



# Measuring need for closure in classroom learners

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## Abstract

Need for closure, as formulated by Kruglanski and colleagues [Kruglanski, A. W. (1990). Lay epistemic theory in social-cognitive psychology. *Psychological Inquiry*, 1(3), 181–197; Kruglanski, A. W., & Webster, D. M. (1996). Motivated closing of the mind: Seizing and freezing. *Psychological Review*, 103, 263–283; Webster, D. M., & Kruglanski, A. W. (1994). Individual differences in need for cognitive closure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76(6), 1049–1062], refers to the motivated tendency to seek structure, simplify complex information, and avoid ambiguity. In this article, we argue that this motive may impact classroom learning in important ways and introduce a self-report measure of need for closure situated in the classroom learning environment. Psychometric properties of the new measure are assessed in multiple samples using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Correlations between the new measure and existing indicators of cognitive closure, as well as variables known to influence motivation and academic achievement, support our assertions regarding the association between need for closure and academic functioning while also providing evidence for the construct validity of the measure. Finally, internal consistency and test–retest reliability suggest that the new measure functions as a reliable measure of need for closure within the classroom.

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## 1. Introduction

In the course of completing their formal education, it is inevitable that learners will experience ambiguity or confusion as they encounter challenging instructional tasks. This

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is especially true for students in secondary education when the knowledge encountered is more likely to be complex, tentative, or controversial. Encounters with challenging tasks are generally considered beneficial by educators, as they assist learners in ultimately gaining a deeper understanding of the issues at hand; however, this benefit is contingent upon approaching these potentially frustrating encounters in an open-minded way. One factor that may impede or curtail the type of effortful engagement that is needed to benefit from the uncertainty inherent in mastering challenging tasks is need for closure (Kruglanski, 1989, 1990). It is for this reason that the need for closure construct may be of interest to educational psychologists.

Need for closure, as formulated by Kruglanski and colleagues (Kruglanski, 1990; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), refers to the motivated tendency to seek structure, simplify complex information, and avoid ambiguity. To date, much of the research on this construct has been conducted within the fields of social and personality psychology. One of the most significant findings documented within those literatures is that need for closure affects cognitive processes associated with problem solving, such as the search for, and evaluation of, possible response alternatives (Kruglanski, 1989; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Richter & Kruglanski, 1998), which in turn influences the accuracy of person perceptions and social judgments. Recently, DeBacker and Crowson (2006) demonstrated the potential relevance of the need for closure construct for educational researchers when they found that need for closure was related to achievement goals and cognitive engagement in the classroom.

In this paper, we further consider the relevance of the need for closure construct for education by introducing a new measure of need for closure that is situated within the classroom context and assessing its validity-related evidence. We reasoned that the ability to effectively operationalize the construct, while at the same time demonstrating predictable relationships with criterion-related variables, would lend support for the utility of need for closure in the study of teaching and learning. If, on the other hand, need for closure could not be effectively operationalized at the classroom level or failed to exhibit predictable relationships with constructs that are often of interest to educators, then this would argue against the relevance of the construct for educational research.

### 1.1. Need for closure theory

Lay epistemic theory (Kruglanski, 1989, 1990) is concerned with how people form, modify and employ their knowledge. At the heart of this theory is a cognitive-generation process which produces knowledge propositions or hypotheses that are then subject to evaluation prior to being accepted or abandoned. The cognitive-generation process is thought to be governed by both the *capacity* and the *motivation* to generate hypotheses. A chief motive influencing the cognitive-generation process is need for closure.

Need for closure refers to the desire for “*an answer on a given topic, any answer, as compared to confusion and ambiguity*” (Kruglanski, 1989, p.337; italics in original). When need for closure is high, individuals demonstrate two tendencies. First, they experience a sense of urgency in regard to obtaining closure, which is accompanied by a tendency to *seize* on the first reasonable judgment or solution that fits the situation. Second, they have a desire to perpetuate the closure state, which leads to a tendency to *freeze* on existing knowledge or judgments (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Richter & Kruglanski, 1998). Need for closure is proposed to be a stable characteristic on which people show individual

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