Using Student Interviews to Understand Theories of Motivation

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This article describes the construction and development of a course assignment that uses student interviews as an instructional tool to bridge the gap between theory and practice in a graduate educational psychology course. The first part of the article describes the student interview assignment used to examine theories of motivation. The second part of the article focuses on evaluation tools used to measures students' motivation for the task and their beliefs about their learning. Participants included 25 graduate students enrolled in an Advanced Educational Psychology course in the spring semester. After completing the student interview assignment, participants completed the interest/enjoyment and value scale of the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Additionally, participants responded to several open-ended questionnaire items on how their learning was affected by completing the student interview assignment. Quantitative and qualitative data reveal that participants reported high levels of both interest and value for completing the assignment and perceived their learning as affected in positive ways.

Keywords: educational strategies, interviews, motivation, teacher education, theory practice relationship

Too often, students consider course content as either "book knowledge" or "common sense," and have difficulty seeing the application of educational psychology theories to the practices of teaching and learning. To translate evidence-based psychological principles into practice, scholars in this field have called for faculty to use instructional strategies and create classroom environments that model these same psychological principles (Anderson, Blumenfeld, Pintrich, Clark, Marx, & Peterson, 2005; Deemer & Hanich, 2004) The construction and development of course assignments such as student interviews is one instructional practice I have used to bridge the gap between theory and practice in educational psychology for the preservice and inservice teachers who take my graduate-level educational psychology course at Millersville University of Pennsylvania.

Although interviews could be used to teach such diverse topics as learning and cognition, development, diversity, management, and assessment, in this assignment, they are used to examine principles of motivation. I have found that many preservice teachers have difficulty integrating and applying motivational principles that are well established in the research literature (Anderman & Leake, 2006), and inservice teachers often resort to quick fixes for motivational problems. Conducting an interview with a K-12 student on their achievement-related behaviors and motivation provides a context to which my graduate students are able to apply classroom principles of motivation that are being learned in our course. In the following sections of this paper I describe the motivation assignment and assessment measure that I used to evaluate teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the assignment.

METHODS

The Motivation Interview Assignment

After completing a course unit on motivation, preservice and inservice teachers are given an assignment that requires them to conduct interviews with K-12 students, in order to give them an up-close look at students' perspectives on achievement motivation. For the assignment, each teacher must select a minimum of two K-12 students to interview. Each interview is conducted individually, and the questions may differ across the protocols. Teachers may interview primary or secondary students, but I encourage them to work with children above third grade since children younger than this often have difficulty providing specific, detailed responses.

In order to maximize teachers' self-determination (see Deci & Moller, 2005, for a review), as much autonomy as possible is provided in the assignment. Teachers are asked to develop their own protocols, or sets of questions, based on readings from the text or class discussions. Prior to conducting their interviews, teachers are provided with instruction on basic principles for conducting interviews, and as a group we discuss how to develop fruitful questions (e.g., ask open ended questions, avoid yes/no) and ways to probe students' responses for more detail. Issues regarding informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity are also discussed. Because the assignment is used for instructional rather than research purposes, teachers do not have to submit proposals to Millersville's Institutional Review Board.

In their interview protocols, some teachers choose to focus on specific content, formulating their questions around one or more specific topics

(e.g., use of rewards, goal orientation), while others choose to ask broad questions about students' motivational experiences in school. Teachers are asked to tape record their interviews and to provide a written transcript of each interview as well.

After completing and transcribing their interviews, teachers write a short paper that summarizes what they have learned from their interviews. There is no predetermined page length for this assignment; rather they are expected to discuss thoroughly how the content they have garnered from their student interviews is related to principles of achievement motivation discussed in class and in their assigned readings. In the paper, they are also expected to provide descriptive information about the students selected for the interviews as well as quotes from students to illustrate specific motivational principles they discuss.

