What Motivates a Lifelong Learner?

Sherry R. Crow

School of Library and Information Management,
Emporia State University, USA

Lifelong learners are people who display an attitude and ability that prompts them to learn across their life spans. Even in the testing environment of United States schools today, a goal of library media specialists is to help children become lifelong learners. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 1985) provides a framework for examining a positive disposition toward learning, or the motivation to learn: the key attribute of a lifelong learner. Additional areas explored include contributions of school library research toward an understanding of student motivation, suggestions for further areas of study, and implications for school libraries.

Introduction

On April 28-29, 2005, the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries (CISSL, 2005a) conducted a symposium in New York City entitled “The Impact of School Libraries on Student Learning.” In the closing sessions of this worldwide assembly of school researchers, one of the key themes determined for future research was lifelong learning (CISSL, 2005b). School librarians in the United States have also been given the commission of helping students become lifelong learners (American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1998). Yet the goal of fostering lifelong learners seems antithetical to the current emphasis in US schools on high-stakes testing, which has increased dramatically in recent years (Clarke, Madaus, Horn, & Ramos, 2000). A systematic review of current research studies (Harlen & Crick, 2003) reveals the negative effect this testing environment has on students’ motivation, a key attribute of lifelong learners (Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003). Although it is difficult enough to address the seemingly dichotomous goals of fostering lifelong learners and helping schools increase test scores, school librarians also have the task of understanding what exactly lifelong learner means. No clear definition of the term in the field of library science has yet been developed. In this article, I offer a definition of the term lifelong learner, describe the attributes of lifelong learners, examine the key attribute of motivation in school library literature, and examine motivation in the light of Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 1985). By making strides to understand the attributes of a lifelong learner, then allowing that understanding to guide the implementation of change, we as librarians can better affect students for life, even in the testing environment of US schools today.
Definition of Lifelong Learner versus Lifelong Learning
Library media specialists generally use the term lifelong learner to mean a
person who practices using skills and attitudes to be a learner for life. These
skills generally mean information literacy skills or the ability to “recognize
when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and
use effectively the needed information” (American Library Association,
1989, p. 1). Information Power, the guidebook used by many US library
media specialists (AASL & AECT, 1998) states that students who are “active
and creative locators, evaluators, and users of information to solve prob-
lems and to satisfy their own curiosity” (p. 2) have the ability to become
lifelong learners. The term lifelong learning, however, usually refers to “post-
compulsory learning episodes,” often work-related (Gorard & Selwyn,
2005, p. 1194) and beyond the years of formal schooling. To those in the
adult-education arena, lifelong learning has been defined as “[beginning]
when compulsory education ends, when students are 16, and sometimes at
the end of later full-time education such as graduation at a university”
(Hargreaves, 2004, p. 1). The two terms are not entirely separate, however.
Indeed, educators have begun to stress that for people to engage in lifelong
learning, they must early in life develop the skills and attitudes necessary to
continue further training or schooling. Also, part of the mission of early
compulsory school must be to prepare people to continue learning beyond
their school years. “Whether people are motivated to learn beyond the end
of compulsory education, and have the capacity to do so, depends very
much on what happens to them during school years” (p. 1). Lifelong learners
are the focus of this article and are defined as people who display an atti-
dude and ability that prompts them to learn across their life spans.

Attributes of a Lifelong Learner
Although the attributes of a lifelong learner have not been fully researched,
Dunlap and Grabinger (2003), researchers in the field of adult education,
describe the lifelong learner as having the “capacity for self-direction, meta-
cognitive awareness, and disposition toward lifelong learning” (p. 7).
McCombs (1991), in clarifying the relationship between motivation and the
lifelong learner, states, “the motivated person is a lifelong learner, and the
lifelong learner is a motivated person” (p. 117). These, as well as nearly all
descriptions of a lifelong learner, include the importance of the learner’s
motivation. It is considered the key attribute, for the other attributes are
“insufficient if learners are not disposed to engage in lifelong learning”
(Dunlap & Grabinger, p. 9). Conventional wisdom would dictate that
although they possess the skills needed to learn, people would not use
those skills if they were not motivated to do so. Motivation, then, is the key
to lifelong learning.
The Lifelong Learner and Motivation

The key attribute of a lifelong learner is motivation, but what kind of motivation does a lifelong learner possess? The daily grind of life finds everyone, lifelong learners included, engaged in activities that are required of them such as cooking, cleaning, working, and so forth, all activities that for most people are extrinsically motivated. Certainly people have intrinsic motivation (caused by inherent satisfaction) when engaging in activities such as solving puzzles, doing art, or playing games for enjoyment. Lifelong learners read and learn about subjects that simply interest them. "When a person engages in an intrinsically motivated activity he becomes fully absorbed in the activity and committed to it. Further, he can tolerate substantial fatigue and suppress primary drives such as hunger" (Koch, 1956). A lifelong learner by definition has an internal disposition toward learning and is, therefore, intrinsically motivated to learn.

