2010

**Autonomy Support 101: How Using Proven Autonomy Support Techniques Can Increase Law Student Autonomy, Engender Hope, and Improve Outcomes**

Carol L. Wallinger

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/dlr

Part of the Law Commons

**Recommended Citation**

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Duquesne Law Review by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.
Autonomy Support 101: How Using Proven Autonomy Support Techniques Can Increase Law Student Autonomy, Engender Hope, and Improve Outcomes

Carol L. Wallinger*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the lead article to this Symposium issue, researchers Martin and Rand advocate using hope theory as one tool to “revitalize” legal education.1 Their recommendation is based in part on the

---

* Clinical Associate Professor of Law, Rutgers School of Law-Camden.

1 Allison D. Martin & Kevin L. Rand, The Future’s So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades: Law School Through the Lens of Hope, 48 DUQ. L. REV. 203, 203-204 (2010) (“Critics of the legal profession, both from within and without, have pointed to a great profession suffering from varying degrees of confusion and demoralization. A reawakening of professional élan
findings of the Carnegie Foundation's 2007 report on legal education. After summarizing the science of positive psychology, and the research that showed that hope correlates positively with academic performance and psychological well-being, Martin and Rand discussed their own empirical study of hope and law students. They found that "hope predicts academic performance and life satisfaction in the first semester of law school." Martin and Rand then proposed five principles legal educators can use to engender hope in law students. Principle Two recommends increasing student autonomy.

Autonomy is also a central tenet of self-determination theory, which studies how human motivation is affected by the social contexts in which people spend their lives. Self-determination theory posits that humans have three basic psychological needs which must be satisfied to ensure optimum health and well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness to other humans. Self-determination theory has been under laboratory and field research for over thirty years. In particular, researchers have conducted many studies demonstrating the theory's effectiveness in educational settings, including a few studies at law and medical schools. This research has yielded much knowledge about how student learning and motivation is affected by the social context of the professor-student relationship, and how professors can in-

must include, in an important way, revitalizing legal preparation." (quoting WILLIAM M. SULLIVAN ET AL., EDUCATING LAWYERS FOR THE PROFESSION OF THE LAW 19 (2007)).

2. Id. at 220-26.
3. Id. at 209-14.
4. Id. at 204.
5. Id. at 218-31.
6. Martin & Rand, supra note 1, at 207.
crease student learning and motivation by using specific techniques which support a student's autonomy.\textsuperscript{11}

This Article recommends that even though there are few empirical studies on legal education, legal educators not wait for such research before moving forward and making autonomy supportive changes in their classrooms. By tapping into the abundant self-determination theory research, and not reinventing the wheel, legal educators could begin immediately to support law students' autonomy and, based on the research by Martin and Rand and others, also engender hope in students.

Besides supporting student autonomy, and thereby engendering hope, there is another reason legal educators should consider using autonomy support techniques in legal education. Many accrediting agencies are now considering moving to "outcome based" reviews, including the American Bar Association.\textsuperscript{12} Self-determination theory has already shown that providing autonomy support can lead to better student outcomes.\textsuperscript{13} Therefore, legal educators should not wait to begin applying autonomy support techniques.

This Article has three additional parts. Part II briefly outlines self-determination theory, with an emphasis on the issues that arise in the social context of the professor-student relationship. Part III summarizes some of the existing research on how student motivation and performance is improved when professors provide autonomy support, including more information on the Martin and Rand study. Part IV provides some suggestions and resources for those interested in learning more about self-determination theory and autonomy support. My hope is that this article will motivate readers to increase the amount of autonomy support provided to law students.


\textsuperscript{13} See generally Reeve, supra note 11, at 183-203.
II. PROMOTING STUDENT SELF-DETERMINATION, IN THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE PROFESSOR-Student RELATIONSHIP

A. Summary of Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory studies human motivation and personality development through the lens of social contexts. The theory concentrates specifically on the reciprocal “person-environment dialectic,” or relationship. Social contexts make up part of the environment in which people spend their time. The theory presumes that all people have a natural tendency toward psychological growth, and it further supposes that the environment and the social context “can either support or thwart the natural tendencies toward active engagement and psychological growth.”

