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NURTURING STUDENT AUTONOMY: THE ROLE OF SELF- DETERMINATION THEORY IN ACADEMIC COACHING

***Abstract:** the article explores the pivotal role of Self-Determination Theory in fostering student autonomy and well-being with the help of academic coaching. As educational paradigms shift towards learner-centered approaches, the development of interventions that promote intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning becomes increasingly critical. This study investigates how the core tenets of SDT – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – can be effectively integrated into academic coaching practices to enhance student engagement and academic performance. The article highlights successful coaching strategies, practical insights and psychometric scales that can enhance self-awareness and empower students to take ownership of their learning.*

***Keywords:** self-determination theory, student autonomy support, academic coaching.*

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ПОДДЕРЖКА СТУДЕНЧЕСКОЙ АВТОНОМИИ: РОЛЬ ТЕОРИИ САМОДЕТЕРМИНАЦИИ В АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОМ КОУЧИНГЕ

***Аннотация:** в статье рассматривается ключевая роль теории самодетерминации в развитии студенческой автономии и благополучия с помощью академического коучинга. Поскольку образовательные парадигмы смещаются в сторону лично-ориентированного обучения, развитие интервенций, которые*

поддерживают внутреннюю мотивацию к обучению, становятся все более актуальными. В работе обсуждается, как основные принципы теории самодетерминации: автономия, компетентность и связанность – могут быть эффективно интегрированы в практику академического коучинга для повышения вовлеченности студентов и академической успеваемости. В статье освещаются успешные стратегии академического коучинга, практические рекомендации, а также психометрические тесты, которые помогают студентам повысить понимание себя и быть более автономными в своем обучении.

Ключевые слова: теория самодетерминации, поддержка студенческой автономии, академический коучинг.

Introduction

The landscape of higher education is evolving, reflecting social changes and the increasing complexity of students' needs and challenges. Against this backdrop, psychological interventions promoting intrinsic motivation and well-being among university students have become relevant as they have been shown to effectively address academic challenges and rising mental health issues faced in academic environments [31]. Some of these interventions have resulted from the integration of psychological frameworks of motivation and wellbeing into academic coaching [2; 27]. One such framework is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that individual motivation is profoundly influenced by the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness [23]. This article aims to outline the foundational concepts of SDT in educational settings, highlight how autonomy support can enhance student outcomes and explore its application in academic coaching.

Foundations of Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory was developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan as an overarching framework for understanding human motivation and flourishing. The core premise of SDT is that intrinsic motivation – engagement in activities for their inherent satisfaction – leads to greater persistence, performance, and well-being than

extrinsic motivation, where activities are pursued for praise or reward or to avoid punishment [23]. Central to SDT in relation to higher education is the belief that all students, no matter their age, gender, socioeconomic status, nationality, or cultural background, possess psychological needs that provide a motivational foundation for their high-quality classroom engagement and positive functioning at university.

SDT identifies three psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness as the source of students' intrinsic motivation. Autonomy refers to the feeling of volition and choice in one's actions. Students experience autonomy need satisfaction when their classroom activity affords them opportunities to engage in learning activities with an internal locus of causality, sense of psychological freedom, and perceived choice of their actions [20]. Competence involves the sense of mastery and effectiveness in tasks. It reflects the inherent desire to exercise one's capacities and, in doing so, to seek out and master environmental challenges. Relatedness pertains to feeling connected and having meaningful relationships with others. It reflects the desire to be emotionally connected to and interpersonally involved in warm, caring, and responsive relationships [23].

Research has consistently shown that environments that support basic need satisfaction lead to higher levels of motivation and better academic achievement [10; 14], [7; 13]. Conversely, needs frustration may hinder personal development [23], leading to poor self-regulation skills, self-criticism and ill-being [30].

Academic Coaching with Self-Determination theory in mind

Evidenced-based academic coaching is increasingly recognised as a valuable intervention to enhance student learning and achievement [11; 27]. A coach works with a student to articulate and affirm their personal vision, values and meaning, to establish goals, develop strategies and attain their fullest potential. The role of an academic coach is to facilitate positive, sustainable change and growth, including optimal learning, development, performance, self-determination and well-being [2].

With students encountering numerous challenges – including stress, anxiety, and the complexity of academic demands – coaching that incorporates psychological theories such as Self-determination theory can be particularly impactful. SDT recognises

that the socio-cultural conditions of a person's life often stifle human development and growth. Based on this observation, a coach could represent a general improvement in these conditions [26] by holding a non-conditional positive regard towards the student's core values, interests and decisions (autonomy support), acknowledging their capacities and strengths (competence support) and relating to the student with care, trust, honesty and authenticity (relatedness support). According to Deci and Ryan [23], relationships with these features create a nurturing environment for effective human action and help to support the complex meaning-making processes that facilitates development of the coherent, and unified sense of self. One of the ways to explore a student's basic need satisfaction and frustration is through the BPNSF scale [32], which gives the coach and the student in-depth understanding about the potential focus of their work.

