Keywords: Behavioral Construct Tailoring, Cognitive Performance, Positive Trends, Tailoring

ABSTRACT

Motivation to learn is difficult to generate when learners are uninterested in the topic. This quasi-experimental study explored behavioral construct tailoring as an instructional message design technique to generate motivation and improve cognitive performance. Ninety-eight college students pre- and post-appraised a lesson, completed a cognitive assessment, and attributed performance to affect or competence-related factors. A risk assessment was used to strategically assign experimental learners to one of three tailored lesson introductions. Results indicated that experimental group learners, on some subscales, were more motivated. Positive trends were found for some affective and competence-related performance attributions, as well as cognitive performance. These findings warrant additional research into behavioral construct tailoring.

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INTRODUCTION

Educators are regularly challenged with the task of designing instruction in a way that motivates their audience to attend, learn, adopt, and sometimes practice the information presented. The challenge exists because information alone is seldom sufficient to change attitudes and behaviors (Strecher & Kreuter, 1999). Some learners do not see a need to change their current knowledge or habits; others do not see the connection between what they learn and its application in real-world settings; and others may find the topic to be contradictory to their belief system. There are, however, message design techniques an educator can utilize to increase audience motivation to learn by stimulating interest.

The value in stimulating interest is that interest plays an important role in learning (Hidi, 1990; Hidi & Anderson, 1992; Krapp, Hidi, & Renninger, 1992). An audience who is interested in what they are learning, generally reportsthey gave effort to the learning task; and they tend to attribute their performance of the task to their own competence (Boekaerts, 2002). The significance of a learner reporting a favorable attitude towards a task is that they will be more inclined to perform a similar task again (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1998; Weiner, 1986). The problem, then, becomes identifying a strategy to stimulate audience interest, and
consequently, generates motivation to learn. Tailoring affords this opportunity.

Tailoring

Tailoring is a design technique that incorporates formally assessed learner characteristics into message design, thus making the message personally relevant. Strecher and Kreuter (1999) explain the rationale for using tailoring as a process. By tailoring materials, unessential information is eliminated; what remains is more personally relevant. When information is relevant, it is more likely to be thoughtfully processed, and thus, more successful in guiding a person to make a suggested behavior change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Strecher & Kreuter, 1999). This is because relevancy leads to an optimistic task-appraisal, consequently increasing learners’ commitment to furnish effort (Boekaerts, 1992, 1996). By making content relevant, an educator motivates learners by making the task more attractive. From an educator’s perspective, this outcome is particularly desirable when the skill, attitude, or information is undervalued by his/her learners.

While tailoring is commonly researched in health education, there are fewer studies in other education settings. Health education studies show that tailored education materials are more effective in generating interest in a topic, increasing knowledge, and eliciting behavior change than non-tailored materials (Kreuter, Farrell, Olevitch, & Brennan, 2000). In a nutrition education study about fat, fruit, and vegetable intake, for example, Oenema, Brug, and Lechner (2001) found that a tailored, educational software program was more appreciated by and rated more relevant by participants. Additionally, participants exposed to the tailored program were more likely to report an intention to change their eating habits. Similarly, in a smoking-cessation education study, Dijkstra (2005) found that participants exposed to tailored materials were significantly more likely to report quitting activity after 4 months than those exposed to the non-tailored materials, 48.7% versus 28.6% respectively. In a breast cancer and mammography education study, Rimer, Halabi, Sugg-Skinner, Lipkus, Strigo, Kaplan, and Samsa (2002) found that participants receiving tailored education materials had significantly greater knowledge about and more accurate risk perceptions of breast cancer than participants receiving the usual care and generic materials. These studies support Strecher and Kreuter’s (1999) conclusion that tailoring increases message relevancy and the likelihood to attend to the information therein.

While increasing learners’ interest is definitely a step in the right direction, educators also need to consider the direction of that interest. Garner, Alexander, Gillingham, Kulikowich, and Brown (1991) found that interest actually can divert learners away from important generalizations. In two different studies, undergraduates read about a physicist and his scientific work. Results indicated students recalled more about the physicist’s personal background than his scientific work. Although the former was rated as interesting, it drew students away from the intended purpose. So, while tailoring is a means to increase message relevancy, messages must point learners’ interest in the direction intended by the educator. Behavioral construct tailoring offers a theoretically sound solution.

Behavioral Construct Tailoring

According to Kreuter, Oswald, Bull, and Clark (2000), behavioral construct tailoring is when a message designer uses established behavioral theories to form the structural content of a message. Such theories could include, but are not limited to, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which posits that environmental, personal, and social factors interact to illicit specific behaviors; or the stages-of-change theoretical model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983), which posits that behavior change is a phased response; or self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991), which examines the development and functioning of personality and the degree to which behaviors are volitional and self-determined. Any one of these theories could serve as the base upon which the context-
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