Self-determination theory proposes that all human behaviors lie somewhere on a continuum between being fully controlled, i.e., dictated by others, and fully autonomous, i.e., originated solely by the individual. Each area of the continuum is further described as involving either extrinsic or intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation “is the inherent propensity to engage one’s interest and to exercise one’s capacities.” Therefore, intrinsically motivated activities typically are those done for the enjoyment of the task. In adults, these activities typically involve hobbies.

Conversely, extrinsically motivated behaviors are done to meet a goal which is important to the individual. The more autonomously-generated the behavior, the more positive and enjoyable the experience is for the individual. As might be expected, most professional career goals (i.e., vocational goals) involve the adoption (or internalization) of extrinsically motivated (i.e., non-intrinsically motivated) goals and behaviors. Internalization is the “process through which an individual transforms a formerly

---

15. JOHNMARSHALL REEVE, UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION AND EMOTION 144-45 (5th ed. 2008).
18. Ryan & Deci, supra note 8, at 72.
19. REEVE, supra note 8, at 111.
20. Id.
21. Id. at 113.
22. Markland, supra note 17, at 817. This is a common misperception. Under self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation is not the type generally used by adults in everyday school or work situations.
externally prescribed regulation or value into an internally endorsed one."23

Extrinsic motivation is further delineated into four subcategories by self-determination theorists, depending on the amount of external control or regulation exerted by the social context or situation.24 The four types of regulation, in increasing order of self-determined behavior, are external, introjected, identified and integrated.25 Integrated regulation is the final phase of motivation development, and it requires synthesis of already identified values, behaviors, and skills.26 Therefore, this stage is not as relevant for legal educators' purposes, because it occurs after our students graduate, and begin practicing law. Instead, our goal is to bring our students to the identified regulation phase, where they willingly adopt as their own the professional values, behaviors, and skills we have shared with them in class. Identification is the "conscious acceptance [by the individual] of the behavior [or goal] as being important in order to achieve personally valued outcomes."27

The primary social context of law school is the professor-student interpersonal relationship. As professors, our goal is to motivate students to internalize the professional values, skills, and behaviors they will need to succeed as lawyers, as well as to learn legal doctrine. As such, we are "socializing agents," similar to parents, managers, or doctors.28 All such socializing relationships involve a differential in "status, power or control—relationships which have a structure that might be referred to as one-up/one-down."29 In relationships with such a power differential, the person with authority:

has some influence over the [subordinate], whether the basis of that influence manifests itself in expertise, rewards, status or position. Consequently, the person who is one down in the

---

24. Id. at 133. A complete discussion of the entire motivation continuum as envisioned by self-determination theory researchers is beyond the scope of this article.
25. Id.
26. Id. at 134-35.
27. Markland, supra note 17, at 816.
29. Id.
relationship is vulnerable to being controlled or bossed around by the person who is one up in power.\textsuperscript{30}

There are many examples in everyday life of overly controlling authority figures. For example, the "directive, take-charge approach to motivating others can be seen in military leaders, hard-line employers, extremely competitive athletic coaches, controlling teachers, take-charge politicians, authoritarian parents, and patronizing doctors."\textsuperscript{31} Explicitly controlling behaviors can and do produce rote compliance by subordinates, but they will not cause the subordinates to internalize, or adopt the value or behavior as their own.\textsuperscript{32} This point is particularly important for us as legal educators, because we are training future professionals who will need to exert independent judgment on behalf of their clients. Therefore, we must lead or persuade our students to adopt our professional values and behaviors as their own. We cannot simply order or force them to do it.

Self-determination researchers know the negative effects controlling behavior from authority figures has on subordinates' behavior, and ultimately, their motivation. Researchers have described two types of negative reactions subordinates have after controlling behavior is used as a motivational strategy. The first of the two negative reactions is passivity and learned helplessness.\textsuperscript{33} The second negative reaction is stubborn and aggressive resistance to the motivator/authority figure.\textsuperscript{34}

Both of these reactions are well known to law faculty, including legal writing faculty. For example, Professor Robin Wellford-Slocum, in her seminal article on the one-on-one student-faculty conference, discussed both the "defeated, unprepared student" and the "argumentative student."\textsuperscript{35} Additionally, Professor Sheila Ro-

