

Chapter 3

“Future Is Yours”: Motivating Online Learners in Higher Education Through a Package of Goods (in the COVID–19 Pandemic)

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ABSTRACT

Globally, learners around the world have had to move from face-to-face (F2F) learning to full “emergency online learning” in many cases, such as in higher education. In “emergency online teaching,” instructors have been learning about how to support learners; however, with the slowing of the acute phases of the pandemic, many learners have dropped out, many for good. One of the most important strategies to retain online learners on their learning tracks involves a package of learning goods that position learners for the future in the near-, mid-, and far-terms. The core idea here is that “future pull” is alluring, and it supports learner persistence in online (and offline) learning. This work describes the mix of elements for creating just such a package in the contemporaneous moment based on the abductive logic study of instructional design work of the past several years for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic at a Midwestern university.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the SARS-CoV-2 / COVID-19 pandemic resulted in global-scale movements of learners from K-12 through higher education to online learning, in order to protect people against the ravages of a novel airborne pathogen passed from person-to-person. In wealthier and more developed countries, the technological infrastructure for such learning—learning management systems, social media apps, built-in tutoring systems, social robots, wireless connectivity, unhindered Internet and Web access, secure grade systems, virtual labs for learning, and others—were somewhat more built out than for lesser developed countries. For many, COVID-19 is seen as leading to “a formidable academic disaster

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-5934-8.ch003

around the world, particularly in low and middle-income countries” (Chandrasiri & Weerakoon, 2021, p. 3), with many students disconnected socially from others, isolated, stressed, and not learning at prior rates of achievement. Students have disappeared from the school rolls at every level. Learning retention is dependent on many factors in more normal circumstances: individual attitudes and dispositions, practical matters (such as the availability of time and money) (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 55), social supports, psychosocial factors (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, pp. 56 - 57), institutional barriers, and learner motivations. For example, one seminal study grouped learners as “*goal-oriented* learners, who use education as a means of achieving some other goal; *activity-oriented* learners, who participate for the sake of the activity itself and the social interaction; and *learning-oriented* participants, who seek knowledge for its own sake” (Houle, 1961, as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 54). In many countries, those who have higher education degrees are often a minority. A mass-level crisis, such as a pandemic, magnifies the challenges.

Various headwinds emerge during a pandemic. There are the practical survival ones—literally staying alive, maintaining housing, retaining work, and acquiring food and drink. There is the issue of both social and personal focus. Governments struggled to provide public education, and learners struggled to learn. In a time of mass crisis, to use a colloquialism, citizens are “not okay.” Mental health is a common challenge (Rasmussen, et al., 2022). Many governments have been seen as ineffectual to their citizenry. The unfortunate circumstances enable the holding of natural social experiments, such as to better understand the efficacy of learning online under emergency circumstances. Fully online learning, hybrid (or blended) learning, and face-to-face learning are thought to offer different levels of support to learners. Online learning and hybrid learning are both thought to require students to have more self-regulated learning skills (van Alten, Phielix, Janssen, & Kester, 2021, p. 1) because there are fewer structural and social supports for the learning. Learning motivation is defined as “an established pattern of pursuing goals, beliefs, and emotions” (Ford, 1992, as cited in Law, Geng, & Li, 2019, p. 2). Both remote learning methods require technological savvy (Yilmaz, 2017, p. 260) and the infrastructure to enable the work. Learners need to know how to express their own social presence online (in learning management systems or LMSes, in virtual worlds, on video, and so on), and they need to have a cognitive presence through which they express their learning and interact with others. In different localities, both faculty and learners have varying experiences with online learning; in some cases, the pandemic forced makeshift efforts.

This chapter suggests that “future pull,” defined here as “the draw and attraction of a future that may motivate actions in the present,” may serve as an overarching strategy to enhance both online student motivation and their retention. In this approach, there is the near-, mid-, and far-future. The near-term future involves the one to six years (covering the higher education learning span); the mid-term future involves post-graduation and the first five years of professional life; the far-term future involves the first six to ten years and onwards of a profession. The suggestion of a hopeful future may seem like a radical suggestion in a context when the next day is not guaranteed, and large numbers of people are dying of the infection. Still, in reality, a majority of learners will survive the pandemic and advance their lives along a constructive path. This “future pull” approach has been used as an instructional design impetus in one shop in a Midwestern university during the pandemic.

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