

Overcoming the challenge of academic achievement: the influence of motivational and  
emotional factors on academic performance.

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## **Introduction**

In Canada, most provinces require that children participate in formal education from age 6-16, for others, mandatory schooling may start at age 5 or extend to age 18 (The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada [CMEC], 2008). This may be supplemented with pre-school education, available to children starting at age 4 or younger; and post-secondary education, which is available to high-school graduates, and can continue for as long as they are motivated to pursue it (CMEC, 2008). Such institutions implement tests to evaluate and monitor performance, and can determine students' eligibility for advancement (to the next grade, or the post-secondary institution of their choice) and reward (scholarships, opportunities). For many students, the transition from high school to university represents a great struggle; not only are they faced with greater demands and responsibilities, but their performance during the next few years will have a significant impact on the rest of their life. It is possible, however, for you to take control of your learning by taking advantage of a few basic motivational theories and principles. This self-regulated learning becomes less effortful over time, and facilitates academic achievement, especially in post-secondary institutions.

Self-regulated learning can be broken down into three basic elements: self-observation/monitoring, self-evaluation/judgement, and self-reaction/incentive (Franken, p. 372). Using these steps, you can bring your behaviors under cognitive control, thus design them to bring about the achievement of a goal (Franken, p. 372). The ability to set goals is arguably as important as knowing how to achieve them. In order to maintain motivation, you must set both proximal and distal goals, which are challenging, but attainable (Franken, p. 373-374).

An important consideration is test anxiety, which can hinder the achievement of even the most prepared, goal-directed students. It is possible to reduce your susceptibility to test anxiety by engaging your prefrontal cortex, adopting a “challenge”-biased appraisal, and learning problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies (Franken, p. 138).

The transition between high school and university is an important time to learn self-regulation and environmental control, not only due to the increased demands, but because the novelty of the situation presents an opportunity to develop or alter schemas and scripts. By selectively developing behaviors, attitudes, and skills which facilitate academic achievement, it is possible to meet goals which you never before thought possible.

## **Discussion**

### **Self-Regulated Learning**

Much research on the subject of academic achievement focuses on self-regulated learning as a means (Winnie & Nesbit, 2010). Self-regulation is a cognitive process, requiring that the learner attend to their behaviors (and/or thoughts) and the motives which underlie them, determine whether they are conducive to success, and adjust them accordingly. This is the process by which goal-directed behavior is achieved.

The first step in learning to self-regulate is observing your behavior (self-monitoring); take note of what you do in academic situations (e.g. how you behave during class, while studying, while writing an assignment; how you allocate your time). Only once you are aware of your behaviors can you reflect on, and change, them (Franken, p. 372). For instance, you might notice that instead of writing an assignment, you are cooking yourself a second dinner.

The next step is to reflect on your behaviors (self-evaluation); determine whether they are congruent with your goals, that is, if they will effectually increase your chances of succeeding academically (Franken, p. 372). Making yourself dinner a second time will not help you finish your paper, in fact, it is hindering your progress (you may even realize that you are only cooking to avoid writing your paper, a classic procrastination technique). You may then decide to change your behavior to correspond with your goals (Franken, p. 372). Instead of cooking, you may force yourself to sit down and get to work on the assignment.

The final step involves affective reactions to behavioral outcomes (self-reaction); you will experience pleasure or satisfaction if you perceive a success, and dissatisfaction, sadness, or negative mood if you perceive a failure (07/11/ 2011, s. 29; Franken, p. 372;). This provides a feedback system which will strengthen or weaken the tendency to execute a behavior in the pursuit of a certain goal; with behaviors that lead to success being reinforced, and those leading to failure being weakened (Franken, p. 18, 372). If you finish writing a good deal of your paper, you will likely feel satisfied, and be motivated to continue working on it to experience the positive affect again.

Initially, self-monitoring and self-evaluation are effortful processes, requiring the ongoing motivation provided by goals. Over time, however, they become increasingly automatic (Franken, p. 47, 48). Initially, I had to stop and think about what I was doing and why, and whether I should be doing it at all (that is, when I remembered to). After a week or so, I was remembering more and more often, and eventually, I began to do it automatically; soon after, I was monitoring and evaluating my thoughts even before they became behaviors (e.g. while working on a paper, I may have the following internal dialogue: “maybe I should eat something –

am I hungry? – no – am I just trying to get out of working on my paper? – yes – will I be happy with myself later on about that? – no – then I should keep working on my paper”). I have found this self-regulation especially effective in dealing with the obstacle of procrastination, which will be addressed again in the context of goal-setting.

### **Setting Goals to Maintain Motivation**

Goals are intrinsically motivating; they direct and organize behavior, arouse effort, and give rise to persistence (Franken, p. 373; Winne & Nesbit, 2010). According to cognitive motivation theory, goals also motivate strategy development, that is, the development, evaluation, and selection of various routes to achieve a goal (Franken, p. 373).