\textsuperscript{30} Reeve, supra note 15, at 454.
\textsuperscript{31} Id.
\textsuperscript{33} Reeve, supra note 15, at 454. See also Judith Welch Wegner, Reframing Legal Education’s “Wicked Problems,” 61 Rutgers L. Rev. 867, 938 (2009) (“Could the dynamics of law school classes be reshaped to move beyond the current culture of silence, passivity and unproductive competition . . . ?”). Passivity in law students also was addressed by a Harvard Law School student. See Note, Making Docile Lawyers: An Essay on the Pacification of Law Students, 111 Harv. L. Rev. 2027 (1998). Learned helplessness results when a person comes to believe that his or her behavior has no direct effect on the outcome of the situation. Reeve, supra note 15, at 250.
\textsuperscript{34} Reeve, supra note 15, at 454.
driuez discussed strategies for dealing with both the "defeated" and the "overconfident" student, the latter of which may stubbornly reject the professor's expertise and critique.\textsuperscript{36}

Self-determination researchers also know the motivational strategies that authority figures can use to promote a positive reaction in subordinates, thereby triggering a "constructive cooperative effort of learning new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that change one's situation for the better."\textsuperscript{37} Those self-determination theory motivational strategies center around having the social context, i.e., the professor-student relationship, nurture and not thwart the student's three fundamental psychological needs: competence, relatedness to others, and, most importantly for this article, autonomy.

The key question therefore, when trying to motivate others, is whether the social context is supporting the person's quest for self-determination by nurturing the three psychological needs, or undermining that person's quest, by failing to nurture those needs?

B. Three Fundamental Psychological Needs: Competence, Relatedness to Others, and Autonomy

As noted above, law professors seek to motivate students to internalize, or adopt as their own, not only legal doctrine, but also the professional values, skills, and behaviors they will need to succeed as lawyers. Initially, those values, skills, and behaviors are unfamiliar to law students. So what is the best way for us to move students towards professionalism? Under self-determination theory, the extent to which a person moves towards internalization of extrinsically-motivated goals and behaviors is strongly influenced by the extent to which the situation nurtures three basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness to others, and autonomy.\textsuperscript{38} All three are necessary to ensure a person's ongoing active engagement and psychological growth.\textsuperscript{39} This section briefly defines each of these needs and then, with regard to autonomy, introduces three separate strategies which provide autonomy support to students.

\textsuperscript{37} Reeve, supra note 15, at 454.
\textsuperscript{38} See Ryan & Deci, supra note 8, at 68.
\textsuperscript{39} Id.
1. Competence

Competence is "the need to be effective in [our] interactions with [our] environment."40 Under self-determination theory, we all have an inherent desire to improve ourselves beyond our current situation.41 As described by Professor Johnmarshall Reeve, one of the most prolific researchers of using self-determination theory in educational settings, "It is the need for competence that motivates people to seek out the . . . challenges that . . . stretch, improve, and refine our capacities."42 Such motivations could certainly explain a person’s desire to attend law school, which, as we all know, is a very challenging environment. However, it is possible for the environment to be too challenging, and there is a limit beyond which too much challenge may be counterproductive to student learning. A situation that produces optimal challenge will satisfy our need for competence.43 The ultimate experience of optimal challenge involves the psychological state commonly known as "flow."

Flow is the state of concentration a person experiences when successfully using her skills to overcome some physical or psychological challenge.44 Flow occurs during deep enjoyment of an activity “at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act.”45 Deep enjoyment results not from just completing the task, but instead from the combined effect of intense concentration and a rewarding sense of accomplishment.46 Perhaps the signature feeling of a flow activity is one where the person loses complete track of time.47 For some, time moves slower, for others, “hours pass by in minutes.”48

Activities which generate flow have been described as having as many as eight characteristics,49 but two are particularly relevant

40. REEVE, supra note 32, at 66.
41. Id. at 66.
42. Id. at 67
43. REEVE, supra note 15, at 155.
44. Id. at 156. See generally MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, FLOW: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE (1991) [hereinafter FLOW].
45. FLOW, supra note 44, at 52.
46. Id. at 46. It might or might not be naïve to think that legal writing can be a source of deep enjoyment to anyone other than a legal writing professor.
47. Id. at 66.
48. Id.
49. Id. at 49. The eight characteristics are as follows:
First, the experience usually occurs when we confront tasks we have a chance of completing. Second, we must be able to concentrate on what we are doing. Third and fourth, the concentration is usually possible because the task undertaken has clear
to motivating law students: first, the task must have clear goals and provide feedback; second, the experience must allow the person to exercise a sense of control over her actions.50