Do children naturally possess the intrinsic motivation to learn? Apparently, yes. "Developmentalists acknowledge that from the time of birth, children, in their healthiest states, are active, inquisitive, curious, and playful, even in the absence of specific rewards (e.g., Harter, 1978)" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). Unfortunately, it seems that this early predisposition toward intrinsic motivation wanes significantly during the elementary and middle-school years (Harter, 1981; Harter & Jackson, 1992; Newman, 1990; Tzuriel, 1989). Recently, Lepper, Corpus, and Iyengar (2005) confirmed these results, finding that intrinsic motivation of students declined steadily from grade 3 (age 8) to grade 8 (age 13).

The decline in intrinsic motivation, however, although an established reality in the research, is not a simple issue and is dependent on several variables. For example, Gottfried, Fleming, and Gottfried (2001), in their recent study of academic intrinsic motivation (motivation specifically focused on school learning), found that although students' intrinsic motivation for learning mathematics, science, and reading declined over the years, this trend was not shown for social studies. Another case in point is the work by Lepper et al. (2005), which found differences in intrinsic motivation between Asian American and European American children, although these differences were not striking. Still, regardless of the variables, the consistent conclusion traversing studies is that "motivation and attitudes tend to decline across the years" (Gottfried et al., 2001, p. 10).

Although we may be relatively certain that intrinsic motivation in fact declines throughout childhood, we cannot as easily identify the cause(s) of this decline. One theory holds that extrinsic motivation somehow degrades intrinsic motivation. A meta-analysis of 128 studies by Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999) concluded that the use of extrinsic, "tangible rewards had a significant negative effect on intrinsic motivation for interesting tasks, and this effect showed up with participants ranging from preschool to college" (p. 653). A second idea, espoused by Lepper et al. (2005), is that school itself stifles children's intrinsic motivation to learn because "positive academic
beliefs and behaviors gradually erode as children progress through the school system” (p. 192). In other words, students’ intrinsic motivation may not be diminished by or replaced by extrinsic motivational factors such as grades, rewards, and avoidance of punishment. Rather, students may just be becoming more and more demotivated (both intrinsically and extrinsically) in school throughout the elementary years.

The research on student motivation has been primarily about motivation in school, not students’ overall motivation to learn (Harter, 1978; Lepper et al, 2005). Although the presumption is that schooling is the pivotal factor, this may not be so. Studies of the participation of British adults in formal learning episodes, although not focused on the lifelong learners’ attributes, do identify social determinants of the participants (Gorard, Rees, & Fevre, 1999; Gorard & Selwyn, 2005). The studies point to “parents’ social class and educational experience [as] perhaps the most important determinants of participation in lifelong learning” (p. 1212), also indicating that if parents are participants in lifelong learning, their children are also more likely to participate (Gorard et al.). Rathunde (2001) also found a strong family influence on the development of adolescents’ undivided interests. Undivided interest, according to Rathunde, refers to the “combination of passive-immediate (i.e., playful) and active-voluntary (i.e., worklike) modes functioning in concert” (p. 160). Balance between the two modes is essential for providing the intrinsic motivation for learning or the capacity for flow, as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Although further analysis is needed, one reason for the importance of family influence on the lifelong learner could be the creation of “learner identities” in the family (Rees, Fevre, Furlong, & Gorard, 1997).

