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In: Student Journal of the Department of Anglophone Studies / Volume 1 (2018)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17185/duepublico/47606>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hbz:464-20181123-143511-1>

Link: <https://duepublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de:443/servlets/DocumentServlet?id=47606>

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Source: This essay was initially submitted as a term paper in the BA seminar “A Survey of American Literature” and supervised by Dr Elena Furlanetto. Published in Student Journal of the Department of Anglophone Studies (Vol. 1, 2018)

Motivation is Everything

The Importance of Motivation in Reading and Teaching Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)

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In his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, Frederick Douglass describes how he succeeded in learning how to read and write while he was still enslaved. Frederick Douglass was born as Frederick Baily in 1818 in Tuckahoe, Maryland. Forty-seven years before the northern states of America won the Civil War it was still common, especially for the states south of the Mason-Dixon Line, to keep African Americans enslaved. Back then, enslaved people were not allowed to go to school or to receive education at all. Therefore, the fact that Douglass was able to educate himself is extraordinary.

As a child of eight years, Douglass had the fortune to receive his first reading instructions by one of his owners. Albeit these lessons only took place a few times before they were ended abruptly, they were the stepping stones for his career. Inspired by these lessons and especially by the fury with which his master ended them, Frederick Douglass dedicated the following years of his enslavement to educate himself. Even though some people tried to hinder him from learning, and even though he was aware of the fact that he put himself at a high risk of punishment by educating himself, his extraordinary strength, endurance, willpower, and his intelligence helped him to finally reach his goal to become able to read and write.

In recent years, psychologists like Karl Josef Klauer and Detlev Leutner or Paul Eggen dealt with the importance of motivation for the learning and teaching process in their books *Lehren und Lernen – Einführung in die*

¹ This essay was initially submitted as a term paper in the BA seminar “A Survey of American Literature” and supervised by Dr Elena Furlanetto.

Instruktionspsychologie (2012) and *Educational Psychology* (2013). When comparing the passages of *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass* where Douglass explains how he managed to educate himself with the arguments put forward by these psychologists one might notice that Douglass already made use of some strategies of modern instructional psychology which were introduced around 150 years after his time.

In this paper I argue that Frederick Douglass's ability to educate himself and others while being enslaved can be explained through the concept of motivation. In the first part of the paper, I am going to discuss the narrator's struggle to educate himself and point out which strategies he used and which circumstances helped him to keep a high motivation level. In the second part, I will build on the findings of the first part and introduce further motivational strategies that can be used to teach Frederick Douglass's autobiography.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATION IN *NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS*

To begin with, I would like to define the term "motivation" with the help of Dale Schunk, Paul Pintrich, and Judith Meese. They argue that "[m]otivation is the process whereby [a] goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained" (qtd. in Eggen and Kauchak 4). Klauer and Leutner support this definition and transfer it to the field of education by pointing out that, when a student loses motivation, the whole learning process stops (see 49). Even though they emphasize the importance of keeping track of motivation throughout the whole learning process, they acknowledge that the introductory phase is of special significance (see 49).

This notion of the learning process can also be found at the beginning of Frederick Douglass's educational career in the sense that no learning process can start without motivation. Until he was about eight years old, the narrator of the *Narrative* lacked the information that triggered his motivation and with it his determination to educate himself. Already before he found the source of his motivation, Douglass was dissatisfied with his situation. He was troubled by the fact that he and his fellow slaves did not know when they were born, like white children did (see Douglass 15), and he reports that he can trace back his "first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery" (24) to the songs sung by his

fellow slaves to drown their sorrow while they were going to the great house farm for their monthly allowance.

