

## **Conation: Cultivating the *Will* to Succeed Among Middle and High School Students**

Ernestine G. Riggs, Associate Professor, School of Education, Loyola University

### **Abstract**

A great deal of research has been conducted regarding extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and which concept has the most effective impact on the learning process. Teachers are constantly asking: “*How can I motivate my struggling or low achieving students to learn the essential skills and strategies they will need to be able to compete in this technological and global society?*.” *How do I get them “to want to learn without the issuance of stickers, McDonalds’ coupons, and pizza parties?”*

Extrinsic motivation (external influence) is too frequently utilized to “encourage” students to learn. However, there is a growing body of research (*conation*<sup>1</sup>) that demonstrates the power of intrinsic motivation or “one’s inner *will*, drive, determination, tenacity, and perseverance to want to learn. The *will* is an intangible place *within* each person that internally drives or compels one *to want to learn* for the personal value and self-satisfactory of learning.<sup>2</sup> Conation creates change from within; this transformation has the potential of refocusing our paradigm regarding the impact and influence the *will* has in the process of teachers teaching and students learning.

### **Introduction**

How often have teachers asked, “When will they learn? Why is it so difficult for them to understand this or that concept? What is it going to take for the proverbial light bulb to come on?” “How do I get them to *want* to learn for the pure sake of learning?” “What do I do with those students who have given up on themselves, school, and even life?” What causes some students to disengage from learning and productive living? Why do some adolescents lack the will to aspire to worthy goals, a worthwhile dream, or fail to strive to be the very best they can be?

In contrast, why are other students *internally driven* to learn, compelled to succeed, and inspired to strive for what is often perceived as impossible fetes of excellence? If we want to effectively teach and engage students in authentic and successful learning, we must first develop a breakthrough factor for achieving success. In the classroom, it all begins with a relationship. It begins with the *will* to teach, on the part of the facilitators of learning (teachers), and the *will* to learn, a responsibility that falls on the shoulders of students.

### **Conation: The Concept Defined**

---

<sup>1</sup>W. Huitt, *Conation as an Important Factor of Mind*. Retrieved October 7, 2003 from <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/regsys/conation.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Cheryl R. Gholar and Ernestine G. Riggs, *Connecting with Students’ Will to Succeed: The Power of Conation* (Glenview: Pearson Professional Development, 2004).

Where does this incentive to live, learn, and succeed reside? Growing research indicates that the dimension of its strength lies in an intangible place *within* the learner.<sup>3</sup> However, the results thereof, are often profound, and sometimes immeasurable. Does this place have a name? Is it intangible and immeasurable? What is its purpose? This developing body of research explores the psychology of learning from the standpoint of looking at the determinants of learning as it relates to the learner taking the initiative and responsibility for his or her own learning. Isn't this a novel concept?

Although the research is not definitive, it offers a foundation for future research in the area of intrinsic motivation and the volitional aspects of human behavior. Lepper defines *intrinsic motivated learning* as “learning that occurs in a situation in which the most narrowly defined activity from which the learning occurs would be done without any external reward or punishment.”<sup>4</sup> This self-motivation, self-effort, striving, and volition are also referred to as *conation*.

Conation (koh NAY shun) is a derivative of the Latin word *conatus*, which is defined as a natural tendency, impulse or striving; used in Spinozism philosophy, it is referred to as the inclination of a thing to persist in its own being. In Webster's *Third New International Unabridged Dictionary*,<sup>5</sup> conation is defined as the conscious drive to perform apparently volitional acts, with or without knowledge of the origin of the drive, distinguished from affection and cognition. *Good's Dictionary of Education*<sup>6</sup> defines the conative domain as striving or having the power to strive or struggle toward a goal which may be conscious or unconscious; descriptive as one of the three great divisions of the mind (historically) namely the *will*, as contrasted with terms descriptive of the feeling (affective) or the power of knowing (cognitive).

Conation is in the “work domain” of learning. Students will engage or disengage their *will* to learn based on their perception of reality; in other words, whether the topic or subject matter has some personal, rational, or “real life” meaning for them. Their level of engagement also depends on their sense of self and how authentic the task is for them. Adolescents want to

---

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>M.R. Lepper, “Motivational Considerations in the Study of Instruction,” *Cognition and Instruction* (1988) 5, 289-310.