Although most children experience a decline in intrinsic motivation, others maintain it and go on to become lifelong learners. Are the children who remain intrinsically motivated somehow able to overcome the influences of an extrinsically oriented school system and society, or have certain educational and societal experiences moved them from extrinsic to intrinsic motivational behaviors? A look at student motivation in the light of the SDT may lead to the answer.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is an approach to human motivation that examines why a person chooses to act. The theory categorizes motivation into three basic types spread across a spectrum: amotivation, or non-action; extrinsic motivation, or action caused by an external force; and intrinsic motivation, or action caused by the inherent satisfaction of the action itself. Social context is also considered in SDT as a determinant of a person’s motivational locus (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
Types of Motivation
The two extremes on the self-determination continuum are amotivation and intrinsic motivation. In amotivation, people either do not act at all or act without intent. Non-action is caused by a lack of value for the activity, a perceived lack of competence to complete the activity, or lack of confidence that the outcome of the activity is desirable. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, stems from the self and causes actions that are stimulated by interest, enjoyment, curiosity, or pleasure (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The remaining category, extrinsic motivation, as defined in SDT, is divided into four types based on the degree of a person’s autonomy in determining an action. The first type, external regulation, is action caused by an external demand or reward. The second type, introjected regulation, is action caused by an avoidance of guilt or anxiety. People exercise introjected regulation in order to maintain their feelings of self-worth. The third type, identified regulation, is action caused by identifying one’s values with those of another person. The fourth type, integrated regulation, occurs when action based on the values of another person are fully assimilated into the self. This type of extrinsic motivation is the most autonomous, but is still considered extrinsic because the activity is not done for its inherent satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000, see Figure 1).

Social Context
In addition to the categories of motivation outlined by SDT, the social context of motivation is explored. People have psychological needs for competence (Harter, 1978; White, 1963), for relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reis, 1994), and for autonomy (deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975). People are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, or at least have a more autonomous level of extrinsic motivation, if they know they can do the task (sense of

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*Figure 1. The self-determination continuum.*

competence); have a positive relationship with a support person with whom they feel secure such as a mentor (relatedness); and feel that they have a choice in performing the task (autonomy, Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In the framework of motivational levels and social context, then, SDT theorizes that people who are not intrinsically motivated to do a task can, with time and a healthy social context, begin to assimilate behaviors to themselves so as to become more autonomous and eventually develop intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). "There is some suggestion in the literature that internalized reasons do gradually supplant extrinsic reasons for engaging in disliked behaviors [such as doing homework] (Chandler & Connell, 1987) and that specific teaching practices do facilitate internalization (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994)" (Lepper et al., 2005, p. 193).

By examining the motivational factors and the societal context in the lives of students who exhibit the attributes of lifelong learners (self-direction, metacognitive awareness, and a disposition toward lifelong learning, Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003), we may be able to discover the experiences, both in and outside school, that either help children maintain their intrinsic motivation toward learning or help them internalize extrinsic motivation.

The Motivation of the Lifelong Learner in School Library Research

As in other fields, the use of the expression lifelong learner varies in school library literature, ranging in meaning from an emotionally appealing goal (St. Lifer, 2003) to the broad description given in Information Power (AASL & AECT, 1998) that mirrors the first three information literacy standards. School library research on the motivation of the lifelong learner focuses on the student during the information-searching process, on the library media specialist's leadership role in implementing Accelerated Reader (AR), and on the library media specialists' (LMS) use of motivational strategies during instruction.

Kuhlthau (2004), in her extensive research into the information search process, acknowledges the effects of uncertainty on the intrinsic motivation of the seeker. She theorizes that with the mediation of library media specialists and teachers, students can overcome the natural anxiety caused by the searching process and develop a personal interest in the topic being explored. This interest is the foundation of an intrinsic motivation to learn about the topic. Burdick (1996) explored differences by gender in the information-seeking experiences of high school students. In her study, she developed an Information Search Styles Matrix based on the focus and involvement of the learner. The more focused and involved the learner was, the more successful was his or her project. Success was defined by the learning that took place, the level of involvement, and the sense of competence experienced by the student.
Several studies have examined the motivation of students while using technology during the search process. Broch (2000) acknowledges motivational issues in students’ use of the Internet and the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC), particularly about the frustration of sorting through the abundance of materials available. “In this atmosphere of ‘abundance’ it seems particularly challenging for a library media specialist (LMS) or teacher to convince an unmotivated student to distinguish between an adequate and a better-than-adequate source” (p. 3). Studies on the effectiveness of various OPACs with children include one by Solomon (1993), who studied the information retrieval behavior of 679 students during the 1989-1990 school year at Bonnie Brae Elementary School in Fairfax, Virginia. His study involved tracking the children’s natural use of the OPAC, observing their successes and failures, and monitoring their frustration levels. Borgman, Hirsh, Walter, and Gallagher (1995) also studied the browsing and keyword-searching behavior of children using the Science Library Catalog in the Pasadena Unified School District. Their research was fueled by the belief that “if children were to pursue discovery-based learning effectively, they needed the skills to search for information that would expand their knowledge beyond the specific classroom lessons” (p. 663). Reducing frustration by providing well-designed OPACs removes one roadblock to students’ intrinsic motivation.

