

Idealism as Intrinsic Motivation

Written by Miranda Celeste Hale
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The following is a contribution to the JREF's ongoing blog series on skepticism and education. If you are an educator and would like to contribute to this series, please contact [Bob Blaskiewicz](#) .

Professional educators are driven by intrinsic, not extrinsic, motivation. We're motivated not by financial reward (teaching isn't exactly the most lucrative profession) but by our desire to inform, to enlighten, and to promote critical thinking. We're passionate about these things. We want to make a difference. Put simply: we're motivated by our idealism.

Although it's not an exact parallel, this is also true of skeptical activism (in other words, in the above paragraph, substituting "skeptical activists" for "educators" and "skeptical activism" for "teaching" changes neither the meaning of nor the truth of the paragraph's claims in any meaningful or significant way). Like professional educators, skeptical activists are driven by their passion and are motivated by a strong desire to contribute to society in a positive and meaningful way. Both professional educators and skeptical activists (and those of us who belong to both groups) rely heavily on idealism and the intrinsic motivation it provides.

However, although idealism is a powerful intrinsic motivator for educators and skeptical activists alike, it is not enough. If we wish to be successful in our attempts to inform, educate, persuade, and promote critical thinking and evidence-based decision making (inside or outside of the classroom) we first need to accept that our passionate idealism is only a start. Idealism is a valuable, admirable, and useful personality trait, one that indicates a principled refusal to succumb to the apathy and cynicism that pervades much of contemporary society. That being said, though, we must also acknowledge that while our idealism motivates us to inform, enlighten, and promote evidence-based decision making (in the classroom or otherwise), in order to turn motivation into action, we must be willing to be both idealists and pragmatists. Idealism alone doesn't accomplish anything. Although this may not be something we often consider when analyzing our own contributions to skeptical activism, the professional educators and/or skeptical activists who we admire and respect the most are almost certainly the ones who acknowledge (through their words and/or their actions) that pragmatism, discipline, and hard work are just as important as idealism.

Any discussion of idealism as an intrinsic motivator is meaningless and unrealistic, though, unless it includes an acknowledgment of the enormous elephant(s) in the room: activist burnout and educator burnout. Both professional educators (skeptics or otherwise) and skeptical activists often find that their passion is a double-edged sword, one that motivates and inspires

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the hard work that transforms their ideals into reality, but that also can (and often does) lead to feeling so overworked and overwhelmed that burnout is all-but-inevitable.

This burnout and the related temptation to throw in the towel are completely understandable and often happen to the most admirable and hard-working of educators and skeptical activists. Our idealism motivates us to take action, but sometimes we take on more than we can handle. And, although the promotion of critical thinking, skeptical inquiry, and evidence-based decision making cannot occur in the classroom or in any other context unless we're willing to work hard and to "practice what we preach", if we're in this for the long haul and if we're committed to education and/or skeptical activism, then taking a step back (in an attempt to either fend off or recover from burnout) can be beneficial for two reasons:

1. It offers us a chance to prioritize and to decide where our limits and boundaries lie (which, ideally, will help prevent future burnout).
2. It provides an opportunity to "rediscover" our idealism. Perhaps paradoxically, idealism is often both the indirect or direct cause of and the antidote to burnout. When we "rediscover" it, our idealism can once again provide the intrinsic motivation and inspiration that drives us in our roles as educators and skeptical activists.

This leads to the question: how can we combine idealism (our intrinsic motivation) and pragmatism (the hard but important work that committed educators and/or skeptical activists engage in) in this context without eventually getting burned out, becoming jaded, and/or wanting to give up altogether? In addition to the above-mentioned ideas (taking a step back, prioritizing, focusing, and setting limits), it's also important to be realistic and to acknowledge that, no matter how hard we try, we will never be able to help everyone or remedy every problem. For example, there will always be the student we just can't get through to, or the audience member (a blog reader, an individual with whom we engage on a social media platform, someone listening to us speak at a skeptic event, etc.) who, to our disappointment, we just can't reach.

In other words, because our skeptical activism (of whatever sort) is driven by intrinsic motivation, burnout is all-but-inevitable. And that's okay. It doesn't mean that we need to give up for good. Rather, burnout, in this context, is often just a reminder that, somewhere in the midst of all of our hard work and activism, we inadvertently lost track of our idealism. Once we "rediscover" that lost idealism, we can work through and move past the burnout, and return to our roles as teachers and activists with renewed motivation and inspiration, balancing pragmatism and idealism in the way that is most beneficial to ourselves, to our fellow educators and skeptical activists, and, most importantly, to the audience (of whatever sort) that we want to inform, enlighten, and educate.

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