Even though Douglass suffered from cold, hunger, isolation from his family, the psychological pain to be enslaved, and from seeing his fellow slaves being mistreated, Douglass describes his childhood in Talbot as relatively easy, since he was still too young to work in the field and, in addition, he enjoyed the affection, and with it the protection, of his master's son, Master Daniel (see 33). His 'stroke of luck' continued when he was selected to go to Baltimore to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld to take care of their son Thomas (see 35). First, Douglass explains that the living conditions for enslaved people were much better in the city than at the countryside: they were "better fed and clothed" and the slaveholders had "a sense of shame" (38) which allegedly prevented them from being cruel. Second, he made the experience that not all white people were dreadful. He describes his new mistress Mrs. Sophia Auld as "a woman of the kindest heart and finest feeling" who "had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery" (36). And finally, it was here in Baltimore that Douglass found the source of his motivation, namely the tenderness of his mistress. Inexperienced in handling slaves, Mrs. Auld started to teach Douglass the ABC and subsequently to spell words of three and four letters (see 36). But as soon as Mr. Hugh Auld found out what was going on he put an end to it and told his wife that it was unlawful to teach a slave. In addition, he said that an enslaved person "should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do" and that learning would spoil the best of them: it would "forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontent and unhappy" (37).

Later on, Douglass declares this situation to be of the greatest importance as it allowed him to finally understand "the white man's power to enslave the black man" and that the "pathway from slavery to freedom" (38) was education. He highlights the importance of this situation by pointing out that he owes as much to his mistress for teaching him as to his master for giving him this invaluable lesson (see 38). From this moment of enlightenment, Frederick Douglass was not only determined to learn how to read and write, but he also reached the "conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold [him] within its fowl embrace" (36).

So far, I did not only describe the events which guided Douglass to find his motivation, but I also outlined circumstances which Douglass himself identifies as

most propitious for his later career. I did so because I want to point out that motivation is an innate power that needs to be stimulated and focused on a certain goal in order to be used successfully. While discussing the prerequisites of motivation, I also would like to discuss the importance of a person's well-being for his or her motivation. Therefore, I am going to look at the humanistic theory as one theoretical view of motivation.

The humanistic view of motivation "focuses on the 'whole person' and views motivation as people's attempts to fulfil their total potential as human beings and become 'self-actualized'" (Eggen and Kauchak 334). The leading representatives of the humanistic theory are Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. According to Rogers, the wish to become self-actualized is ingrained in every human being but its actualization depends on a person's environment – it can foster or hinder it. Furthermore, Rogers speaks of "unconditional positive regard [and] treating students as if they are innately worthy" (qtd. in Eggen and Kauchak 335) to receive education. Of course, it cannot be said that Douglass received "unconditional positive regard" but in contrast to other slaves, he at least received positive regard from his master Daniel and his mistress Mrs. Auld. Thanks to both of them, the environment Douglass lived in as a child in bondage was often one that fostered his wish to become self-actualized. Similarly, the concept of a hierarchy of needs popularized by Maslow implies that the so-called deficiency needs, the needs for survival, safety, belonging, and self-esteem, have to be met before self-actualization can be achieved (see 337). Here again, Douglass's comparatively positive experiences in his childhood allowed him to meet these deficiency needs and to proceed to the level of self-actualization. As his narrative develops, the reader encounters situations in which the narrator fears for his life or is not feeling safe anymore; as a consequence, his wish for self-actualization is – even if only temporary – broken.

From his moment of enlightenment, Douglass finds the determination to learn how to read. After he loses Mrs. Auld as a teacher, he has to find ways to continue his learning process himself. In the beginning he trains his reading skills by secretly reading the newspaper whenever possible, but Mrs. Auld's eagerness to please her husband makes it difficult. She becomes furious whenever she sees Douglass with a newspaper and takes it away from him immediately (see Douglass 40). Even though this makes it more difficult for Douglass to progress, his motivation is still high enough to develop a new plan to learn how to read. He befriends boys on the street

and turns them into his teachers. As the boys in the street suffer from hunger and Douglass has access to food at Mr. and Mrs. Auld's house, he starts to carry bread and his book with him every time he is sent to run errands: "This bread [he] used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give [him] that more valuable bread of knowledge" (41). This plan proves to be successful as Douglass finally learns to read.