<sup>5</sup>*Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Unabridged, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2002).

<sup>6</sup>Carter V. Good, *Dictionary of Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1945).

know “what’s in it for me?” If they see something is worth the effort, then they will put forth whatever effort is required.

### **Understanding the Concept of Conation**

Conation can be thought of as “an internal engine” that drives the external tasks and desires. It is the interconnecting network of energy that transforms ideas into action. If we use an automobile metaphor, we might say that perception of reality will determine if the drive shaft (the work domain) is going to engage the engine (the brain), and the transmission (the heart of learning) to the total process. The drive shaft links “*what I want to know*” to “*how I feel about the task*” and subsequently “*how I will ultimately respond to the task, the various situations in life, and the world in which I live.*”

The “work domain” is the connective tissue that puts knowledge (cognition) and feelings (affection) into action. It links learning to life. As we examine teaching for understanding and the variables that lead to authentic success, the “work domain” is not unlike the owner’s manual of an automobile. It enables the owner, in this case the learner, to more fully understand what he/she owns and what it will take, when sliding into the driver’s seat, to keep the engine (brain) and the transmission (heart) and all the other vital organs and parts healthy, knowledgeable, and ready to function at their highest level of performance.

Conation is innate! It is in each one of us -- we are born with the *will* of wanting to succeed and the determination to do what is necessary in order to reach our goals. Observe a baby learning to walk. Regardless of the number of times the baby fails to maintain his or her balance or upright position, something drives him or her to continuously get up and try time and time again, day after day, sometimes for weeks, until those shaky, unsteady steps are transformed into ambulatory confidence. Someone, family members, friends, sometimes even strangers, provide the motivation through encouraging words (external force), but it is the conative drive (intrinsic motivation) that gets the child up and back on his or her feet regardless of how much effort it takes. Unfortunately, somewhere between those first successful baby steps and the giant step into school and life, this *will*, *determination*, and *effort* are diminished or destroyed all together.

What is it in the course of our existence that moves us and then makes us move, enabling human capacity to create its own rhythms and realities in the dance of life? The resident choreographer residing in the soul of the teacher never stops asking one collective, compelling

rhetorical question... “Who will teach them to dance with the wind, and touch the sky with their hearts, minds, and souls? Who will enable them to develop a sense of “self motivation” to even desire to participate in this dance of life and learning?”<sup>7</sup>

### **Changing Paradigms**

As facilitators of learning, we extend our reach to a young star, shining in silence, or to the learner who, seemingly, has no hope. We teach our students to take the risk, to step out there on the unstable plank of life, to understand that they have the ability to cope with the everyday challenges, that they have the *will*, skills, gifts, and talents to succeed, not only in school, but also in life.

As educators, we have learned that we cannot “make students learn.” The age-old adage, “You can lead a horse to water, but cannot make it drink,” applies aptly to students as well. We can teach them, attempt to motivate them, but cannot learn for them.<sup>8</sup> This desire must be proactive on their part. Students must, first, have the *will* to want to learn, and then they must be willing to put forth and apply the effort to the learning tasks. However, past and present experiences have taught us that students do not always learn what is taught, or adequately learn what is required, or that they necessarily want to learn! Thus the question--how do teachers give students the incentive to learn and the *drive* or *will* to achieve? The answer--teachers cannot *give* students the desire, drive, or will. There is not one teacher, parent, or any other stakeholder who has the power to externally *make* students learn. The elements of *drive*, *will*, and *effort* must emanate from the individual. However, we can awaken and cultivate these elements through authentic and creative teaching. Author, Bob Sullo, has written a book entitled “**Activating the Desire to Learn.**”<sup>9</sup> His very title attests to the fact that as facilitators of teaching and learning, we have the essential tools to develop, nurture, foster, encourage and, yes, activate a desire on the part of students to want to learn; however, the *will* and willingness to put forth the effort, as previously stated, must come from them. This is not an impossible expectation, as these factors have been a part of the students’ psychological structure since birth.

Unfortunately, these concepts have been overlooked as a vital interventive approach. Teachers have literally ignored the payoff of these elements as they struggle through each day, trying to “coerce” students into learning required subject matter.

---

<sup>7</sup>Gholar and Riggs, 2004.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Bob Sullo, *Activating the Desire to Learn* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2007).

