
Preface

One thing is certain; there is no shortage of materials written about language learning motivation. Besides the ever-growing number of books and edited volumes published on the topic over the past decade (now easily into double figures), literally hundreds of articles—both theoretical and practical—have appeared in journals, periodicals and various collections of papers. So, the obvious question is: Why do we need another book on the subject? In this Preface we would like to briefly summarize why we think that the topic of this book—*directed motivational currents* (DMCs)—forms a special part of motivation theory, and why we believe it is worthy of further exploration. We will do this by answering four central questions: (1) What are directed motivational currents? (2) How are DMCs related to language learning motivation? (3) Are DMCs useful? (4) And, finally, who is this book for?

What Are Directed Motivational Currents?

Our thinking about motivational currents originates in an observation. We have seen, both in our own lives and in those of others around us, that there are specific periods when we seem to find ourselves in a particularly intensive state of focused productivity which allows us to achieve a great deal, often much more than we would have believed possible at the outset. It is as if every piece of a jigsaw falls magically into place and we ‘get into the zone.’ But, what is this ‘zone’? Although it is difficult to describe the phenomenon precisely, even a cursory search online reveals that many people show at least *some* awareness of having experienced this heightened motivational state for varying lengths of time. For example, in an expressive blog entry on the topic of achievement, Bronnie Ware captures exactly the kind of fulfilling and productive absorption in a project that is the hallmark of a DMC:

When I am absorbed in a project, my time is used efficiently and enjoyably. When the project is completed, I get on with enjoying

life until I draw the next idea or opportunity to me. And then off I go again, excited and absorbed. Recently I have been shaping an old project into a new form . . . The sense of achievement I am experiencing at the moment is the most heart-warming I have ever known in my working life.¹

There are literally thousands of postings on the Internet which echo Ware's sentiments, all along the lines of "When absorbed in a project, I'm totally immersed in it, constantly thinking of what to do to make sure everything flows, is cohesive and unifying"² (by an interior designer), or "Often I am absorbed in a project for months on end, at other times I flit between projects"³ (by a creative writer). The following extract, from a blog written by a computer programmer, offers a particularly clear description:

The kind of work I do (as a computer programmer) requires a lot of focus. There are some projects which require long periods of concentrated work; they need analysis; they have subtle corners requiring careful negotiation; they call for experience and skill, and also a certain kind of elegance. When I see a project like this coming up, I feel a tingling of pleasant anticipation—the thrill of the long-distance runner.

You can be so absorbed in these projects that you lose all track of time. You fail to notice the pain in your back, or that your shoulders ache, until you stand up and realize that you have been hunched over the desk in some terrible position for hours. These projects leak into your daily life: you wake up with the solution to a problem, you are still solving equations in your head when driving the children to school, you try to hurry through cooking dinner to give yourself time to check the results of some tests you left running. You become obsessed.⁴

Of course, being totally absorbed in a task is not a new idea; the phenomenon has been widely understood since Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) introduced the concept of the 'flow experience' into the psychological literature. However, as we will explain in more detail in Chapter 1, the topic at the center of this book involves something more than being fully immersed in the process of a single activity. What we are interested in is *longer currents* of intensive action, projects that can go on for weeks, months and sometimes even years at a time. The focus of this book, as the computer programmer cited above expressively describes it, is all about "the thrill of the *distance* runner".

We decided to call this phenomenon a ‘directed motivational current’ because of its similarity with ocean currents such as the Gulf Stream or the East Australian Current (the latter vividly portrayed in the animated film *Finding Nemo* as an oceanic ‘superhighway’). Both motivational and ocean currents represent a formidable flow of energy, carrying the life-forms caught up within them unimaginable distances. In the film *Finding Nemo* for example, the hero—a clownfish called Marlin—relies entirely on the East Australian Current to take him to his destination, one which would otherwise have been impossibly out of reach had he been reliant solely on his own resources. In a similar way, motivational currents also enable people to function for prolonged lengths of time at heightened states of productivity and, for a period, to perform at levels over and above what they may have believed themselves capable of. The modifier in our term—‘directed’—refers to the well-defined pathway taken by the flow of motivational energy, starting from a concrete beginning and propelling forwards toward a specific end target, thus similarly paralleling the immovable trajectories of mighty ocean currents which follow fixed, unshakable paths.

How Are DMCs Related to Language Learning Motivation?