Finally, teachers are also responsible for developing a way to evaluate this assignment. Using a combination of small group work and full class discussions, the class develops a rubric that is used to evaluate their papers. Using a group-developed rubric in this way not only allows preservice and inservice teachers to self-regulate their own learning, but also introduces the class to principles of assessment, the next unit covered in the course.

Assessing the Effectiveness of the Assignment

To determine whether teachers' perceive the motivation interview assignment as an effective instructional tool, teachers completed a paper and pencil survey regarding their beliefs about the assignment during the last week of the spring semester. All 25 of the students enrolled in the course that term participated in the study (15 females; 10 males). Sixteen participants were classroom teachers (i.e., inservice teachers) and nine were students seeking initial certification (preservice teachers and students enrolled in the post-baccalaureate program). Students' degree programs included elementary education,

secondary education, special education, nursing, and sports management.

To assess their motivation for the interview assignment, participants completed the interest/enjoyment scale and the value/usefulness scale of the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Each scale is composed of 7 Likert-scale items, and participants' scored each item between 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). The IMI has been used in several empirical studies to assess students' subjective experiences in targeted activities (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Ryan, Koestner & Deci, 1991) and has well-established reliability and validity (McAuley, Duncan, & Tammen, 1987). For this study, the IMI was modified to specifically address students' motivation for completing the motivation interview assignment.

In addition to the IMI, students also responded to several instructor-designed open-ended items: 1) What did you like most about the motivation interview assignment? 2) What did you like least about the motivation interview assignment? 3) How did the motivation interview assignment help you connect theories of motivation to practice? and 4) How was your own motivation for learning educational psychology affected by this assignment?

RESULTS

Quantitative Data

I was interested to see if there were differences between the scores of preservice and inservice teachers on these scales. As displayed in Table 1, there appeared to be very little difference between the groups on either scale, and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) found no significant difference between the group means on either scale ($F(1, 23) = 0.09$, $p > .05$ and $F (1, 23) = 0.98$, $p > .05$). Thus, it seems that both groups reported similar interest/enjoyment and value related to this assignment.

Table 1. *Participants' Mean Scores on the Interest and Value Scales of the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory.*

	N	Interest scale	Value scale
Inservice teachers	16	5.90 (0.85)	6.38 (0.60)
Preservice teachers	9	6.20 (0.47)	6.44 (0.45)

Note. Standard deviations shown in parentheses. Possible scores range from 1 (low) to 7 (high).

Participants' means scores, by item, on the IMI are displayed in Table 1. Overall, scores appeared slightly higher on the value scale than on the interest/enjoyment scale of the modified IMI. There also was less variability in participant's scores for the value scale than for the interest/enjoyment scale, with the scores of many items on the value scale approaching ceiling level (i.e., scores of 7).

Table 1. *Participants' Mean Scores, by Item, on the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory.*

Interest Scale	**Mean**	**St. Dev.**
1. I enjoyed the motivation assignment.	6.12	0.78
2. The assignment was fun to do.	6.04	0.98
3. I thought the assignment was boring.	1.36	0.57
4. The assignment did not hold my attention at all.	1.28	0.46
5. I would describe the assignment as very interesting.	6.00	1.00
6. I thought the assignment was enjoyable.	6.04	1.02
7. While I was completing the assignment, I was thinking about how much I enjoyed it.	4.52	1.58
Value Scale		
1. I believe the assignment was of some value to me.	6.40	0.65
2. I think that completing the assignment was useful for understanding motivation.	6.48	0.65
3. I think the assignment was important to do because it helped connect theory to practice.	6.68	0.47
4. I would be willing to do this type of assignment again because it has some value to me.	6.16	0.94
5. I think completing the assignment could help me learn to motivate students.	6.24	0.87
6. I believe completing the assignment was beneficial to me.	6.48	0.59
7. I think this was an important assignment.	6.36	0.70

Note. Possible scores range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Qualitative Data

