
Tikrit University

Collage of Education for Humanities

English Department



Adult Education

Second Year

Adult Education and Motivation

Asst.Lect. Marwah Sh. Yaqoob

2025-2026

Adult Education and Motivation

Adult learning is no longer confined to night school classes or university extension programs. In today's knowledge-driven world, the need for continuous learning is a necessity—not a luxury. Whether driven by economic shifts, technological disruption, or personal reinvention, more adults are returning to learning at various stages of life. Yet access to learning opportunities is only one piece of the puzzle. The heart of the learning process lies in **motivation**—a learner's internal or external reason to begin and persist in acquiring knowledge or skills.

For adults, who often balance work, family responsibilities, financial pressures, and personal setbacks, staying engaged in education requires more than just enrollment. It requires understanding and sustaining motivation. Unlike children, adult learners bring with them a wealth of lived experiences, social expectations, and practical considerations. These shape the kind of motivation they respond to, and ultimately, whether they will succeed in their learning journey.

At its essence, lifelong learning is not just about attending workshops or gaining certificates—it's about building a mindset of growth, curiosity, and resilience. Motivation is what keeps this mindset alive.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators both play roles at different times and in different contexts. A learner may begin with external incentives—such as a job training requirement—but over time, they may discover personal meaning in their education. Alternatively, someone may start with passion and purpose, but require external support to stay engaged through life's challenges.

Understanding how motivation works—and how to foster it—is the key to building effective, equitable, and empowering adult education systems.

Motivation is the engine of adult learning. It determines whether a person simply enrolls in a program or finishes it with new skills and renewed purpose. By understanding the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic drivers, educators and learners alike can create learning journeys that are both meaningful and achievable.

What is Motivation?

Motivation is the internal drive or external influence that pushes a person to act, pursue goals, or maintain behavior toward achieving something. It's what makes people *want* to do something — whether it's getting out of bed, learning a language, or chasing a dream.

Types of Motivation

Motivation isn't one-size-fits-all. People are driven by different things depending on the situation, their goals, and their personality. Psychologists typically categorize motivation into two main types:

- **Extrinsic motivation** arises from outside of the individual and often involves external rewards such as trophies, money, social recognition, or praise. You do something to *gain a reward or avoid punishment*.

In adult learning, this is extremely common—many people pursue education because of job requirements, financial incentives, or social pressures.

Some examples include:

- A working parent earns a professional certification to qualify for a higher-paying position.
- A community leader completes a training to access grant funding for their nonprofit.
- A program participant attends all sessions to receive a stipend or housing benefit.

Extrinsic motivation can be extremely powerful—especially for adults facing urgent economic or social pressures. In many workforce development and nonprofit programs, extrinsic motivators like stipends, job placement, and completion bonuses are essential for enrollment and attendance.

- **Intrinsic motivation** is internal and arises from within the individual. For example, one might do a complicated crossword puzzle purely for the gratification of solving a problem. You do something because *you genuinely enjoy it or find it meaningful*.

Examples:

- Learning English because you love understanding other cultures.
- Exercising because it makes you feel strong and confident.
- Reading a novel because the story fascinates you.
- Solving puzzles just for the satisfaction of figuring them out.

A Third Type of Motivation?

Some research suggests that there is a third type of motivation: **family motivation**. An example of this type is going to work when you are not motivated to do so internally (no intrinsic motivation), but because it is a means to support your family financially.

How to Support Motivation in Adult Learning Programs?

Whether you're a program coordinator, educator, or nonprofit leader, here are some strategies to support both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in adult learners:

1. **Make learning relevant** – Connect lessons to real-life needs and goals.
2. **Set short-term and long-term goals** – Help learners visualize progress and celebrate milestones.
3. **Provide choice and flexibility** – Let learners choose topics, formats, or project options.
4. **Use incentives wisely** – Offer rewards, but don't make them the sole focus.
5. **Create community** – Peer groups, discussion forums, or learning circles can boost accountability and connection.
6. **Highlight personal growth** – Reflect regularly on how learners are changing, not just what they're completing.
7. **Offer feedback and praise** – Recognize effort, not just achievement.