Csikszentmihalyi, the father of “flow,” provided this classic illustration about the effect of clear goals: in mountain climbing, clear goals, such as the desire to move higher up the mountain (or at least not fall off the mountain), combined with the immediate feedback from the tools the climber is using, make intense concentration not only possible, but necessary if the climber is to be successful.51

Painting artwork is another example; the goal is usually clear (seeing a vision come to life on a canvas) and the feedback from the paint on the brush hitting the canvas is immediate. Both the clear goal and the immediate feedback contribute to the feeling of flow.

But flow is also possible in activities with less immediate feedback, such as writing, if the person learns to set clear goals and receive feedback. To achieve flow while doing such creative activities, the person must “internalize [the] criteria for ‘good’ and ‘bad.’”52 Also, the feedback need not be as immediate as that in sports or the arts, as long as it conveys the message that the goal has been obtained.53 The closer in time the feedback is to the action, the better, but immediate feedback is not required.

The second law-student relevant characteristic of a successful flow activity requires the possibility of control of the outcome.54 There must be some learning at stake—and this is the quintessential “teachable moment”—during which the student tries and either succeeds or fails, but in any case is better for the experience of having taken the risk and exercised control over her own experience.55

---

goals and provides immediate feedback. Fifth, one acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life. Sixth, enjoyable experiences allow people to exercise a sense of control over their actions. Seventh, concern for the self disappears, yet paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over. Finally, the sense of the duration of time is altered; hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours.

Id.
50. FLOW, supra note 44, at 49.
51. Id. at 54.
52. Id. at 56
53. Id. at 57.
54. Id. at 60.
55. FLOW, supra note 44, at 61.
Two other points about flow are particularly relevant to legal education. First, although legal doctrine may not be the most fascinating material to many law students, flow researchers have shown that with the right balance of skill and challenge, most activities can induce flow and be psychologically rewarding. In fact, more flow experiences happen at work than during leisure activities. Second, research also showed that students preferred challenging school or part-time work activities that promoted flow, over watching television, an unchallenging task. This research helps refute the argument that students prefer non-challenging activities.

2. Relatedness

The second psychological need that requires nurturing is relatedness to others, which is "the social context that supports internalization." Again, as described by Professor Reeve:

Relatedness refers to the quality of the interpersonal relationship that exists between the teacher and the student, and it captures the student's sense of belongingness and support—of being liked, respected and valued by another person. When the student feels emotionally connected to and interpersonally involved with the teacher, relatedness is high and internalization occurs willingly. When the student feels emotionally distant from [sic] and interpersonally neglected, relatedness is low and internalization does not occur willingly. When . . . teachers are responsive and receptive to students and when they provide a relationship characterized by interpersonal security, autonomy support, and involvement, internalization flourishes.

Not all relationships satisfy the need for relatedness. Relationships between people doing business together, sometimes labeled "exchange" relationships, do not meet the relatedness need, because there is no obligation to be concerned for the other person's needs or welfare. On the other hand, "communal" relation-

56. REEVE, supra note 32, at 63.
57. Id. at 63.
58. REEVE, supra note 15, at 158.
59. REEVE, supra note 32, at 46.
60. Id.
61. REEVE, supra note 15, at 163.
62. Id. at 163-64.
ships do satisfy the relatedness need, because both parties take care to meet the needs of the other person.\textsuperscript{63}

3. Autonomy

Autonomy is the simplest need to explain. Reflecting back on the person-environment dialectic mentioned earlier, autonomy is the desire to have “inner resources, rather than environmental events, determine one’s actions.”\textsuperscript{64} It is the psychological need “to experience self-direction and personal endorsement . . . of one’s behavior.”\textsuperscript{65} Perhaps the prototypical examples of autonomy are intrinsically motivated behaviors, because they are guided strictly by the person’s own interests. But personal autonomy also exists during identified or internalized behavior, when a person volitionally chooses the behavior suggested or modeled by another, but is not controlled or coerced into that behavior.\textsuperscript{66}