We can imagine from the context that Douglass must have lived with the constant threat of being watched and the fear of being caught. Robert Yerkes and John Dodson show that there is a curvilinear connection between a student's anxiety level and her/his motivation. While some anxiety is actually helpful to promote learning, too much is destructive (see Klauer and Leutner 53). Douglass's willingness to continue to learn how to read, even though it is no longer possible to do so inside his master's house and his creative resolution to turn the boys in the streets into teachers, show that he makes use of his anxiety, to try harder.

At the age of twelve, Douglass endured a troublesome period. During the period of his life in which Douglass suffered the most under the idea of being a slave for life, he got hold of the book *The Columbian Orator*. This book consists of many political speeches, essays, and poems and was used in the United States to improve students' reading skills and eloquence. In this book, Douglass's attention focused on a text about a discussion between a slave and his master, and Sheridan's speech about Catholic emancipation (see Douglass 41-42). In reading these passages closely, Douglass learns "the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights" (42). These texts had two effects on Douglass: on the one hand reading them enabled him to put his thoughts into words, but on the other hand they made him understand what his Master Hugh meant by saying: "[To enable a slave to read] would make him discontent and unhappy" (37). At one point he admits that "learning how to read had been a curse rather than a blessing," because "it had given [him] a view of his wretched condition, without the remedy" (42). Even at this point, when he regretted to have learned to read and understood that his ancestors once had been free people on another continent, he could not stop fantasizing about freedom in America, even though he wished he could (see 42).

Despite this torturous state of mind, Douglass was still determined to either kill himself or do something for which he would be killed in the struggle to free himself from slavery (see 43). In his ambition to pursue his aim, he was eager to

hear everything he could about slavery. By doing so he came across the word 'abolition' occasionally (before he even knew the meaning of the term he was very attracted to it because it was always used in a way that reflected his own ideas). Once he fully understood that this word was used to describe the movement to end slavery and that more people were fighting for it, his motivation was rekindled (see 43).

Douglass's fascination for the book *The Columbian Orator*, the word 'abolition', and even his transitory discouragement can be explained with the help of the cognitive theory of motivation. This theory proposes that people always try "to make sense of their experience" and that they are "naturally motivated to learn when their experience is inconsistent with their current understanding" (see Eggen and Kauchak 334). As mentioned earlier, Douglass was discontent with his situation as a slave, but he could not yet put his thought into words, therefore he was still motivated to learn. *The Columbian Orator* "gave tongue to interesting thoughts of [his] own soul" (42) and therefore helped him to overcome this gap. But as this gap closed, a new one formed. Now that he understood the concept of slavery, his antipathy against it intensified and his willingness to free himself and fight against slavery increased. On the one hand, he realized that the gap between his determination to stand up for his beliefs and his actual ability to do so was enormous, and this realization resulted in transitory discouragement. But on the other hand, this new gap provided him with new motivation and made him highly responsive to everything that could help him come nearer to his goal. In this state of mind, he came across the word 'abolition'. It was due to the inconsistency between experience and understanding that motivated him to investigate the meaning of the word.

Now that he understood so much more about slavery thanks to his ability to read, he was sure that the ability to write was of great importance as well. Therefore, he decided to learn how to write before trying to improve his conditions by breaking free. The creativity and intelligence he showed while learning how to write even exceeded his efforts of his reading learning process. As he was eager to learn how to write before he would make a first attempt to escape from his master, he started to copy the letters "L", "S", "F", and "A", which he frequently saw being used as abbreviations in the shipyard. After he managed to write and name them he started to challenge boys on the street to beat him at writing letters. In this way he practiced writing the letters he already knew and learned new ones. Afterwards, he

started to “copy [...] the Italics in *Webster’s Spelling Book*” and to “write [...] in the spaces left in Master Thomas’s copy-book” until he finally learned to write (see Douglass 44-45).