Many studies have examined the motivational aspects of Accelerated Reader (AR, Krashen, 2003; Mcloyd, 1979; Robbins & Thompson, 1991). Everhart (2005), however, studied the relationship between the implementation of AR and students’ motivation, and then applied her findings to the leadership role LMSs can play in implementing AR. Three schools in Scotland and England, all with differing levels of AR implementation, were the focus of Everhart’s study. The level of implementation was determined by such factors as “intensity of the monitoring of student reading progress and intervention when needed; volume of AR reports; range of book selection” (p. 5), and so forth. Everhart found that “motivational style interacts with gender in relation to the competitive and social aspects of the AR program” (p. 12), that the level of implementation in the schools did not correlate with the extent of students’ reading, and that the management aspects of the program were not being effectively utilized. Based on these findings, she recommends that library media specialists who already work in AR schools can be instrumental in its implementation, “particularly in the area of book selection, reading guidance and motivation, organization of materials, and teacher professional development” (p. 12). She recommends that LMSs in non-AR schools use her study to support “collaborat[ing] with teachers to set individual reading goals for students and develop a responsive collection” (p. 13) outside the AR program.

Small (1999) focused on the LMSs’ use of motivational strategies in her study of library skills instruction and the effects on the on- and off-task behaviors of students. She observed nine exemplary LMSs teaching library
skills to students in grades 3 to 8, then categorized the motivational strategies using the ARCS Model of Motivational Design. ARCS is founded on expectancy-value theory (Small, 1998) and consists of four components of instructional motivation: Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction (Keller, 1987). Small found that the LMSs used a significant number of motivational strategies during lessons (an average of 24 strategies per 30-minute lesson) and that middle-school librarians used more motivational strategies than elementary school librarians. She also reported that only 2% of the motivational strategies used were considered to stimulate behavior based on intrinsic motivation. It is interesting to note that the ARCS Model analyzes the strategies of the teacher, whereas SDT looks at the motivation of the student. Small’s study examined the on- and off-task behaviors of students during instruction, but it would also have been enlightening to identify and classify students’ thoughts and feelings using the SDT Continuum to identify the strategies that caused each type of motivational response.

The study of students’ motivation during the information-seeking process—whether it be researching the cognitive process of seeking or tracking the frustration level exhibited during OPAC and Internet searching behavior—looks at a small but important part of the picture of the lifelong learner. Although the study of the motivational effect of AR and librarians’ motivational strategies during library skills instruction is important in helping the library media specialist to understand how better to implement programs and design lessons, it does not provide an entire portrayal of what motivates a lifelong learner. The experiences that motivate an emergent lifelong learner (a child aged 5-13 who exhibits the attributes of a lifelong learner) go beyond the research projects and reading programs conducted in school, indeed beyond the school walls.

Areas for Further Study and Implications for School Libraries

Areas for Further Study

The definition of lifelong learner as described in this article—people who display an attitude and ability that prompts them to learn across their life spans—could be made more robust by conducting a Delphi study. Leaders in elementary and secondary (K-12) education, as well as in adult education and library science, could be surveyed so that a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary definition could be developed and contrasted with the experience and perceptions of children identified as emergent lifelong learners.

One of the difficulties of serving children is understanding what will affect them for life. Longitudinal studies on the development of adolescents’ undivided interests (Rathunde, 2001); about the changes in academic intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Bronstein, Ginsburg, & Herrera, 2005; Gottfried et al., 2001; Otis, Grouzet, & Pelletier, 2005); and about the changes in elementary students’ self-perceptions of competence and intrinsic motivation (Bouffard, Marcoux, Vezeau, & Bordeleau, 2003) have all
helped build understanding of how children’s motivational loci develop. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted of children who exhibit the attributes of lifelong learners to see if they fulfill the promise of their early grades in their adult lives. Another interesting study would be to authenticate the attributes of identified adult lifelong learners (as described by Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003) and to investigate their motivational types.