III. How Autonomy Support Motivates Students, Engenders Hope and Improves Student Outcomes

Autonomy support is the “amount of freedom a teacher gives to a student so the student can connect his or her behavior to personal goals, interests, and values.”\textsuperscript{67} Autonomy support involves “teaching in ways that nurture students’ intrinsic motivation, and internalization processes.”\textsuperscript{68} Research has shown that “when authorities provide autonomy support and acknowledge their subordinates’ initiative and self-directedness, those subordinates discover, retain and enhance their intrinsic motivations and at least internalize nonenjoyable but important extrinsic motivations.”\textsuperscript{69}

In addition, autonomy support has been shown to also nurture the needs for both competence and relatedness.\textsuperscript{70} Therefore, it is a motivational strategy that promotes and nurtures all three of the basic psychological needs.
Educators can provide autonomy support by:

1. Offering the students as much choice as possible about how to learn the course material or meet the professor’s course goals. This provides the students with *implementation choices* within the constraints of the professor’s course goals.

2. Whenever possible, providing the students with a *meaningful rationale* about the course goals, especially when no choice about mandatory rules and requirements can be provided.

3. Acknowledging and empathizing with the student’s *perspective* of the course, even if that perspective is a negative one, especially when presenting difficult or uninteresting material.

Recall that we want our students to internalize the professional values, behaviors, and skills necessary to succeed in the practice of law. Providing a meaningful rationale has been shown to be one of the best ways to induce such internalization. The idea is to provide the students with enough information about why the values, behaviors, or skills you are sharing are important to their personal goal. Ultimately, we want the student to agree and think “Oh, OK, that makes sense to me; I see why that is important to you; I can see why it could be important to me, too.” Using a “because” phrase when providing a rationale, such as “learning the steps of the writing process is important because employers will expect you to edit your own work,” makes it more likely the subordinate will internalize the value, skill, or behavior.

In addition to increasing student motivation, extensive studies have shown that providing autonomy support increases positive

---


72. Interestingly, students may have mixed responses to choices. See Wallinger, *supra* note 10, at 843-51 (summarizing a research project where students were given multiple choices on how they received feedback on their writing; only one choice was wildly popular with the students). More research is necessary on applying autonomy support to law school.


76. *Id.*
learning outcomes. These include: (1) "Higher academic achievement"; (2) "Enhanced conceptual learning"; (3) "Greater perceived competence"; (4) "Greater creativity"; (5) Greater engagement in class; and (6) A preference for activities which challenge them.\textsuperscript{77}

A study-by-study analysis of these prior works is beyond the scope of this Article. But looking at the list, one can see some of the same outcomes that we seek for law students.

Autonomy support is a tool professors can use which promotes the most persuasive type of extrinsic motivation—identified (or internalized) regulation. Such motivation strongly encourages students to persist when learning new or difficult material. Persistence is critical to learning, and it is easier when it is associated with positive emotion. Autonomy support generates positive emotions; optimal experience, or flow; and contributes to the individual's overall healthy development.

Unfortunately, many law students do not "flow" through their courses in law school. Instead, they are bored and apathetic. Many prior works have documented legal education's shortcomings, and their effects on law students. For example, see Sheldon and Krieger's empirical works, published in 2004 and 2007. The 2007 study summarizes much of the prior literature about the negative effects of law school on law students,\textsuperscript{78} and both studies provide new data.\textsuperscript{79} These sources, and those they cite, are a treasure trove of information about how legal pedagogy affects law students both positively and negatively. Rather than summarizing their findings here, I highly recommend that anyone seeking more information consult the original sources.\textsuperscript{80}

Most research on this topic focuses on the negative effects of legal education on many law students. But in the lead article to this volume, researchers Martin and Rand focused instead on those

\textsuperscript{77} Id. at 24-26 (internal citations omitted). Additionally, Sheldon and Krieger have shown that students at one law school scored better on the bar exam when they perceived their faculty as autonomy-supportive, compared to a second law school where the students felt less supported. See Understanding, supra note 10, at 886-895.

\textsuperscript{78} Understanding, supra note 10, at 883-84.

\textsuperscript{79} Evaluating Change, supra note 10, at 270-75; Understanding, supra note 10, at 888-93.