By challenging the children on the streets to extend his writing competence Douglass unconsciously made use of the ‘need for competence’ theory, which is a part of the ‘need for self-determination’ approach (see Eggen and Kauchak 336). This theory “suggest[s] that people acquire proficiency and skill ‘because it satisfies an intrinsic need to deal with the environment’” (qtd. White in Eggen and Kauchak 338). Eggen and Kauchak similarly understand this as the desire to be (or at least to appear) smart and successful (see 338). In addition, they point out that it is important for students to realize that their level of competence is increasing. Teachers like to use praises, communicating high expectations, and challenging activities to make their students aware of their progress (see 338). One possibility to achieve the same goal is to do exactly what Douglass did – to convert the children in the streets, who are used to be the students, into his teachers. When students are able to teach others, it is the greatest proof that they fully understood what they have learned. Furthermore, the idea of challenging the children in the streets can also be seen as a constructive conflict. Constructive conflicts are goal-orientated debates between students about a topic. These disputations help to focus the learner’s concentration on the topic, promote the power of endurance, the ability to look for information, and make sure that the information is deeply ingrained (see Klauer and Leutner 50).

After this, Douglass reports very little about his eagerness to learn as he is absorbed by concerns about his place of living and well-being. The next time he refers to his intellect, he is staying with Mr. Covey. After a few months, Mr. Covey succeeds in taking away all of Douglass’s vitality and motivation: “I was broken in body, soul and spirit. [...] [M]y intellect languished, the disposition to read departed” (Douglass 58). After spending about half a year with Mr. Covey, Douglass is at his lowest, but his anger and hate toward the inhumane and brutal overseer make him regain his strengths. When Douglass is about to receive another whipping, he decides to fight against his current master. This situation is of importance as it provides a source of new motivation to Douglass and re-kindles his determination to escape to freedom sooner or later again (see 65).

As I mentioned earlier, a person’s need for self-actualization depends on the fulfilment of one’s deficiency needs. In the encounter with Covey, Douglass’s

deficiency needs are far from being met, as even the basic need for survival is in question. These circumstances explain Douglass's mental breakdown. Even though his spirit rises after his fight with Mr. Covey and his conditions also improve as he is not whipped anymore, his circumstances are still extremely severe, and his liberty is even more limited than before. As a result, he continued to lack the power and the chance to pursue his goal to become educated – he lacked motivation.

After a full year, Douglass left Covey to begin working for Mr. Freeland. Once again, he has the “fortune” to live with a more lenient slaveholder. Under these new conditions, Douglass' motivation, his interest in education and his belief that education is the key to freedom arose again. At Mr. Freeland's he started to teach other slaves for the first time to help them to overcome their wretched conditions. He lived together with two fellow slaves: Henry and John Harris. Both “were quite intelligent, and in a very little while after I went there, I succeeded in creating in them a strong desire to learn how to read” (70). As this desire spread to other slaves as well, Douglass devoted his Sundays to teach his fellow slaves how to read (see 70).

He describes “the work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed” (71) and that “it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race” (72). In this situation, Douglass also described the motivation of his fellow-slaves: “They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness” (71).

Douglass is now at a point where he possessed full intellectual freedom and therefore was able to understand that white Americans would have the power to oppress African Americans as long as the majority of the slaves was illiterate and did not have the means to challenge their enslavement. By teaching his fellow slaves, Douglass wanted to change exactly that and by doing so he followed the core assumption of sociocultural assumptions about learning; students are more motivated to participate in a learning process where students and teachers work together to achieve a shared goal (see Eggen and Kauchak 334). The goal of freedom Douglass and his students pursued, the fact that the lessons had to be kept secret, and that the slaves knew the high risk they exposed themselves to, strengthened their bonds and their motivation to collaborate. Furthermore, the last-mentioned paragraphs in *Narrative* show that Douglass was teaching passionately - also an important virtue to create motivation in students (see 353).