From a motivational perspective, a DMC is an important phenomenon because it contains a considerable amount of highly concentrated fuel for action. Curiously though, to date, psychology has had surprisingly little to say about this type of pathway. To be sure, there is a wide array of terms concerning the *target* or *direction* of motivated behavior—such as ‘goal,’ ‘orientation,’ ‘need,’ ‘aspiration,’ or ‘vision’—as well as extensive discussion in the literature about how different targets may have different motivational *pulls* on an individual. However, a DMC is not merely a pathway toward a goal; the intriguing theoretical aspect of a DMC is that it not only provides a direction for action, but it also *energizes* action. It is this point—the current’s unique, energizing capacity—which distinguishes a DMC from almost every other motivational construct described in the literature.

As we shall see in the chapters that follow, virtually all motivation theories in the past have *separated* the initial energy source (the ‘motive’ proper) from its actional consequence (the ensuing action), the argument being that motivation theory primarily concerns these initial motives, as it is these which fuel subsequent behavioral trajectories toward particular outcomes. To illustrate this, the standard way of thinking about L2 motivation has been to assume that if a learner has a powerful motive to do well at school—stemming, for example, from curiosity, interest, need, obligation, or incentive—this motive will be reflected in his/her motivated

learning behaviors and, in theory, his/her final grades. However, while this scenario is, in most cases, entirely correct, what makes a DMC exciting is that it behaves in a radically different way from this ‘motive-causes-behavior’ template. Within a DMC, the outworking of the initial motive becomes *part of the energy source* itself: The motivated behavior of the actor *does not use up* energy but, conversely, actively *generates* energy. While this crucially import—and indeed defining—aspect of DMCs will be further discussed in the subsequent chapters of this book, the key point we wish to underline here is that, in a DMC, the motive and subsequent behavior form a *unified construct* and are inseparable from one another.

It is important to reiterate that in this respect, a DMC is a unique phenomenon. Most of our actions follow the traditional template: We need potent motives to provide energy which we then utilize to achieve certain goals, such as the mastering of a foreign language. However, from time to time, it happens that we are caught up in the midst of a whirlwind of factors which somehow ‘sweep us off our feet,’ and we find ourselves moving rapidly toward achieving something we had never imagined we could. We might, for example, see a group of students tasked with creating a concept and storyboard for a new TV advertisement for their school get carried away and, by the time the project comes to a close, have created the concept, the storyboard, a script, have filmed the rough footage, edited it, and even negotiated with school management to have it put up on the school’s website. Or, in another context, we might see a musician volunteer to put on a concert in order to raise money for charity, and see it swell from the string quartet within which she plays, to featuring a small chamber orchestra, and continuing to grow until—when the night of the concert arrives—walking out onto the stage is a full orchestra of musicians *plus* piano soloist for the freely loaned grand piano! We have witnessed these and many other examples, both in and out of the L2 classroom, and have come to believe that the circumstances in which DMCs might occur are, quite simply, boundless; we might, for example, see students get carried away and put on an outstanding school play, prepare a fantastic classroom presentation, or raise an unprecedented sum for a local cause. A DMC is recognizable when the journey toward a goal does not merely consist of conscientious, concentrated hard work, but instead exhibits signs of something more—a serendipitous coming-together of circumstances and conditions—leading the project to take on a life of its own and stream past initial expectations to a point way out in the distance.

Are DMCs Useful for Classroom Purposes?

A recurring theme in accounts of DMC experiences from *all* walks of life is the heightened levels of effectiveness and productivity that people experience while caught up in the current. This suggests that the

phenomenon is not so much about having a great time or experiencing a thrill, as about *delivering an outcome*. The potential usefulness of DMCs lies in this productive capacity. If we can harness this capacity to good effect—that is, if we can set the direction of a DMC toward beneficial learning outcome targets within classroom settings—we may be able to facilitate a smooth and far-reaching learning pathway. Exploring this practical potential was one of the main driving forces behind writing this book, and it explains the subtitle: “Frameworks for focused interventions.” Our main contention—which we discuss fully in the final two chapters—is that although fully-fledged DMCs might not be a very frequent phenomenon, it is highly important to understand the causes and nature of the construct as, quite simply, the same principles are at work in *all* long-term motivational sequences. Thus, we see DMCs as the *optimal form* of project engagement, which, to a certain extent, are *approximated* in long-term motivated behaviors in general. Accordingly, if we are able to isolate the main conditions and features that constitute a DMC, we may then be in a position to use them as components of a framework for effective classroom motivational interventions to promote long-term learning. In this way, our knowledge about DMCs can be transformed into a basis for powerful motivational scaffolds.

Who Is This Book For?