\textsuperscript{80} See also Emily Zimmerman, An Interdisciplinary Framework For Understanding and Cultivating Law Student Enthusiasm, 58 DEPAUL L. REV. 851 (2009). Professor Zimmerman bravely proposed a brand new "enthusiasm paradigm," grounded in psychological research, which breaks down enthusiasm into the subparts of "law student interest for law study," and vitality or energy for law study. Id. at 854 (emphasis added). She challenges law schools to change so that they do not diminish but instead "cultivate law students' enthusiasm for law study." Id. at 853.
law students who were successful and happy.81 Using the science of positive psychology in general, and hope theory in particular, they sought to find out what personality traits such students possessed.82 Two traits emerged: optimism, which relates to a person's expectations about events beyond the person's control; and hope, which relates to a person's expectations about events that are within the person's control.83

Whereas self-determination theory is grounded in the social context or the interaction between a person and the environment, hope theory is a "cognitive" motivational theory, concerned with a person's mental events.84 Hope theory contains three concepts: goals, pathways thinking, and agentic thinking.85 During their presentation at this Conference, Martin and Rand distinguished the last two concepts by describing pathways thinking as mental "waypower," and agentic thinking as mental "willpower."86 Students demonstrate agentic thinking when they use their mental willpower, or their belief that they can succeed at a task, to overcome the inevitable environmental obstacles that interfere with meeting their goals.87 Therefore, these two psychological theories complement each other, because self-determination theory works to ensure that those responsible for supervising students' learning do not contribute to the list of environmental obstacles students encounter.

Martin and Rand identified five strategies or "principles" by which legal educators could engender hope in their students.88 Principle Two was to "Increase Student Autonomy," and they recommended this principle because "hope correlates positively with perceptions of control."89 As discussed infra, autonomy support places control squarely in the student's hands, and it creates positive emotions by nurturing the needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy.

Martin and Rand concluded "that although more research is warranted, hope appears to be a personality strength that posi-

81. Martin & Rand, supra note 1, at 204.
82. Id. at 205.
83. Id. at 207-09.
84. Reeve, supra note 15, at 206, 259. "Cognitions are mental events." Id. at 206.
85. Martin & Rand, supra note 1, at 207-08.
86. Allison D. Martin & Kevin L. Rand, Presentation to "The 'Colonial Frontier' Legal Writing Conference" (Dec. 5, 2009).
88. Martin & Rand, supra note 1, at 218-31.
89. Id. at 223.
tively influences law student success and well-being." Because being hopeful depends in part on the student’s use of agentic thinking, and autonomy support inspires, encourages, and reinforces such thinking, providing such support engenders hope in students.

III. CONSIDERING APPLYING AUTONOMY SUPPORT?

Conventional wisdom would say that at this point in the Article, there should be a list of specific examples explaining how to apply self-determination theory to law students. While I might be accused of “hiding the ball,” I am declining to provide such a list. I believe such examples must be developed by the faculty members themselves who are seeking to provide autonomy support for students. Autonomy is a highly individual phenomenon, and faculty members must develop their own individual strategies, upon reflection of their own teaching practices, and pedagogical goals. Also, as one who teaches primarily small groups of students, I would not presume to know what would work best for those faculty members who teach large sections of law students. As a starting point, however, I recommend you consider how you respond to student questions, i.e., what is your “response style?”

A. What’s Your Response Style?

Each of us has a motivational style; some tend to be oriented more towards taking charge and controlling students’ behavior; others tend more towards supporting students’ autonomy. In one study, researchers presented managers with vignettes which described a typical problem that the managers might encounter with a subordinate. Then the researchers asked the managers to choose one of four possible responses to those problems. The responses were rated on the degree to which they were autonomy-supportive (highly or moderately) or controlling (highly or moderately).

90. Id. at 205.
92. REEVE, supra note 15, at 150.
Below is one question from that study.\footnote{Id. at 583.} If you are interested in learning more about your response style, take a moment to read the vignette, choose one of the four choices, and then consult the footnote below for the key:

Recent changes in the operation have resulted in a heavier work load for all employees. Barbara, the manager, had hoped the situation would be temporary, but today she learned that her branch would need to continue to work with the reduced staff for an indefinite period. Barbara should:

A. Point out that her employees will keep their own jobs only if they can remain productive at the current rate, and then watch their output carefully.