## Forum on Public Policy

The concepts of *will*, *drive*, and *effort* have also been ignored too long by too many students who, at this very tentative time of their lives, often, seem to think that in the scheme of things, learning is not important enough to which they should devote a great deal of time and effort.<sup>10</sup> It has been noted that at the middle school level, emphasis should be placed on mastery and improvement instead of on relative ability and social comparison. However, observed and empirical data has demonstrated the opposite. More prominence is placed on relative ability, competition, and social status. Less emphasis is placed on self-motivation, effort, self-improvement, and life planning strategies. This shift results in a decline of task and ability goals, self-esteem and confidence and, of course, academic achievement.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Gholar and Riggs, 2004.

<sup>11</sup>E.M. Anderman and C. Midgley, Changes in Achievement Goal Orientations after the Transition to Middle School. Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, Boston, MA, March 1996. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED306226).

### **Conation as it Relates to Adolescents**

In 1977, Joan Lipsitz conducted a classic study subtitled, *A Review of Research and Programs Concerning Early Adolescence*.<sup>12</sup> This study focused attention on early adolescence as being a stage of human development that is unique to this population of young people. Subsequent studies have indicated that young people between the ages of ten to fifteen are challenged not only with physical changes, but are thrown in the throes of trying to manage the changes occurring in their social, emotional, mental, and moral development.

Those of us who have contact or interact with adolescents on a regular basis, know many of the perceptions and beliefs attributed to them are generally stereotypical, negative, and even mythical. Some general characteristics that have been ascribed to middle school students include the perceptions of them being “a composite of raging hormones, who are often confused about who they are, want to be, or should be. They have a difficult time accepting their physical and emotional transformations; often see themselves as unattractive, unaccepted, unappreciated, and even unloved. They want very much to ‘fit in,’ but frequently feel isolated by their peers, teachers, and family.

A number of adolescents are experiencing social and emotional trauma, are involved in anti-social behaviors, exhibit a lack of moral and value-based attitudes and actions. Of course, we know these perceptions, assumptions, and generalizations do not apply to all adolescents, but research has demonstrated that this population is “at risk.”

How often have you heard proclamations, questions, and comments from colleagues and parents or posed similar questions yourself such as: “*What is wrong with these kids? “They hit that adolescent stage and their minds are on everything except learning!” “They are true examples of the ‘me generation,’ they only care about themselves.” They are selfish, disrespectful, short-tempered, moody, and downright unmanageable!” “When will they learn?” “Why don’t they understand that school is more than designer jeans, iPods, or the latest DVD releases?” Don’t they see the importance of getting a good education? “What will it take for them to see the light?” “When will they take some responsibility for their own learning?” “How can I motivate them to want to learn?” “They just don’t seem interested in even trying to get an*

---

<sup>12</sup>Joan W. Lipsitz, *Growing up Forgotten: A Review of Research and Programs Concerning Early Adolescence: A Report to the Ford Foundation* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1977).

*education!” “If I could pour the information into their heads, I would, but I can’t make them learn. Their minds are on everything but school.” Why is this?*

It is true that many changes are taking place during what has been described as the most crucial stage in a young person’s developmental process. John H. Lounsbury stated: “No other age level is of more importance to the future of individuals, and, literally, to that of society; because these are the years when youngsters crystallize their beliefs about themselves and firm up their self-concepts, their philosophies of life, and their values... the influential factors that are the ultimate determinants of their behavior.”<sup>13</sup>

In opposition to the negative traits attributed to many adolescents, research data and personal observations illustrate the majority of young adolescents are quite “normal.” They have strong morals and core values that preclude their participation in premarital sex, indulgence in alcohol and drugs, and/or other unacceptable social behaviors. They travel down the road of puberty rather effortlessly, avoiding many of the ditches of despair and potholes of uncertainties and confusion about their self-identity and future. They are happy, humorous, trusting, adventuresome, clever, smart, street-wise, challenging, and hopeful.

In regards to their cognitive development, they are in what Piaget called the Formal-Operational Stage that occurs approximately between the ages of eleven and fifteen, in which they have the ability to think abstractly and to reason hypothetically.<sup>14</sup>

However, we cannot afford to become distracted by the attitudes and unacceptable behaviors that some students bring into the educational setting. Our students are more than statistics or utilities to be clustered together and labeled to form standardized norms by which success and failure are measured.