In the chapters that follow, we hope to present a convincing argument that DMCs offer new insights of value both to motivation researchers and classroom practitioners. Applied linguistics and language pedagogy have, by tradition, always walked a fine line between theory and practice, and it is in this spirit that we have gone about writing this book: We have tried to satisfy—rather than alienate—both audiences. In this respect, everything depends on striking the right balance between theoretical explanations and practical suggestions. While Kurt Lewin (1952, p. 169) was right to conclude that “There is nothing more practical than a good theory,” we all know that the opposite is likewise true; that there is nothing *less* practical than a not-so-good theory. Therefore, while reading this book may not generate in every reader the kind of total DMC-like levels of absorption which makes it feel as though time is stood still, we genuinely hope that it will inspire new ideas and will give increased confidence to all those looking to embroil themselves in one of life’s exciting motivational currents.

On a Personal Note

As mentioned above, the original idea that sparked our curiosity about directed motivational currents emanated from our personal lives and the

recognition that we ourselves had experienced exactly the type of powerful motivational currents which we describe in this book. Deciding to explore these experiences further, we spent almost six months—together with Zana Ibrahim—brainstorming about how best, theoretically, to capture this powerful phenomenon, and what we might call it. (We experimented with upward of 30 different terms before settling on the moniker ‘directed motivational currents’!)

We became convinced about the existence of DMCs when we started to collect interview data from multiple highly motivated learners, quickly discovering that DMC elements and principles kept popping up in all areas of our findings. Further confirmation came in the form of a throw-away comment in an email to Zoltán from Alastair—who at the time was working with his colleague Sofia Davydenko on the first empirical study of DMCs (Henry, Davydenko, & Dörnyei, 2015)—and which read: “All the time onwards from listening to the initial interviews I’ve been struck by how the things these informants were saying gelled with not just some, but pretty much all of the DMC characteristics you had described.”

After we started to share our initial findings (through several early conceptual papers and on Zoltán’s personal website; www.zoltandorneyi.co.uk) we received further encouragement from people from all over the globe. Indeed, as soon as we made our ideas public we began receiving emails from individuals worldwide telling us they had encounters with DMCs and felt compelled to get in touch because our description of them resonated so deeply within their own lives and experiences, and would we mind if they shared these experiences with us? The email extract below is typical of one of these (describing a project which we go on to discuss in detail as an extended illustration at the end of Chapter 8):

When reading about DMCs I couldn’t help but remember the energy that the students arrived to class with . . . the autonomy the students worked with was beyond anything I had seen before. The most telling thing came right at the end when we were debriefing on the whole experience and sharing thank yous. The feedback from the students, in addition to the usual comments on making new friends, having great memories and feeling more confident in their English abilities, also included things like “having a new purpose,” “being useful,” “seeing themselves as capable of new things,” “wanting to do it again,” “wanting to teach others to do the same.” All of these ideas made me realize that on top of the massive high they were on throughout the event and afterwards (as their success was celebrated quite publicly at the school), that they had learnt much more than language and new skills and knew that they could work with a heightened level of intensity towards their English language goals.

It was a genuinely thrilling experience for us to receive such inspiring and encouraging messages about DMCs from individuals from such a wide range of contexts and backgrounds. We interviewed many of them via Skype and some of their accounts can be found within the pages of this book.

The ultimate confirmation that DMCs are real came from the experience of writing this manuscript, and it is no exaggeration to say that the process has been quite an adventure, a journey that bears all the hallmarks of a DMC! It has at all times been intensive, exciting, exhausting, and totally absorbing, regardless of any of the challenges and hurdles that we faced along the way. As we approached the submission deadline and our evenings (and nights) became shorter, while our waking hours spent in front of computers considerably longer, we could not help but notice that we were writing about what we ourselves were going through. In fact, in many ways, this book is not only a discussion of the topic of DMCs, but also a collection of field notes from the midst of a powerful collective DMC experience! We sincerely hope that readers find the ideas and arguments we put forward within these pages as interesting and engaging as we ourselves found them carrying out this research.

Notes

1. <http://bronnieware.com/a-sense-of-achievement>.
2. www.thisiskc.com/2014/05/designer-alejandro-lopez-brings-european-style-kansas-city-homes.
3. <http://cathiedevitt.com/my-work>.
4. <http://womanunadorned.wordpress.com/2013/09/19/focus>.

References

- Csikszentmihaly, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Henry, A., Davydenko, S. & Dörnyei, Z. (2015). The anatomy of Directed Motivational Currents: Exploring intense and enduring periods of L2 motivation. *Modern Language Journal*, 99. Manuscript in preparation.
- Lewin, K. (1952). *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical articles by Kurt Lewin*. London: Tavistock.