Using an iterative process involving coding, categorizing, and theme identification, an analysis of the responses to the first open-ended question indicated that the majority of teachers and teacher candidates in the class enjoyed hearing the perspectives of K-12 students. Most (17/25) wrote comments like, "It gave me a chance to see what one of my students feels about motivation in my class as well as other classes," and, "Hearing a child's perspective about what went on in the classroom, especially in the way of rewards and

punishments, was enlightening." In addition, teachers reported that they enjoyed the assignment because it helped them connect theory to practice. One participant commented, "I liked the analysis part, connecting theory to practice, analyzing the students' responses." Another said, "I liked being able to relate the theories and knowledge that I received in class to a real-life scenario; it allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the material." Finally, several teachers reported that they liked the authentic nature of the assignment. One participant noted, "I liked that it was a real example. We can read about theory and read examples, but nothing compared to talking to a real student." Another teacher mentioned, "As a teacher, it made me think about different approaches I could use with my own students. The assignment was a real eye-opener for me."

In response to the second question, asking what they liked least about the assignment, participants overwhelmingly commented on the process of transcribing the interview. Examples of comments included, "While I understand the reasoning behind it, it was tedious to transcribe the interview," and "Typing up the interview verbatim took forever." However, several also acknowledged the importance of the transcription requirement: "The tedious aspect of the assignment was transcribing the conversation. Actually, this aspect helped me think through and analyze the interview so I could then write a finished report." A number of teachers (7/25) did not respond to this question or indicated that there was nothing they didn't like about the assignment. Finally, a few (2/25) participants indicated that they didn't enjoy the writing part of the assignment. For example, one teacher said, "I enjoyed interviewing, but I do not enjoy organizing my thoughts into a well-written paper."

Participants' responses to the third question indicated that this assignment did help them better understand how theoretical knowledge can be applied to understanding students' motivation in K-12 classrooms. Specifically, twelve teachers commented on the "real world application" of the assignment, saying, "It allowed me to see real life examples of the theories rather than trying to relate to them abstractly," and, "Everything that we read about sort of 'came to life.' It made it easier to understand the theory." Several teachers (4/25) also commented that the assignment had forced them to reflect on their own classroom practices or experiences: "It helped me reflect on the teaching I

am doing," and "It made me think about what I say to my students more and how they are motivated by me."

On the fourth question, regarding the effect of the assignment on their own motivation to learn, over half of the responses (13/25) indicated teachers' desire to increase their learning. Specifically, participants noted that they were intrinsically motivated by the assignment and by the utility value the assignment held for them. Such responses included, "When I saw the value in what I was learning, it motivated me to learn as much as I could and then implement it into my daily lessons," "I was motivated to determine what motivated the student and learn more about how they felt about practices that teachers use," and, "I would like to learn more and apply what I have learned." One teacher referred to an increase in her self-efficacy, saying, "It made me feel more confident because my one concern in the beginning of the course was my lack of familiarity with psychology. This assignment helped me to relate to the material and put it in a context which I was able to understand." Another teacher referred to misconceptions that he had about how to motivate his own students, noting, "I saw contradictions in my thinking with the readings and with what the students said." Finally, one participant valued the depth this assignment brought to his learning of the content. Specifically, he noted, "The assignment was very insightful and beneficial. In a perfect world I would have loved to do an assignment like this for each topic we covered. I think I took the most information from this class in motivation, and I believe this is because the assignment forced me to dig deep through the information on motivation."

CONCLUSION

The above findings from survey data and open-ended responses suggest that inservice and preservice teachers reported high levels of both interest and value for completing the motivation interview assignment. Interestingly, there were no differences between preservice and inservice teachers' reported value or interest/enjoyment in the assignment. The motivation interview assignment encompasses all of the elements discussed earlier by Anderson and her colleagues (1995). Specifically, the qualitative responses suggest that teachers perceived this assignment to be an effective tool for helping them connect theories of motivation to classroom and life experiences of K-12 students.

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