In order to discover the motivations of the emergent lifelong learner, more study is needed of the personal experiences of the learners themselves. “It seems strange that researchers on motivation have generally sought to improve student motivation without asking students what ‘make sense to them’” (Nicholls, 1992, p. 282). Using the framework of the SDT (Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), the types of motivational experiences of emergent lifelong learners could be examined, along with the social contexts that influence them. It is critical to explore the experiences and social contexts both in and out of school if we are to understand fully the entire motivational picture of the emergent lifelong learner, and to explore them through a sound, psychologically based lens such as SDT. “Library researchers cannot be expected to restructure their approaches without turning outward and ‘joining the other professions that have teamed up with psychologists to enhance their own understanding of their own profession in new and vigorous ways’” (Fine, 1984, p. 458). It is the intent of this author to pursue such an undertaking.

**Implications for School Libraries**

Although it is presumptuous to assume that implementation of change in school libraries will fully counter the effects of home, society, and school environments on fostering lifelong learners, the implications of understanding the motivational experiences of the emergent lifelong learner on practice in school libraries could be significant. The implications could include defining the basis of our mission, directing our services, and structuring our environments. Our widely accepted mission to help students become lifelong learners could then be based on a clearer description of what a lifelong learner is, or at least on beginning to understand a definition. The services we provide could reflect those activities that either foster intrinsic motivation or help students integrate extrinsic motivational behaviors. Classroom techniques for motivating children are becoming increasingly extrinsic in the light of the pressure put on teachers in the US to emphasize the type of instruction that will raise test scores, and not necessarily foster motivation to learn. By collaborating with teachers to design projects that will meet classroom goals, teach information literacy skills, and motivate students, library media specialists can help students “begin transferring [those skills] into fulfilling their personal needs for information” (Crow, 2005, p. 24), making learning more personal and thus more intrinsically motivated. Collaboration with teachers in instructional design is particularly important at the elementary level because the research shows a
significant decline in intrinsic motivation between grades 3 and 8 (Harter, 1981; Harter & Jackson, 1992; Lepper et al., 2005; Newman, 1990; Tzuriel, 1989). However, it is also important for library media specialists at the secondary level as intrinsic motivation continues to drop during adolescence (Gottfried et al., 2001; Otis et al., 2005). Although it should be acknowledged that collaboration with every teacher is more difficult in high schools due to sheer numbers of teachers, library media specialists at all levels can influence instruction by participating on subject teams and in curriculum mapping. With regard to library environments, a better understanding of the emergent lifelong learner could help library media specialists enhance and promote stimulation of thought and interest. In other words, we could base what we do on sound theoretical principles of human motivation.

Conclusion

US schools today are under tremendous pressure to produce high scores on standardized tests. The teaching strategies that often result from this pressure, although sometimes motivating students to do well on tests, often do not motivate them to learn. This paradox arises because “although reforms that stress standards, accountability, and sanctions may (or may not) succeed in raising test scores, they are also likely to sabotage a key goal of education—creating a flexible population of life-long learners who can adjust to the changing needs of society and the workplace” (Sheldon & Biddle, 1998, p. 164). In the language of SDT, the climate in schools created by a testing approach encourages teaching strategies that emphasize external regulation and a controlling social context. “In other words, reliance on tangible rewards or punishments in the classroom not only depresses important forms of learning but also thwarts the goal of creating self-motivated, lifelong learners” (p. 170).

The accountability movement in US schools is probably here to stay. However, by studying and understanding what motivates students to learn and continue to learn outside school, school librarians can work with teachers and schools to design instruction and create an atmosphere that will go beyond standards and test scores to build on identified and intrinsic interests. By example, we can show teaching strategies and conceive learning environments that will help students not only to learn in school and increase test scores, but to become people who display an attitude and ability that prompts them to learn across their life spans.

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Author Note

Sherry R. Crow is the Library Technology Educator at Midland International Elementary School in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Currently an adjunct professor for Emporia State University and the University of Colorado at Denver, she teaches courses in children's and adolescents' literature and information literacy. Sherry has worked in several school libraries and public libraries in children's, young adult, reference, and media services departments. Her most recent publication is Information Literacy: A Guide for the Library Media Specialist (Pieces of Learning, 2005). She was named Colorado Librarian of the Year in 2004 and is currently pursuing a doctorate in library and information management at Emporia State University.