B. Explain the situation and see if they have suggestions about how they could meet the current demands.

C. Tell all of her employees that they should keep trying because it is to their advantage to do so.

D. Encourage her employees to keep up with the work load by pointing out that other employees in other branches are doing it adequately.\footnote{Self-Determination Theory: An Approach to Human Motivation & Personality, http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/measures/moq_description.php (last visited Mar. 22, 2010) (follow “Download the complete packet for the Motivators’ Orientation Questionnaire in Word format” hyperlink). Respectively, the answers are: A. Highly controlling; B. Highly autonomy-supportive; C. Moderately controlling; and, D. Moderately autonomy-supportive. Id. This questionnaire was based on a previous study, developed for researching the response styles of pre-college teachers. Id.}

B. Modifying Your Response Style

When seeking to provide more autonomy support to your students, I suggest you start small by moderating just one of your responses and making it more autonomy-supportive. Applying autonomy support is as much an attitude shift as it is a teaching technique.

Consider what response you have when students ask questions that could be easily answered by referring to your course syllabus. Does your response denigrate their question, generating negative emotions? Or does it motivate them to begin internalizing the professional value of self-sufficiency, generating positive emotions?
Do you value these questions as opportunities to provide meaningful rationales? Frequently I find I get these types of questions from students who are simply overloaded with information at that moment.

Teaching often involves the concept of “scaffolding,” which means providing student support for learning by a variety of methods. Reminders are one such method, and when faced with a syllabus question from students, I calmly respond by first giving them the specific data they are seeking, such as due dates or reading assignments. Then I use the question as an opportunity to remind them that they had that information all along. I also provide a rationale for why, in the professional world, they would check all their resources, such as court rules, before asking such questions, and then I ask them to pinpoint for me which current resource would have provided the answer. I rarely, if ever, get the same type of question from the same student.

C. Other Suggestions

Martin and Rand reference a number of suggestions in use by other law professors, including Professor Gerry Hess’s idea of collaborating with students on the course design. As a corollary to that idea, at the midterm point in the semester, consider asking a colleague to visit your class and ask your students for their assessment of the class. One tool widely in use in colleges and universities is the “Small Group Instructional Diagnosis” technique. SGID uses an outside facilitator or fellow faculty member to ask your students three questions about the class: What is working well? What needs improvement? And, what suggestions do they have for changing the class? Typically, the professor leaves the classroom while the facilitator meets with the students for about thirty minutes. The facilitator and faculty member then meet to

96. REEVE, supra note 32, at 54. Other scaffolding techniques include: clues, encouragement, assistance, problem-solving strategies, and illustrative examples. Id. For example, in my 1L legal writing class, when I hand out the file materials for the six-week long final exam project, I include a calendar/schedule with suggested specific, weekly goals to help them stay on track and complete the project in the time allotted.


discuss the feedback from the students and their suggestions for improving the course.\textsuperscript{99} SGID is an excellent method by which to provide autonomy support by acknowledging your students' perspective on your course.

IV. CONCLUSION

Self-determination theory has been subjected to rigorous empirical testing by research psychologists, under a wide variety of situations. It has a highly developed paradigm showing what works and what does not work to support an individual's autonomy, thereby allowing the individual to blossom and attain his or her full potential.

After studying self-determination theory, I have concluded that there is no such thing as a stupid question from a law student, but that sometimes there are questions from exhausted, anxious or depressed law students, who have not thought through how to find the answer on their own. If we use autonomy-supportive principles, and simply redirect them with a response style that is, as much as possible, more supportive and less controlling, so that they then can find the answer on their own, we engender hope, which can lead to better learning, and better student outcomes. Does hope spring eternal for the students in your classes?\textsuperscript{100} I hope so.

\textsuperscript{99} SCHWARTZ, supra note 98, at 179.

\textsuperscript{100} Recent research is helping to isolate the areas of the brain involved in generating hope and optimism. See Tali Sharto et. al., \textit{Neural Mechanisms Mediating Optimism Bias}, \textit{NATURE}, Oct. 24, 2007, http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v45/n7166/full/nature06280.html. Scientists scanned the brains of fifteen volunteers while they imagined both positive and negative possible future life events. \textit{Id}. The scientists found that imagining positive future events led to increased activity of the parts of the brain that store emotional memories (amygdala) and regulate emotion responses (rostral anterior cingulate). \textit{Id}. These are thought to be the same areas of the brain that seem to malfunction in depression. \textit{Id}.