Why Motivation Is Important?

Motivation serves as a guiding force for all human behavior. So, understanding how motivation works and the factors that may impact it can be important for several reasons.

Understanding motivation can:

- Increase your efficiency as you work toward your goals
- Drive you to take action
- Encourage you to engage in health-oriented behaviors
- Help you avoid unhealthy or maladaptive behaviors, such as risk-taking and addiction
- Help you feel more in control of your life
- Improve your overall well-being and happiness

Tips for Improving Your Motivation

Everyone experiences fluctuations in their motivation and willpower. Sometimes you feel fired up and highly driven to reach your goals. Other times, you might feel listless or unsure of what you want or how to achieve it.

If you're feeling low on motivation, there are steps you can take to help increase your drive. Some things you can do to develop or improve your motivation include:

- **Adjust your goals** to focus on things that really matter to you. Focusing on things that are highly important to you will help push you through your challenges more than goals based on things that are low in importance.
- If you're tackling something that feels too big or too overwhelming, **break it up into smaller, more manageable steps**. Then, set your sights on achieving only the first step. Instead of trying to lose 50 pounds, for example, break this goal down into five-pound increments.
- **Improve your confidence**. Research suggests that there is a connection between confidence and motivation. So, gaining more confidence in yourself and your skills can impact your ability to achieve your goals.
- **Remind yourself about what you've achieved** in the past and where your strengths lie. This helps keep self-doubts from limiting your motivation.
- If there are things you feel insecure about, **try working on making improvements** in those areas so you feel more skilled and capable.

What Causes Low Motivation?

We all experience dips in motivation from time to time. It's normal and often happens during times when we are stressed, anxious, or struggling with problems like poor sleep or relationship conflicts.

There are a few things you should watch for that might hurt or inhibit your motivation levels. These include:

- **All-or-nothing thinking**: If you think that you must be absolutely perfect when trying to reach your goal or there is no point in trying, one small slip-up or relapse can zap your motivation to keep pushing forward.
- **Believing in quick fixes**: It's easy to feel unmotivated if you can't reach your goal immediately, but achieving goals often takes time.
- **Thinking that one size fits all**: Just because an approach or method worked for someone else does not mean that it will work for you. If you don't feel motivated to pursue your goals, look for other things that will work better for you.

Motivation and Mental Health

Sometimes, a persistent lack of motivation is tied to a mental health condition such as depression. Talk to your doctor if you are feeling symptoms of apathy and low mood that last longer than two weeks.

Theories of Motivation

Throughout history, psychologists have proposed different theories to explain what motivates human behavior. The following are some of the major theories of motivation.

Instincts

The instinct theory of motivation suggests that behaviors are motivated by instincts, which are fixed and inborn patterns of behavior. Psychologists such as William James, Sigmund Freud, and William McDougal have proposed several basic human drives that motivate behavior. These include biological instincts that are important for an organism's survival, such as fear, cleanliness, and love.

Drives and Needs

Many behaviors such as eating, drinking, and sleeping are motivated by biology. We have a biological need for food, water, and sleep. Therefore, we are motivated to eat, drink, and sleep. The drive reduction theory of motivation suggests that people have these basic biological drives, and our behaviors are motivated by the need to fulfill these drives.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is another motivation theory based on the desire to fulfill basic physiological needs. Once those needs are met, the hierarchy expands to include other needs, such as those related to safety and security, social needs, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

Arousal Levels

The arousal theory of motivation suggests that people are motivated to engage in behaviors that help them maintain their optimal level of arousal. A person with low arousal needs might pursue relaxing activities such as reading a book. In contrast, those with high arousal needs might be motivated to engage in exciting, thrill-seeking behaviors such as motorcycle racing.