Understanding students and the belief systems they bring to school each day is essential in determining an awareness of why their commitment to learning has or has not reached a mandated or expected instructional level. What our students believe about themselves is similar to a filter through which a student hears, absorbs, and reacts to what is being taught. Children and adolescents come to school with pre-existing beliefs about their abilities and what they can and will learn. Teachers who view themselves as change agents also view their students as active participants and contributing members of society. They teach to touch lives, helping

---

<sup>13</sup>John H. Lounsbury, Key Characteristics of Middle Schools. *ERIC Digest*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED401050).

<sup>14</sup>Thomas C. Gunning, *Creating Literacy Instruction for All Students* (Boston: Pearson Education Inc., 2006).

students to understand that they can look up the rough side of any mountain in life and then decide that they, too, can climb.

### **Conative Teachers Create Conative Students**

In the conative classroom, performance is high and a climate of excellence is created and preserved through the development of mutual trust, respect, student potential, support, high expectations, a collaborative synergy, achievement, and happiness. In this context, teachers are human resource developers and knowledge brokers, who utilize their skills to transform lives.

A link that has been missing in our search for relevance in education is the link between conation and school achievement. An understanding of the crucial role the *will* to learn plays in sustainable school achievement and, ultimately, success in life, cannot be ignored.

The negative side of human behavior we sometimes observe and experience in the actions of students in our classrooms often results from the actual or perceived lack of positive nurturing and empowerment from significant others. If the operational framework that governs the overall thinking in our culture is “He who dies with the most toys wins,” one of our challenges as educators will be to help students expand their thinking about life, education, and future goals. The negative social realities that exist in many of our schools are merely a reflection of the myriad of mixed messages students are confronted with on a daily basis.

Overall, learning communities are looking at transforming ways in which schools go about the process of educating students. However, real transformation works from the inside out. Transformation begins from within the hearts and minds of people who advocate change. It permeates an entire culture, the society and all of the individual and collective constituents who work within as well as outside of the framework in which change is desired.

As we explore what should be taught and what students should know in order to succeed in the global world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, school agendas will consider more and more that transformational learning will be motivated by those who have the *will* to teach and the determination to reach each student with no exception.

We, as educators must have the *will* to want to reach, and then teach students. We must consistently pursue authentic and interesting learning tasks that will not only challenge students, but will develop an inner craving and thirst for knowledge that goes beyond “attaining the best grade, or passing that high stakes test.” It is up to us, the facilitators of learning, to ignite that flame of desire on the part of the learner to want to learn for the unadulterated sake of learning,



the self-joy and satisfaction of discovering she/he can do it, as we, their ever-present cheerleaders, provide them with support, encouragement, an abundance of praise and pride.

In an article by Asa Hillard entitled, “*Do We Have the Will to Educate All Children?*” he states, “If we embrace a *will* to excellence, we can deeply restructure education in ways that will enable teachers to release the full potential of all of our children.”<sup>15</sup> We can make a difference by being there for our students as they attempt to navigate their way down the undesignated route of life...as they try to make sense of school, learning, and life.

### **Conation as an Antidote to “Academic Anemia:” Utilizing Literature to Integrate the Cognitive, Affective, and Conative Domains**

When students are faced with new or different tasks, they are required to concentrate and focus their efforts on the prescribed instructional activity in order to learn the content or complete the task (cognition) Their success in accomplishing these objectives depends on several factors; one being how the learner perceives his or her emotional, physical, or mental ability to execute the assigned tasks (affective). Research has indicated it is this factor or domain that deals primarily with one’s attitude toward life, learning, self-perception, and personal aspirations. Feelings about self-esteem and self-efficacy a person has about him/herself have a profoundly significant influence on one’s level of learning or performance ability.

However, examine various test scores for middle and high school students or ask any middle or high school teacher and they will tell you these students do not always exhibit the academic skills of critical thinking, reading abilities, and math proficiencies. Teachers will also share the fact that these students would and could be more academically successful if they “would just put forth more effort, have or take more initiative, and follow through with the completion of lessons or projects. Again, the question asked by the teacher: “Why can’t or won’t these students learn?” The question asked by the students: “Why do I have little or no interest in learning; do I have the ability to learn if I put my mind to it?”