Although Douglass was aware of the relatively lenient conditions he had at Mr. Freeland's, he decided that 1834 would be the year in which he would gain physical freedom (see Douglass 72). His writing skills became crucial to devise an escape plan for himself and some of his friends. He wrote protections² for all of them, allowing them to go to Baltimore to spend their Easter holiday there (see 75). Their attempt failed, and they ended up in jail. While his fellow slaves were taken back to Mr. Freeland, Douglass was put in jail for a week until Captain Auld sent him back to Baltimore to live with his old master, Mr. Hugh (see 79). Here he was trained to become a caulker. When he finally managed to survive another inhumane situation in which he was heavily beaten by white ship-carpenters, he realized what has been explained with the hierarchy of needs before: "whenever my condition was improved, instead of its increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free, and set me to thinking of plans to gain my freedom" (83). In this state of mind Douglass planned a new break out and finally succeeded. He settled in New Bedford and became a subscriber of *The Liberator*, an abolitionist newspaper that denounced slaveholding. By reading this paper, Douglass develops "a pretty good idea of the principles, measures and spirit of the anti-slavery reform" (96), which become the basis for his participation in the anti-slavery movement.

The extraordinary example of Frederick Douglass shows us vividly what many teacher guides try to convey: motivation is of the highest importance for the learning process of students. So far, however, I have not mentioned the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and its importance to understand Douglass' learning experience. While people who are extrinsically motivated pursue a goal to receive a reward when accomplishing it, people who are intrinsically motivated pursue a goal for its own sake. For them the presented task is interesting, fascinating, and challenging enough in itself; they do not require any further reward (see Klauer and Leutner 52). While motivating students is the general goal, teaching them to be intrinsically motivated is even better "because of its focus on learning and understanding" (Eggen and Kauchak 331). Not surprisingly, Douglass appeared intrinsically motivated throughout his learning process.

In this paper, I have addressed several different approaches to handle the topic of motivation. I mentioned cognitive and humanistic views of motivation to

2 Protections were letters normally written by a slave's master that allowed his slave to travel from one point to another. This kind of document was used as slaves were not allowed to move freely in general.

understand Douglass's motivation in detail. Furthermore, I paid attention to the influences of needs on motivation by discussing Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the need of self-determination. In addition, I explained the influences of anxiety on motivation, the sociocultural view of motivation and the importance of passion for Frederick Douglass's learning process and his attempts to educate others. All these approaches help to highlight that without fulfilling the prerequisites of motivation, without his innate motivation, and without his use of motivational strategies, Douglass would not have been able to pursue his career the way he did.

In the second part, I examine how the previous findings and other motivational approaches can help teachers to motivate their students while teaching them the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

HOW TO TEACH FREDERICK DOUGLASS WITH A FOCUS ON MOTIVATION

In the following section I draw from the book *Approaches to Teaching Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, edited by James C. Hall (1999). The various authors of this teaching guide focus on many different topics that can be addressed when working with the narrative. Besides engaging in the theme of education as I did, one can also focus on US history, racism, human rights, the legal system that allowed slavery, socialisation, personhood, the influence of religion, gender, aspects of labour, the literary canon, the authenticity of the slave narrative, its structure and stylistic devices, the purpose of slave narratives, and many other topics. As we can see, the book aspires to capture the different layers of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. A discussion about how to raise students' motivation in dealing with these topics, however, is only addressed between the lines.

To show what I mean, I am going to discuss a contribution by David L. Dudley, titled "Teaching Douglass's Narrative in the World Literature Survey," which focuses on broad humanistic themes in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. His aim is to make his students see that the humanistic topics discussed by Douglass are still important for their lives and the societies they live in; he wants to shape his students' thoughts by fostering "a humane sensibility [...] that will help them know and accept themselves and become more understanding and accepting of others" (Dudley 134). Already in this example, Dudley refers to an important

