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Abstract

This article reviews the 7th International Self-Determination Theory (SDT) Conference which was held at Hotel Zuiderduin in the Netherlands during May 2019. In addition to the founders of SDT; Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, acting as plenary speakers, the call for papers sourced presenters from across multiple academic fields, and within industry, to present symposia, poster presentations, and papers under several themes. These themes extended to recent theoretical developments in SDT, the science of SDT, applications of SDT and future directions. This review will begin with a commentary on the organisation of the conference, briefly outline potential areas of interest for self-access learning researchers and practitioners to pursue and conclude with takeaways from the plenaries.

Keywords: self-determination theory, language learning, psychology, motivation, conference

Nestled among the sand dunes in the Dutch province of North Holland, the 7th International Self-Determination Theory (SDT) conference was an event that celebrated numbers. With registration numbers exceeding 700, and four days of presentations hosting more than 150 presenters, it is only through the organisational prowess of Dr. Rashmi Kusurkar and her team from the Department of Research in Education, VUmc School of Medical Sciences Amsterdam, that the conference was able to run as smoothly as it did. Held every three years, the aim of the conference is to bring together researchers and practitioners from an array of fields; from the medical profession, to sport scientists, educators, public service providers and all those in between, to share and discuss how SDT can enhance our understanding of human psychology and motivation. To meet the needs of this diverse range of attendees, the conference provided a separate theme for each conference day in the following order: Recent theoretical developments in SDT, Science of SDT, Applications of SDT: Applied day, and Future directions in SDT.

Each conference day consisted of two simultaneous keynote sessions from invited speakers. Presenters in the symposia had 15 minutes each to present followed by a Q&A session. The overall symposia concluded with a 10-minute discussion on the themes. Paper presenters presented consecutively and were allocated 15 minutes including questions. In terms of scheduling, this permitted a greater number of presenters to share their research, but

in practice it was foiled by the inevitable technological and overtime issues which detracted from the overall quality of many of the presentations. Due to the sheer scale of the work being disseminated at the SDT 2019 conference, there is simply not enough space to comment on everything. For that reason, this review will explore three (self-determined) categories of presentations relevant to Self-Access Learning (SAL) contexts: Individual differences, Dialogue and Autonomy-support strategies.

Individual Differences

Within SDT, the role of the learning environment is often explored, and it is assumed that the greater autonomy-support an environment provides, the more likely our students' will view their needs as being satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, as any SAL practitioner knows, the support systems we put in place are not always interpreted the same by our students. Laura Thomas from Liverpool John Moores University, and Emily Oliver from Durham University shed light on this issue by providing an engaging presentation on how personality moderated sensitivity to need support and thwarting. Unsurprisingly, extraversion and a lack of neuroticism and covert narcissism predicted an individual's sensitivity to the supports in their environment, while neuroticism and covert narcissism were predictors of frustrations within the environment. Taking their research, a step further, the function of personality as a predictor of need seeking and avoidance behaviours was also explored. The results suggested that individuals who have extraverted and conscientious personalities appear to be more likely to seek supports from others, while need avoidance behaviours were likewise anticipated by extraversion, but also openness and neuroticism (Thomas & Oliver, 2019). How SAL contexts approach the provision of supporting students' perceptions of their environment remains to be seen, however it reaffirmed a feeling within me that in planning and implementing autonomy-supports SAL moderators must include differentiated strategies that consider students' personalities.

Dialogue

In reflecting on the support students may need in terms of how they perceive their environment, two other presentations come to mind. Emily from Durham University illustrated the potential uses for self-talk in challenging scenarios. While the study conducted was derived from athletic endeavours, the axiom that language learning is a marathon, not a sprint provides a metaphorical link for the ideas to resonate. Oliver outlined the frequency in

which individuals engage with self-talk strategies (98%), and identified the uses of self-talk; third person for coping and self-evaluation, second for situations that require self-regulated action, and first to (potentially) endorse one's own self (Oliver, 2019). Using the methodology and applying it to a language learning context could open new areas for research; in particular how the explicit teaching of self-talk could be used to moderate language learners' feelings of competence during high stress situations such as spoken interactions or exams.

Frederick Philippe, one of the keynote speakers from the University of Quebec provided attendees with a deeper insight into how emotional regulation may influence an individual's future behaviour. His findings suggest that by reconstructing memories with greater reflexivity, and by viewing them through a needs satisfying memory network, individuals may develop an active capacity to learn from their emotions (Philippe, 2019). While it may be out of our capabilities, the applications of this research would mean that with the right training and support, we may be able to help our students to feel more competent in regulating their emotion-related behaviours, leading to better wellbeing overall.

Autonomy-Support Strategies

Preceding Phillippe as a keynote speaker was Johnmarshall Reeve. In this talk, Reeve explained how very often teacher instructors do to teachers as teachers do to their students - they attempt to socialise them into certain ways of thinking rather than supporting the internalisation of the concepts and value of what they are teaching. With SDT principles, teachers in a teacher-training course appeared to take on the perspectives of their students (a task easier said than done!) leading to an increase in student agentic engagement (Reeve, 2019). Closing his talk Reeve, posed a thought-provoking question to the audience, asking us to consider the need for 'expectations-based structure' in our teaching.

Like Reeve, Leen Haerens's keynote was focused on the training of teachers but her focus leaned towards the types of intervention research that could take place with or by practitioners in various educational fields. Her focus on intensifying SDT-based training by including self-reflection activities which explored educators' own motivating styles, mirrors my own thoughts about the kinds of activities that self-access centres should undertake when evaluating the autonomy-supportive nature of their people and spaces.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, this was the largest conference I have ever been too. For an early-career researcher such as myself, the wealth of knowledge amassed was daunting and only served to highlight how much there is to learn about SDT. As I sat in the final plenary and listened to Richard Ryan and Edward Deci respond to the audience's questions, two things stood out to me. Firstly, that SDT research heavily leaned towards the quantitative. Self-access contexts are perfect environments for conducting qualitative forms of research, and something more researchers and practitioners should take advantage of. This leads me into my second commentary, namely that Ryan and Deci have been heading this field for decades. As Ryan himself stated at the closing of the plenary, the time to pass the torch has come. SDT still has areas that need to be examined, debated and elaborated upon. As one era ends, the next takes its place, and I for one can hardly wait to see what new insights it brings.

Notes on the Contributor

Amelia Yarwood is a Learning Advisor at Kanda University of International Studies. She has worked in education in both Australia and Japan. Her research interests include L2 identity and motivation, emotions in language learning, language learner autonomy and curriculum design.

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