---

<sup>15</sup>Asa Hillard, III, “Do We Have the Will to Educate all Children?,” *Educational Leadership*, 49(1) (1991): 31-36.

Kanfer, Ackerman, and Snow and Watson, Clark, and Tellegen<sup>16</sup> explored the concept of conation, referring to conative aptitudes. These aptitudes encompassed the mental states or behaviors an individual experienced in various situations or circumstances.

Snow and Jackson of Stanford University completed and published **Assessment of Conative Constructs for Educational Research and Evaluation: A Catalogue**. This research is not by any means conclusive. The researchers themselves stated, “Unfortunately, most of the research on conative constructs in educational research has been limited to small-scale, isolated and piecemeal studies. Measures have usually been limited to questionnaires, often hastily developed and inadequately evaluated.”<sup>17</sup>

However this is a beginning. Until recently these conative constructs, as they relate to students’ abilities and desires to learn, have been virtually forgotten. A multitudinous amount of research has been conducted, and an equal number of articles and books written on the affective and cognitive domains. However, the conative domain has remained that untapped reservoir as a possible tonic or potential antidote for “academic anemia.”

Envision a classroom of students who are *intrinsically motivated* and ready to give one hundred percent to the learning process with the focused goal of working up to their highest potential! The Impossible Dream? An Unreachable Goal? Not necessarily. This scenario could be the norm rather than the exception in classrooms throughout this nation. This effort-driven environment already exists in countless schools...where academic success resides. Is this drive “to make it” or “succeed” in the genes or in the environment in which such students live and learn?

Students are exposed to the concept of conation in their classrooms on a daily basis. The conative theme can be found in a variety of curricula and subject areas. There are many applicable examples of this *drive* or the *will* to persevere through intrinsic motivation and effort, specifically in the literary genre. On a daily basis, students read or listen to stories, watch movies and videos about fictional and nonfictional characters who, regardless of the challenges and obstacles placed before them, manage to persevere victoriously. Even the very young have

---

<sup>16</sup>D. Watson, L. A. Clark, and A. Tellegen, “Development and Validation of Brief Measures of Positive and Negative Affect: The PANAS Scales,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1988).  
keck.waisman.wisc.edu

<sup>17</sup>R. E. Snow and D. N. Jackson, III, *Assessment of Conative Constructs for Educational Research and Evaluation: A Catalogue* (CSE Tech.Rep.No.354) (Los Angeles: University of California National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, 1992).

that internalized drive, as evidenced in infants as they progress through the cognitive and social developmental stages.

As early as preschool, in Aesop's fable of *The Hare and the Tortoise*,<sup>18</sup> children hear how the sluggish tortoise persevered to beat the spirited hare in a seemingly impossible race to win. In *The Little Engine That Could*,<sup>19</sup> a diminutive and frail engine managed to climb an enormous mountain only because it thought it could; each time the little train said "I think I can, I think I can," it put forth more effort into the endeavor and did it! Children of all ages, as well as adults, watched the animated film *The Lion King*,<sup>20</sup> and cheered for Simba, a young African lion, who managed to find his rightful place in the "Circle of Life." In spite of being besieged by obstacles and challenges, Simba perseveres through his courage, tenacity, commitment, and conviction.

Students also read about real people such as *The Wright Brothers and How They Invented the Airplane*.<sup>21</sup> The fact that many before them had failed, and some had even died trying to unlock the secret of flight did not discourage the brothers from their quest. They experienced failure in their early attempts, but did not give up. They were self-motivated, believed in their vision and their ability to make that vision a reality; they had the *will* to succeed in their efforts of getting a plane to fly.

Harriet Tubman had conation.<sup>22</sup> She was determined to lead as many slaves as possible to freedom. Even the threat of capture or death did not deter her *will* or impede her efforts to succeed in her mission.

*The Story of My Life*<sup>23</sup> has students engrossed in and consumed with Helen Keller's compelling, *drive will, determination*, and successful struggle to surmount what many would consider overwhelming obstacles. *The Jackie Robinson Story*<sup>24</sup> depicting how he fought discrimination and extreme racial prejudices to become America's first black major league baseball player is yet another saga of pure inner *drive, will, courage*, and determination that still inspires students of all ethnic and cultural heritages.