The effects of Autonomy thwarting practices

SDT outlines the sources of autonomy disturbances that frequently hinder students' motivation and wellbeing. By understanding the root causes of autonomy disturbances, an academic coach can effectively address these challenges. Some common classroom autonomy thwarts include surveillance, deadlines, imposed rules and limits, imposed goals, commands, competition and evaluation [20].

Another example of psychologically controlling environments is authoritarian parenting, which involves guilt induction, severe punishment, intimidation, conditional approval, and withdrawal of love [15]. These parental practices have been shown to result in experiences of ill-being including anxiety, depression, and negative affect in students [30]. For example, research into career unreadiness in undergraduates [5] reveals that anxiety related to making career choices stems from the experiences of authoritarian parenting. Another study [25] has shown that helicopter parenting, which is a type of controlling parenting style, significantly positively predicts depression and less satisfaction with life in college students. This is due to the fact that helicopter parenting might prevent children from developing self-efficacy [1] since these overly controlling parents tend to engage excessively in the lives of their grown-up children by trying to fix any difficulties that their children may encounter.

Nurturing Autonomy through Academic Coaching

While in SDT the satisfaction of basic psychological needs is crucial, the satisfaction of the need for autonomy is considered primary because when individuals experience psychological freedom, are actively engaged and highly motivated to act, they are more likely to learn and implement new strategies and skills [22]. Additionally, research highlights that when students perceive their learning environment as supportive of their autonomy, they are more likely to engage in self-directed learning, experience positive affect and demonstrate higher academic achievement [9; 13; 21].

Furthermore, the studies of autonomy support indicate important outcomes in terms of student mental health and wellbeing. For example, Gong and Wang [8] have shown how parental autonomy support can have significant positive effects on self-esteem and emotion regulation. Additionally, need satisfaction in autonomy and relatedness in adolescence and emerging adulthood was shown to be related negatively to depression, loneliness and stress [12].

Coaching strategies that promote autonomy include providing choices, encouraging self-reflection, and minimising controlling behaviours. Some of the common autonomy, competence and relatedness supportive gestures include opportunities for self-direction, explanatory rationales, acknowledgment of feelings [20] and developmental feedback. These basic need satisfaction gestures might be conducive to promoting growth mindset [3] and self-compassion [18], which have been linked to numerous positive mental health outcomes [4], including perfectionism induced anxiety and depression [6].

Furthermore, by adopting a facilitative approach – one that encourages students to explore their values, strengths and interests – the coach supports the student's intrinsic motivation. One of the ways to explore one's values and strengths is through an online validated strengths measurement tool [17] – the Values In Action (VIA) survey [34], which provides a breakdown of an individual's character strengths, i.e. virtues which are morally valued in all cultures and ubiquitous across people [19]. Numerous studies suggest that knowing and displaying signature character strengths, which are

most prominent in an individual, is intrinsically motivating and satisfying, thus allowing individuals to achieve optimal functioning and well-being [24]. Another way to facilitate the awareness of a student's skills and capabilities is through Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Test [16], [33], which shows in which of the nine areas – Bodily/Kinesthetic, Existential, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Logical-Mathematical, Musical, Naturalistic, Verbal/Linguistic, Visual/ Spacial – the student is the most capable, in order to tap into these resources throughout their educational and career journeys.

Goal-setting and goal achievement within SDT

The coaching process can be viewed as a cycle that begins with setting a goal, creating an action plan, and engaging in a continuous reflective cycle based on the actions undertaken between coaching sessions, resulting in increased self-awareness, self-regulation and renewed confidence [27].

According to SDT, students adopt goals for various reasons ranging from the pursuit of extrinsically motivated goals, e.g. to please a parent or a teacher, or to avoid feeling guilty or ashamed to more intrinsically motivated goals, which support behaviours that feel valuable or are inherently interesting or enjoyable. SDT emphasises the difference between controlled and autonomous motivation that can be plotted along a continuum of self-regulation varying from extrinsic regulation to intrinsic regulation [23]. These motivational underpinnings greatly impact how much effort and energy students direct towards goal achievement and how much satisfaction is gained from this process.

Research suggests that engagement in pursuit of extrinsic goals such as enhanced status, increased popularity, or material success neglects basic need satisfaction and therefore undermines learning and well-being even for those who actually attain their extrinsic goals [28]. Conversely, striving to achieve intrinsic goals such as personal growth and deeper interpersonal relationships facilitates basic needs satisfaction, thus vitalising students' inner motivational resources, resulting in persistence, improved performance and psychological wellbeing [29]. One of the ways to explore the student's aspirations during the coaching process is through the SDT aspirations index [35], which can provide a comprehensive insight into the student's goals, paving

the way for enhanced focus on autonomously motivated intrinsic goals and improved wellbeing.

Conclusion

The integration of SDT within academic coaching presents a promising strategy to address the academic challenges and mental health issues that students face. By fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness, coaching can help students build self-determination, leading to more effective studying and greater personal satisfaction in their educational journeys. This approach highlights the potential for educational programs and policies to better equip future generations for the demands of the ever-changing world.

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