Book Review

Directed motivational currents and language education: Exploring implications for pedagogy

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The construct of a *directed motivational current* (DMC), or *". . . a surge of motivational energy that seemingly picks an individual up and carries them sometimes unimaginable distances"* (p. xvi) was introduced into research on motivation in second and foreign language (L2) learning less than a decade ago (e.g., Dörnyei, Ibrahim, & Muir, 2015; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). Despite being a relative newcomer to the field, the concept has provided an impulse for empirical investigations which have primarily focused on validating its core assumptions and proposed dimensions using largely qualitative methodology (e.g., Safdari & Maftoon, 2007; Zarrinabadi & Tavakoli, 2017). The book *Directed Motivational Currents in Language Education: Implications for Pedagogy* by Christine Muir is another valuable addition to this line of inquiry and it can be seen in a way as a follow-up to and extension of the monograph *Motivational Currents in Language Learning: Frameworks for Focused Interventions* that she co-authored with Zoltán Dörnyei and Alastair Henry in 2016. Since I had the opportunity to write a review of this volume for *Studies in Second Language Learning and*

Teaching (Pawlak, 2017), I was all the more curious to see how research on DMCs has progressed and what promise it currently holds for L2 pedagogy. Therefore, the moment the publisher contacted me with the suggestion that SSLLT might be a good venue for a review, I immediately jumped on the offer and simply felt compelled to take on this task myself. I have to say from the get-go that the book has lived up to my expectations and, although I might be somewhat skeptical about some of the implications for classroom practice, I have to admit that Christine Muir's work represents a so-much-needed step forward in the study of DMCs. This certainly cannot too often be said about all the apparently innovative ideas introduced into the domain of second language acquisition research.

Following the "Preface," which sets the scene for the discussion of DMCs and provides an overview of the contents, the book is comprised of four parts, each subdivided into chapters and ending with a succinct summary that also serves the purpose of signaling what is to come next. Part I, "Introducing DMCs and Intensive Group Projects," consists of three chapters which focus on the developments in L2 motivational research that have contributed to the rise of DMCs, such as complex dynamic systems theory, possible selves, emotions or vision (Chapter 1), the definition and distinctive attributes of the construct (Chapter 2), as well as DMCs in the classroom which involve entire learner groups and can be generated by means of intensive projects (Chapter 3). Part II and Part III shift the focus to empirical investigations which aimed to rectify the limitations of previous research, which, as pointed out above, has mainly been qualitative in nature and has not really moved beyond validating the initial theoretical framework. Each of the two parts consists of three chapters (Chapters 4-6 and Chapters 7-9, respectively), which present the methodology of the study, the results and, in Part III, some considerations on how the implemented project could be improved upon, and, yet again, reader-friendly summaries. Part I reports a questionnaire study drawing on online data from all over the world, showing that a DMC is a recognizable and universal phenomenon, identifying novel triggers responsible for its occurrence, as well as providing specialists with a new research tool, that is the *DMC Diagnostic Scale*. Part III, in turn, describes the findings of an interventionist study which aimed to purposefully facilitate a group DMC in a class of students of diverse nationalities at a language school attached to an Australian university. This was done with the help of what is referred to as an *intensive group project with DMC potential*, of the type Dörnyei at al. (2017) label *All Eyes and the Final Product*. The analyses of the data collected by student and teacher diaries as well as interviews demonstrated that a DMC was indeed successfully engineered and participation in the project led to L2 development. Finally, Part IV, "The Future of DCM Research," reflects on the seven frameworks for focused interventions introduced by Dörnyei et al. (2017),

stressing in particular the potential of study abroad experiences, and considers the directions of future research on DMCs, including action research. The book closes with the "Afterword," in which readers can find further advice on implementing projects with DMC potential alongside a list of useful resources.