---

<sup>18</sup>George Fyler Townsend, *Aesop's Fables by Aesop* (Fairfield: 1st World Library, 2004).

<sup>19</sup>Watty Piper, pseudo, Cristina Ong, *Meet the Little Engine that Could* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 2001).

<sup>20</sup>Disney's *The Lion King*, by Walt Disney Company.

<sup>21</sup>Clarion R. Freedman, Young Adult Literature in the Classroom: Reading It. In *The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane* (New York: Holiday House, 2002).

<sup>22</sup>J. Ferris, *Go Free Or Die: A Story About Harriet Tubman*. Books: google.com.

<sup>23</sup>H. Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Reprinted) (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1967).

<sup>24</sup>Paul J. Zingg, "Diamond in the Rough: Baseball and the Study of American Sports History," *The History Teacher* 19(3) (May, 1986): 385-403.

## Forum on Public Policy

In *The Diary of Anne Frank*,<sup>25</sup> students find themselves vicariously enduring the fear and ordeals faced by Anne, her family and friends, but at the same time, admiring the tenacious *will* to survive as these people lived in the midst of such cognitive dissonance. The life stories of people such as Winston Churchill, Tecumseh, Dr. Severo Ochoa, Cesar Chavez, and Nelson Mandela are other examples of individuals who persevered by sheer will, determination, and effort.

Some believe the distance between the learners and the expectations that have been established for their learning are simply too far apart, unattainable, and unrealistic. As educators, our role in the conative domain is to teach students how to shorten this distance by becoming their external cheerleaders, so they can develop internal cheerleaders of their own. It is our role to teach them through literature, videos, movies, and real-life role models. Through these venues and other various experiences, students are exposed to how battles can be fought and won, and how to fight and win those battles through resolve and effort, experiencing what it feels like to overcome the odds in school and, most importantly, in life.

Teachers can help students better understand the role of conation and how it operates in relationship to the cognitive and affective domains. These domains are related, but distinctly different in terms of the philosophical and instructional focus. The chart below illustrates these differences, but interconnectiveness of the relationships among the cognitive, affective, and conative domains.

---

<sup>25</sup>F. Goodrich and A. Hackett, *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Copyright © Renewed 1984, 1986). Books...Google.com.

**COGNITIVE**

**(To Know)**

**I have to learn** how the industrial revolution impacted rural areas.

**Attributes**

knowing  
problem-solving  
thinking critically  
reflective thinking  
comprehending

**AFFECTIVE**

**(To Feel)**

**I know I can** research this topic and find the information I need.

**Attributes**

emotions  
feelings  
self-perception  
self-concept

**CONATIVE**

**(To Have the Will)**

I am having a difficult time finding what I need, but **I will not give up!**

**Attributes**

will  
persistence  
willfulness  
patience  
tenacity

As teachers and students learn more about the vital interplay of the conative connection and school achievement, students can be taught how to set goals, stay focused, and transcend learning barriers through determination and effort. Students begin to understand that in order to excel, it will be the conative connection that will move them above environmental or social conditions that may have a tendency to “bring them down,” or take them off course. It is in the work of the teacher and the student that connects the heart, mind, and *will* of the learner to the mission. Without the conative connection, authentic teaching and learning just won’t happen! The “work domain” is integral to authentic success in that it moves the student into learning that goes beyond the notes, quizzes, and final exams. It internalizes itself in the life of the learner by actualizing the belief that if there is a way...**I HAVE THE WILL!**

**Conation as a Transformative Factor**

How is conation essential to the learning process? Without conation there is no product, only potential. Conation is the achievement aspect of ability, the process through which we fulfill our goals.<sup>26</sup> Motivation sets the stage for action; conation carries the action through.<sup>27</sup> The conative domain connects to the human experience of learning, as it opens the door to new

---

<sup>26</sup>Kathy Kolbe, *The Conative Connection* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990).