aspect of how to increase student motivation without naming it as such. It is the concept of personalization – to personalize the content by linking topics to the student’s life (see Eggen and Kauchak 353). He does so by referring to W. E. B. Du Bois, an African American professor at Atlanta University from 1897 to 1910 who was denied the use of the Atlanta public library. Since Atlanta is the capital of Georgia, the state Dudley and his students live in, this example fosters a personal link between the topic and students. Other authors published in this collection make use of this technique as well. Gregg Crane does so by discussing the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights with his class, before negotiating their content in contrast to the concept of slavery (see Crane 72). Elizabeth Schultz says that any connection to the students’ contemporary context can help to strengthen their motivation (see 102). The passion and enthusiasm for teaching many of the contributions to the volume display a mastery goal orientation. Mastery goals “focus on accomplishing tasks, improving, and increasing understanding” (Eggen and Kauchak 349) which “lead [...] to sustained effort, high self-efficacy, willingness to accept challenges, and high achievement” (351) on the student’s side. Enthusiasm is of importance because “teacher modelling is one of the most powerful influences on students’ interest” and “students’ motivation to learn can significantly increase if [the teacher] model[s] [his/her] own interest in the topic [s/he is] teaching” (367). A final quote from Dudley underlines such enthusiasm: “Frederick Douglass [...] is my hero. I invite students to make him their hero too” (137).

As already outlined at the beginning of the first part of this paper, to raise the student’s attention and motivation is of special importance in the introductory phase of a new topic. According to Eggen and Kauchak, a teacher can confront students with unique problems, paradoxical questions, or eye-catching examples. Furthermore, they encourage designing an introductory phase that builds a bridge between the student’s prior knowledge and the new content (see Eggen and Kauchak 377). When teaching Douglass, Martin Klammer, for example, makes use of his students’ prior knowledge about “the African roots of African American culture [...], American slavery, and the slave narrative” (124) they gained by dealing with *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789). As an eye-catching example, Bruce Mills suggests using images of slave ships, advertisements for slave auctions, or the punishment of slaves as an introduction to teaching the narrative (see 144). Showing photographs can help to open the classroom conversation: while some students might want to talk about what they see on the

pictures, others might already be able to link it to the narrative of Frederick Douglass.

Another technique to promote students' interest and therefore their motivation is to increase their involvement. One way to do so is to use open-ended questions, "questions for which a variety of answers is acceptable," which makes them "accessible and nonthreatening" for students, they "are safe and ensure success" (Eggen and Kauchak 380). This kind of question may help to involve even the shyest student in the class, while many students can participate. In his contribution "Teaching Douglass's Narrative in an Introductory Humanities Course," Martin Klammer writes that he makes use of open-ended questions when teaching Douglass. One of his questions is: "If you were a white Northern reader in 1845, what part or aspect of Frederick Douglass's Narrative would most move you to change your mind and perhaps even work for the abolition of slavery?" (see 126-127).

Nevertheless, after having constructed an environment the students feel safe and are motivated to participate in, the level of difficulty has to rise as it is essential to keep their motivation high. Communicating high expectations is one way to keep them focused. Bruce Mills does so by asking his students complex questions that require them to work closely with the text and, in addition, to formulate their own opinion (see 145). Another strategy that can be derived from his contribution is autonomy. As he offers many questions, probably too many to be dealt with by all students, Mills may give them the choice to answer one particular question and afterwards discuss answers to all questions in class. By doing so he would save time and, more importantly, meet his students' need for autonomy. According to Bruce and Kauchak "giving [...] students choices is the simplest way [to] increase their perception of autonomy" and with it their innate motivation (see 338). These are only some of the possibilities to motivate the students to learn about Frederick Douglass and his *Narrative*.

CONCLUSION

The former African American slave Frederick Douglass was able to teach himself reading and writing solely thanks to his motivation in a society in which it was unlawful for slaves to be educated. He was able to do so because he grew up in a

surrounding that, albeit in unorthodox ways, supported his wish to become educated – this support was created by positive regard and the fulfilment of his deficiency needs. By meeting these prerequisites Douglass had the chance to develop the strong innate motivation to become self-actualized. This motivation was the pathway for his later career as an abolitionist. To show that the concept of motivation is not only of help for extraordinary people such as Douglass, I referred to sections of the teaching guide *Approaches to Teaching Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Here, several authors also referred to motivation in order to support students in their learning process. Eventually, reading and teaching Douglass shows us that motivation is of importance to reach educational goals. In this regard he continues to be a great inspiration for our time.

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