In order for a goal to be motivating, it must be both challenging and attainable (Franken, p. 374). If a goal is too easy, there will be no perceived success in achieving it, thus no incentive to do so; likewise, if a goal is perceived to be unattainable, you will not want to pursue it in fear of failing and experiencing negative affect. This is consistent with the expectancy-value theory of motivation, which states that people have expectations about behavioral outcomes (and their likelihood), to which they can assign a value; they then select the behavior which is most likely to lead to the greatest positive affect (Franken, p. 23). In the former case (easy goals), there is little or no value, inhibiting approach behavior; in the latter case there is not only little to no expectation of success, but also a high expectation of failure (which would cause a negative affective state), stimulating an avoidant response.

Many are hesitant to set goals for themselves, fearing the repercussions that failure could have on their self-esteem (which they are motivated to protect) (Franken, p. 373). It is, however, possible to protect your self-esteem while engaging in goal-directed behavior by managing your

appraisals. A failure does not need to be a reflection on your self-worth; if you do not manage to achieve a goal, you should consider whether the goal you set was more challenging than expected, or if you should deem the outcome a “failure” at all. At times, I have set out to work on a lab report, and after hours of work had nothing to show for it excepting a large amount of primary literature. Though I could consider the endeavor a failure, I realized that I had collected a pool of resources which would facilitate my writing at a later time, and felt satisfied with my success for the day.

It is also important to set both proximal and distal goals, as neither are useful without the other (Franken, p. 373). Distal goals (aspirations), such as graduating university with a certain GPA, are essential for maintaining direction; they are connected with greater anticipatory emotions (or feelings of satisfaction), and can sustain motivation when proximal goals fail to (Franken, p. 373). Proximal goals are those concerning the immediate future, which are set in the context of achieving a distal goal, an example would be preparing for an exam (to achieve the more distal goal of a high GPA) (Franken, p. 373). It is proximal goals which motivate us to act; the continuous succession of proximal goals provides an ongoing source of satisfaction when they are consistently met, rewarding goal-directed behaviors (Franken, p. 373).

The importance of distal goals can be further seen in their ability to help inhibit procrastinatory behaviors; you, like many students, will be tempted to put off a proximal goal (such as studying for a test) to pursue a more interesting activity (such as watching television). However, by monitoring for and evaluating these behaviors in the context of a distal goal, it is possible to keep your progress on track (Franken, p. 373).

Though goals are intrinsically motivating, it is still often difficult to engage in goal-directed behaviors, as they are often less interesting than you'd like. However, routinely engaging in behaviors which you consider disinteresting generates cognitive dissonance; to reduce this tension, you can make your cognitions match your behavior, that is, conclude that since you are spending so much time studying a topic, you must be interested in it (Franken, p. 46). Interest (a pseudo-emotional, pseudo-motivational state) in a task increases attention, frequency of engagement, and persistence in that task (07/11/ 2011, s. 31; Winne & Nesbit, 2010).

When you fail to achieve a proximal goal, it is important, not only to manage your appraisal of the failure, but to maintain hope and optimism, which contribute to persistence in the face of adversity (Franken, p. 7). I find that to remain optimistic, it helps to consider your distal goal, and determine how (if at all) the recent failure affects what you must do to attain it (do not question whether you will attain it). For instance, if I want to end a course with 90%, and I get an 85% on a midterm, I will calculate the grade which I need to achieve on the rest of the course work to get a 90%, and adjust my proximal goals accordingly. Doing so often puts things in perspective, and replaces my negative affect with the interest which accompanies perception of challenge (07/11/ 2011, s. 31).

### **Test Anxiety**

Test anxiety is detrimental to academic performance, and occurs when you perceive tests as threatening, heightening your arousal level, and when prolonged, causing a stress response; the net effect is a reduced ability to inhibit attention to irrelevant stimuli (Franken, p. 137). The most significant performance effect is intrusive thinking; individuals focus on themselves and

their shortcomings rather than the task at hand (Franken, p. 138). The executive functioning of the prefrontal cortex is important in directly counteracting these effects (allowing you to focus), and is strengthened by engaging in goal-directed activity (Franken, p. 138). Decreasing test anxiety can be as simple as appraising situations as challenging (increasing interest), rather than threatening (Franken, p. 138). It is also important to prepare for the test during the weeks or months beforehand (problem-focused coping), and to deal with your emotions during the test, and the hours preceding it. I have found that my attitude and consequent emotional state during a test has a significant effect on my performance; entering the room with a calm, confident, and optimistic attitude can be easily achieved by convincing yourself “I have studied for this test as much as the instructor could expect, I did everything they asked; they have created this exam so that students who studied as much as I did would succeed”.

### **Conclusion**

In my experience, academic achievement is best facilitated by self-regulation, goal-setting, and maintaining composure in a testing situation. By learning to self-regulate, you develop (and automatize) the skills to both carry out goal-directed behavior, and recognize and prevent procrastination. Setting proximal and distal goals which are both attainable and challenging, provides the motivation needed to succeed academically, and organizes your behavior correspondingly (e.g. discouraging procrastinatory behaviors). Interest resulting from cognitive dissonance, as well as optimism and hope also help to motivate these goal-directed behaviors. Both goal-setting and self-regulation engage the prefrontal cortex, which is important in minimizing the effect of test anxiety, an academically detrimental state. Test anxiety can also

be avoided by perceiving tests as challenges, rather than threats, as well as preparing sufficiently, and adopting a calm, confident attitude during the testing session.

### References

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