<sup>27</sup>L. Corno and R. Kanfer, “The Role of Volition in Learning and Performance,” *Review of Research in Education* 1993: 301-341.

adventures for both teachers and students. It provides a framework or model for teaching students new learnings. This framework consists of “The Three C’s of Conation”:

- **Captivate**...seize students’ attention with interesting, grade/subject appropriateness materials, and authentic tasks.
- **Cultivate**...foster and encourage the development and refinement of students’ abilities, skills, gifts, and talents.
- **Connect**...establish a bridge between what is taught and what is learned.<sup>28</sup>

Alexander Graham Bell, during the turn of the century, described to his contemporaries as best he could, the psycho-dynamics of what happens to a person internally when the focused energy of the affective and conative connection moves into operation. He stated: “*What this power is I cannot say. All I know is that it exists.... and it becomes available only when you are in that state of mind in which you know exactly what you want...and are fully determined not to quit until you get it.*”<sup>29</sup> Although Bell was referring to something entirely different, his statement can be used to describe conation in its purest terms.

Efforts to transform learning into high performance begins with understanding what makes learning happen, what brings about the *will* to learn, what creates the “buy-in,” what transforms a life? In our search to define success in the academic arena and in life, we know that some students simply need to uncover within themselves the *will* and determination to learn and “to do.” Who will show them? Who will teach them? Who will be there for them? The answer is, as mentors and teachers, we are often “it!”

Deep within the place where learning lives, is the human dimension, the conative domain, (the will, drive and determination) to succeed. We can tap into a wellspring of learning, the heart of the matter, the place where fortitude, commitment, adaptability, and persistence are nurtured. Students’ metacognitive skills can be enhanced as they encounter daily challenges in their lives in and out of school.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching in the conative domain begins when our students enter the classroom and meet that conative energy at the door. This kind of teaching demonstrates the teacher not only has the *will* and tenacity to meet and cope with the demands of a diverse student population, but

---

<sup>28</sup>Judson Hixson, Cheryl R. Gholar, and Ernestine G. Riggs, *Ensuring Success for “Low Yield” Students: Building Lives and Molding Futures*. Retrieved October 7, 2003 from <http://www.teachstream.com>.

<sup>29</sup>A. G. Bell, *The Multiple Telegraph* (Boston: Franklin Press, Rand, Avery & Co.), 1876.

performs the type of teaching that cares, questions, challenges, and expects a high quality of performance from every student. What we give is often what we receive. Elements of the conative connection that facilitate and foster productive learning include caring, believing, listening, understanding, working together toward a common goal, sharing ideas, modeling expected behavior, coaching, and mentoring. When these elements come together in the reciprocal presence of the *will* to teach and the *will* to learn, we create breakthrough factors that move students and teachers together to higher levels of knowing, being, and action.

It is through the process of conation that goals are accomplished, success is achieved, results are attained, and intellectual effort put forth. This ability to take action is within every individual. However, ability remains in the form of potential until knowledge and emotions are moved into productive action.

In education, conation is the domain wherein action and *will* are engaged by the learner to produce academic persistence. The purposeful desire to strive, and the determination to acquire knowledge or a skill is critical to student achievement and authentic success. Conation is one's readiness to accomplish a particular task. If it is infused into the synergy of learning, the result will be a self-motivated, competent, knowledgeable, and productive learner.

We can say that in the conative domain, a mind driven by the *will* to succeed will travel the success journey. The battle scars on this road serve as emotional flags of intellectual heroism and notches of courage that play a particular role in moving the learner from cognitive dissonance to perhaps some small or great victory of personal triumph. Internal (the student's conative spirit) and external (teachers, parents) cheerleaders groove within the intellectual psyche the notion that "I can transform the current challenge(s) into a passageway leading to achievement."

It is in the conative domain that a teacher's attempt to facilitate learning becomes actualized through the individual student's *will*, *drive*, and *effort* to achieve. It is here that "learning" is transformed into the acquisition of knowledge. Conation sets in motion the charge to learn and the responsibility to carry out that charge. In moments of internal conflict, the charge to excel will overpower the temptation to procrastinate in completing the task at hand, or to ignore it altogether. Leaving no obstacle unturned, conation carries the learner forward, prepared to achieve or surpass the intended goal. Conative learners take charge of their learning. Through persistence, the learner transforms potential into reality.

