*Abstract: In our digital and media dominated world, characterized by immediate short-term satisfaction and rapid changes of scene, students' interest in reading literature has for decades been so low that it is almost derisory to expect them to study literature thoroughly by reading extensively, by concentrating over a period of time and by exerting their reserves of patience. This has consequently challenged the approach to literature teaching at university level. Our study is meant to analyse what motivation is insofar as advanced learners of English are concerned and what may generate motivation for the study of literature.*

*Keywords: amotivation, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, teaching literature*

## Premises

There is a generalized tendency among children and teenagers growing up in this day and age to turn away from books and never read outside school. According to a 2012 study of the National Literacy Trust, in Great Britain less than 30% of children read in their daily leisure time, down from 38.1% who read outside school in 2005 (already a very low percentage). What was initially believed to be a phenomenon of reading migration from print to digital, has in fact turned out to be an increasing trend to consume information in ways that do not involve reading or writing text in any way, and to embrace instead video/image-based communication. Moreover, this worrying dynamic is connected with peer pressure. Because reading is viewed as something particular to middle-aged, middle-class people, one would be rejected by his peer group if one displayed behaviour which is not part of youth culture. This trend among British young people has been without a doubt a significant social and cultural tendency specific to the entire young generation of Europe, given the fairly equal living conditions and distraction factors.

This decline in actual reading needs to be addressed by people in authority (i.e. government representatives in charge of education), as there is a close relationship between literacy – reading and writing – and social outcomes, such as employment and housing scopes, social and moral responsibility, political beliefs and actions, etc. Secondly, but more immediately, the decline needs to be addressed by educators, especially the literature teachers during literature lessons, as they are in close proximity to the young generation and the most interested in their students' willingness to read extensively. The serious study of English literature, especially of the great tradition, is the chief weapon against the corruption and vulgarity of mass urban industrial society.

Under these circumstances, what can a literature teacher do in order to determine their advanced students to leave the trend and build an identity in the 21st century with the help of literature books and the corresponding activity of reading? The answer is complicated because it involves the discussion of a whole approach to the teaching of literature tailored to a digital



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and media-orientated generation. However, one major principle in the approach is to create classes that foster motivation for reading, understanding, interpreting and embracing literature. Now that we have identified why most students of present times lack motivation for reading in general, and reading literature in particular, it is necessary to understand the concept of motivation and how to generate it in practice.

**Motivation**

Motivation is a natural tendency and a critical element in intellectual, social, and physical development. Psychologists define motivation as the process that initiates, guides and maintains goal-oriented behaviors. It can be considered the driving force behind an action. Motivation is of two kinds: extrinsic (external) and intrinsic (internal). Extrinsic motivation implies the performance of an activity in order to attain an outcome and it comes from outside of the individual, whereas intrinsic motivation is the type driven by an interest or enjoyment in the task itself, and exists within the individual rather than relying on external pressures or desires for reward (Ryan & Deci "Intrinsic and extrinsic..." 56). It is a classical distinction to conceptualize motivation as either *intrinsic* or *extrinsic,* but the concepts are used together as two ideal types that define a continuum.

**Generating Motivation in the Specialized Setting of Education**

There are many different approaches to *motivation training* and this is of particular interest to educational psychologists because of the crucial role it plays in student learning. Motivation in education can have several effects on how students work and behave in relation to a subject matter Motivated students channel their increased efforts and energy to attain learning goals, innitiate activities, show persistence, reinforce results and steadily improve performance.

In education too, the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are less likely to be used as distinct categories, but instead as two ideal elements of a continuum. Extrinsic motivation is inherent to the process of education, with marks or grades for rewarding desired behaviors or punishing misbehavior. This type of motivation comes into play when students are compelled to learn and their knowledge is immediately tested. It has been proved that it has greater effectiveness when there is progressive focus on positive motivation over punishment, as anxiety interferes with performance of complex tasks (Moen & Doyle 18). The most effective in education, however, has proved the students' intrinsic motivation, which occurs when learning either brings them pleasure or they feel that what they are learning is significant (Wigfield 305), and consequently, are interested in mastering the subject matter, not just in obtaining good grades/marks.

**An English Literature Teacher's Motivational Strategy**

In view of the above observations regarding the importance of intrinsic motivation, and knowing that in contemporary schools, as a rule, students are not naturally internally motivated they need the kind of motivation which is generated by the environmental conditions that a teacher creates. Therefore, there are two courses of actions a literature teacher should take.



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On the one hand, it is imperative that they start by helping their students understand that literature reading and studying benefit their mind in many ways and, as a result, they are of great importance in their personality development and betterment. In this respect, with every text they study, students must be advised to pause to think about what they read in order to realize that reading literature:

- offers them access to life's most important lessons and knowledge about humanity, e.g. beliefs, philosophies, interactions with the world at large, which are subtly, adequately and effectively expressed in art.
- opens their minds to ambiguities of meaning and endless possibilities of expression. Languages in general have very high levels of complexity and ambiguity and they had better learn to master and revel in them. Events also have their own nuances of significance. For that reason, literature analysis can teach them appreciation for nuance and make them better at interpreting and predicting events.
- allows them to experience first-hand and from the inside out the cultures and beliefs of others, unlike history, anthropology and religious studies which provide a method of learning about other cultures and beliefs from the outside looking in. Culture awareness and understanding mean better and more meaningful communication with people from other communities.
- enhances their appreciation of history's complexity, which in turn expands their appreciation of present political complexities and better equips them to predict and prepare for the future. History and literature are inextricably entertwined. Literature shows them that history is not just names and dates and wars and courses of events. History is about people who were products of their time with their own intricately-woven value systems.
- encourages them to question "accepted" knowledge. The more ideas they expose themselves to, the more capable they become to root themselves out and question the paradigms they learn as children in the contexts they were brought up.
- serves as a mirror and an instrument of self-examination necessary in order to put their life experience into proper perspective. They will discover their own personality traits, doubts, feelings, habits or assumptions depicted in literature and understand they are not alone or abnormal. Everything is a matter of human nature.
- exposes them to a variety of attitudes and personalities, bigotries, biases, affiliations, assumptions etc. and will understand that each person is unique. They may still disagree with the others' beliefs, but they get one step closer to understanding them.
- challenges their simplistic ethical conceptions and sometimes their outright condemnation of the others' actions. Ethical exploration is a clear sign of maturity.
- teaches them to trust their own point of view and articulate it. Students are expected to provide evidence for their interpretation of a novel, play or poem. Building a solid case in support of their opinion regarding literary texts is a useful exercise in the process of building self-confidence in their own interpretation of real life.

Reading literature in a foreign language has an extra set of benefits students should be made aware of. Thus, the study of English and American literature in its original language hones the foreign students' English language skills, enlarges their lexical and grammatical knowledge, and teaches them new and valuable techniques for written and oral communication in English. First, as literature is written in a variety of styles on a diversity of



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topics and makes use of an extensive vocabulary and innumerable language structures, students **enrich their vocabularies and augment their range of choices of language structures.** Dealing with words and structures in context, in real use, will make retention easier. Secondly, by reading extensively and analyzing literary texts closely, students **improve their reading comprehension.** Thirdly, if learning to speak is done by listening and imitating; learning to write will similarly be fostered by reading and imitating; thus the reading of literature will **develop students' writing skills.** Finally, by immersing themselves in literature, with its infinite communication patterns, students are exposed to many ways of communication, which helps them **learn a variety of communication techniques**.

On the other hand, in order to internally motivate students to initiate specific the behaviour of reading and analysing literature, a literature teacher should devise literature courses based on their students' needs, characteristics of age and intellectual ability. Thus, the approach to the teaching of literature has to combat students amotivation (i.e. lack of necessary competence and the failure to value the activity and its outcomes) by means of incorporating:

- adequate **curriculum coverage**. Literature in English is characterized by spectacular abundance. Because of that, instead of aiming for comprehensive coverage of an author/period, choices of literary texts should be directly connected with what motivates students (texts they like and need to read in order to establish a basis for further learning) and should be adjusted to a realistic intellectual workload.
- clearly defined and internalised **objectives** turned into drives to reach an end state, the end state being a reward in itself. Merely listing objectives on the syllabus is not enough – according to Ramsden "the reason for using aims and objectives […] [is] to make our intentions for student learning explicit. There ought to be a definite educational justification for every activity, every piece of content, that is present in a course of study" (apud Showalter 25). Moreover, McKeachie underlines that the main aim of a course should not be to cover a certain sets of topics, but rather to facilitate student learning and thinking (idem 24). In other words, teaching objectives should be in the form of actions, competencies (what students will be able to do), and transferable skills, not in the form of information (authors' background, text description and explanation, literary theory etc). What is more, as Brantlinger explains, these objectives are to describe "a set of critical reading skills to apply to the world of language, literature and culture around them throughout their lifetime" (idem 26).
- **teaching methods** which should essentially encourage participation. These methods are to cater for what the motivational theory of self-determination calls the three vital universal psychological needs (Maslow, 1943; Ryan & Deci, "Self-determination"): the need for **competence** (methods are to make students realize they have the skills to be effective agents in reaching their desired goals), **autonomy** (methods are to show students that their educational results are under their own control), and **psychological relatedness** (methods are to require cooperative collaboration among peers). If these needs are satisfied by means of the teaching methods chosen, then intrinsic motivation is undoubtedly cultivated.



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## Conclusion

Understanding and incorporating motivational research into the activity of teaching English literature has the potential to address and work out the young generation's rejection of extensive reading and their indifference to literature, conceptualized as amotivation. It is essential that throughout the teaching process literature be presented in the broad context of students' lives and less in an abstract manner. The students' intrinsic motivation is to be generated and strengthened by constant references to the numerous latent goals of teaching literature, so that they see literature as **the arena** in which the most fundamental queries of human existence are highlighted and offered an intensive scrutiny, and as **the means** to hone their thought processes. Furthermore, the journey toward the development of intrinsic motivation for reading and studying literature should also be fostered through courses which are based on internalized teaching objectives directed at the development of a set of transferable skills and which embody elements supporting the fulfilment of their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, through the necessary conditions and methods that inspire genuine student interest in activities. With the right strategy, a teacher of literature can succeed in entertaining and engaging their students, in motivating them to read, get involved and develop, which in the long run will pay obvious dividends throughout their personal lives and careers.

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