The publication of Christine Muir's book without doubt has the potential to usher in a new era both with regards to research into DMCs in L2 learning as well as how the outcomes of such research are translated into everyday classroom practice. First and foremost, I warmly welcome the admission that, while theorizing about and investigating the construct may still be in its infancy, the time is ripe to move beyond conceptual papers, manuals on how DMCs should be generated or studies that do little more than showing that the framework might be applicable to specific groups of learners in highly selective contexts. I am impressed even more by the two studies reported in the book. To my mind, the contribution of the first lies not only in the fact that it corroborated the universality of DMCs for various settings and learner groups, but also, or even more importantly, that it provided us with a tool (i.e., *DMC Diagnostic Scale*) that will allow enriching qualitative data collected so far and seeking relationships among DMCs and a wide range of individual difference variables that may impact their occurrence (e.g., personality, learning styles, learning strategies, boredom proneness, curiosity or willingness to communicate). The undisputable value of the second investigation is that it has successfully demonstrated that facilitating DMCs is feasible in an instructional setting, even if the conditions in this case were exceptionally propitious. It is clear that such empirical evidence might at the end of the day be more convincing for teachers than just proving that DMCs exist and that perhaps some learners experience them. The likelihood that at least some teachers may take the idea of DMCs on board is additionally enhanced by numerous, quite concrete, if not always practicable, guidelines that can be found throughout the book as well as a healthy dose of realism as to whether proposals of this kind can at all times be effectively applied. When commenting on the positive findings of the interventionist study, Muir openly admits that ". . . it is still to be demonstrated whether such periods of intense motivation might be as successfully facilitated in different contexts, with different student groups – and groupings – and in contexts where, for example, there are fewer contact hours per week of lower levels of external support feasible" (p. 173). I was also intrigued by the idea of *formative experiments* undertaken to verify ". . . theory and empirical research in the real world of practice" (Reinking & Bradley, 2004, p. 155), mainly because of their potential to pave the way for practitioner research, something that is evidently indispensable to broaden our understanding of the true contribution of DMCs. Last but not least, the book is written in an approachable way, with summaries at the end of each part as well

as interim summaries helping the readers to get their bearings without the need to revisit previous chapters or sections.

The reservations I have are not so much related to the book as such, which I believe does make a vitally important contribution to L2 motivation research, but, rather, to the true relevance of the construct of DMC to everyday teaching. Yes, Christine Muir did succeed in showing that such intense motivational surges can be generated at a group level when learners are energized by the need to achieve a goal that is greatly relevant to them. This was, however, a unique context where students were motivated to excel in the first place and the teachers were not only highly skilled and dedicated but also ". . . became swept up in the group DMC . . .," (p. 175). However, the realities of most state-run schools around the world are quite different – learners for whom the additional language is not a top priority among school subjects or university courses, students who are striving to meet predetermined requirements, overworked and unrewarded teachers, severe time limitations, or the need to follow national curricula and prepare learners for final examinations. Hoping that the current situation is transitory, I am not even elaborating on the burdens and challenges of entirely online education for all the parties involved. In other words, in most cases, teachers do not have the luxury of devoting sufficient time to implementing an intensive project, their hands are tied when it comes to curricular changes, and they certainly have little if any influence on final assessments which are externally regulated. Another problem has to do with the myriad of conditions that simultaneously have to be in place for an intensive project to stand a chance of facilitating a group DMC, such as maturity, positive emotionality, common goals, appropriate classroom dynamics or adequate support structures, to name but a few. In most classes in the world, learners tend to follow their own agendas, there are bound to be tensions among them, maturity cannot always be assumed, not to mention the fact that it is unpredictable constellations of individual difference factors that may ultimately account for the occurrence of a group DMC and its success. In fact, one can wonder if it might not perhaps be more feasible for teachers to try to trigger DMCs in the case of individual learners, since it could simply be easier to ensure that all pieces fall into place at the right time in this case. Obviously, the experience would then be reserved only for those who are ready to embrace it, but this goal can be seen as more pragmatic than creating a situation in which a diverse group suddenly, as if with a wave of a magic wand, gets carried away by the need to attain a common goal.

All of these doubts come from someone who used to work for well over a decade in a regular, state-run school and is aware of the everyday challenges that teachers and learners face. I am by no means suggesting, though, that facilitating DMCs in some groups is impossible and should not by attempted. I am merely highlighting the inherent problems this is bound to involve and the need

to convince teachers that embarking on this path is a viable proposition, something that will aid the achievement of curricular goals. On a positive note, the book by Christine Muir is without doubt a step in the right direction if the idea of DMCs is to ever be more widely embraced by practitioners. The two studies she reports and the practical advice she offers will surely be an inspiration for researchers wishing to further explore the concept but also for teachers willing to experiment with it in their one classrooms. The volume is an excellent, thought-provoking read and I recommend it to anyone interested in making L2 instruction more effective, whether they are researchers, teacher trainers, materials writes, or pre-service and in-service teachers.

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