## Forum on Public Policy

The conative world is the small, yet multidimensional world of the mind and heart filled with mental cheerleaders, constructivists, and instructional bulldozers, all doing their part to level the intellectual playing field, while cheering the learner on to academic success and greatness. The victorious cheers that come from *within*, will guide our adolescents down the highway of fulfillment, purpose, and a meaningful life. We must teach our young people to be cognizant of the road signs, pay attention to the detours and barriers, but constantly remind and instill in them the fact that they have the knowledge, *will*, *determination* and *power* to successfully reach their destination if they put forth the effort. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow stated: “Not in the clamor of the crowded street, not the shouts and plaudits of the throng, but in *ourselves* are triumph and defeat.”

It is that internal motivation, drive, and tenacity...in other words, the conative spirit that determines which path we will take on life’s journey as we reach the proverbial “fork in the road.”

### References

- Anderman, E.M. & Midgley, C. (1996). Changes in Achievement Goal Orientations After the Transition to Middle School. Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, Boston, MA, March 1996. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED306226).
- Bell, A. G. (1876). *The Multiple Telegraph*. Boston: Franklin Press, Rand, Avery & Co.
- Corno, L. & Kanfer, R. (1993). “The Role of Volition in Learning and Performance,” *Review of Research in Education*.
- Disney, Walt. (1994). *The Lion King*. Produced by Walt Disney Company.
- Ferris, J. (1988). *Go Free Or Die: A Story About Harriet Tubman*. Books: google.com.
- Freedman, Clarion R. (2002). Young Adult Literature in the Classroom:: Reading It. *The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane*. New York: Holiday House.
- Gholar, Cheryl, R. & Riggs, Ernestine G. (2004). *Connecting with Students’ Will to Succeed: The Power of Conation*. Glenview, IL: Pearson Professional Development.
- Good, Carter V. (1945). *Dictionary of Education*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Goodrich, F.& Hackett, A. (Copyright © Renewed 1984, 1986). *The Diary of Anne Frank* Books...Google.com.
- Gunning, Thomas C. (2006). *Creating Literacy Instruction for All Students*. Boston: Pearson Education Inc.
- Hillard, III. Asa. (1991). “Do We Have the Will to Educate all Children?,” *Educational Leadership*, 49(1):31-36.
- Hixson, Judson; Gholar, Cheryl R., & Riggs, Ernestine G. *Ensuring Success for “Low Yield” Students: Building Lives and Molding Futures*. Retrieved October 7, 2003 from <http://www.teachstream.com>.
- Huitt, W. (2003). *Conation as an Important Factor of Mind*. Retrieved October 7, 2003. <http://chiron.Valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/regsys/conation.html>.
- Kanfer, R & Ackerman P. L. (1989). “Motivation and Cognitive Abilities: An Integrative/Aptitude-Treatment Interaction Approach to Skill Acquisition,” *Journal of Applied Psychology - Monograph* 74 657-690.
- Keller, Helen. (1967). *The Story of My Life* (Reprinted) New York: Scholastic Book Services



## Forum on Public Policy

- Kolbe, Kathy.(1990). *The Conative Connection*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Lepper, M.R. (1988). Motivational Considerations in the Study of Instruction,” *Cognition and Instruction* 5, 289-310.
- Lispsitz, Joan W. (1977). *Growing up Forgotten: A Review of Research and Programs Concerning Early Adolescence: A Report to the Ford Foundation*. Lexington: Lexington Books.
- Lounsbury, John H. (1996). Key Characteristics of Middle Schools. *ERIC Digest*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED401050).
- Pipper, Watty (pseudo, Cristina Ong). (2001). *Meet the Little Engine that Could*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.
- Snow, R. E, & Jackson, III. D. N. (1992). *Assessment of Conative Constructs for Educational Research and Evaluation: A Catalogue* (CSE Tech.Rep.No.354) (Los Angeles: University of California National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing.
- Sullo, Bob. (2007). *Activating the Desire to Learn*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Townsend, George Fyler. (2004). Aesop's Fables by [Aesop Fairfield](#): 1st World Library.
- Watson, D. L., Clark, A. & Tellegen, A.. (1988). “[Development and Validation of Brief Measures of Positive and Negative Affect: The PANAS Scales](#),” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* keck.waisman.wisc.edu.
- Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (2002. (Unabridged, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.). Springfield: Merriam-Webster.
- Zingg, Paul J. (1986). “Diamond in the Rough: Baseball and the Study of American Sports History.” *The History Teacher* 19(3). May, 385-403.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2006.