Motivating the Adult Learner Online

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INTRODUCTION

An understanding of learner motivation is important to all educators, particularly those teaching online where learners need to be more motivated to achieve (Miltiadou & Savenye, 2003; Pintrich, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Beffa-Negrini et al., 2002; Roblyer, 1999). As educators strive to create better online courses that motivate learners to be successful, substantive theories on online adult learner motivation are essential to have as benchmarks against which to pattern best practices.

BACKGROUND

Pintrich's (2003) and Miltiadou and Savenye's (2003) seminal research in learner motivation provides a theoretical basis and, although these researchers present different learner motivation classification schemes, common themes emerge such as the perception of ability (self-efficacy), reason for engagement (value and goal setting), and self-regulation.

Educators strive to more fully understand learner motivation since motivated students learn better. "[T]he quality of the education provided is intertwined with the student's ability and the student's motivation, to produce learning" (Kawachi, 2003, p. 61).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Adult Online Learner Motivation from the Learner's Perspective

Online learner motivation cannot be separated from the online context or environment where learning takes place or more specifically the environment where learners are motivated by an engaging task or activity and where learners are influenced by, and changed through the nature of interactions, tasks, activities, practices, self-pacing, independence from the bounds of time and location, rehearsability, access to Internet resources, course quality, social interactions, and cultures of the online learning environment. Additionally, learning context as a motivational factor drives enrollment in online courses. Adult online learners are motivated to enroll and persist in online courses because of the nature of the online learning context and the personal control factors such as flexibility in time, place and pace of learning. Online adult learners are intrinsically motivated, they set goals and employ cognitive strategies, and they value online learning and believe they are competent and possess the prerequisite knowledge and skills to be successful. To be motivated, online adult learners must value their educational experience or educational outcomes. Adult learners choosing to enroll in online courses possess high levels of self-efficacy and believe they will be successful in that environment. Therefore, learning context; personal control; intrinsic motivators such as interest, value, and goal setting; and employment of cognitive strategies are intertwined factors contributing to adult learner motivation from the learner's perspective associated with the desire to participate, persist and be successful in online learning.

Good online courses that motivate adult learners need to be well designed, provide situational interest, allow personal control, and support extrinsic motivating factors. They need to motivate online adult learners to invest the time and work necessary to be successful, to persistently study, work hard and learn, and to actively participate in the online course.

Design

Adult learners enrolling in online courses value the online learning context, but the context must support learning. Foremostly, online courses must be designed to allow learners to acquire the requisite course knowledge.

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Interest

Pintrich (2003) and Styer (2007) showed that when learners are interested they are more motivated. Personal interest occurs when learners are studying a topic they enjoy such as a course within their major. Situational interest motivates learners by involving learners in engaging task and activities. Online adult learners are motivated by engaging tasks and activities as they participate in valued tasks and avoid non-valued tasks. Sass (1989) found that approachable, friendly and enthusiastic instructors; the use of a variety of instructional techniques; well-planned, organized and relevant course materials; the use of real, concrete, and understandable examples; appropriate difficulty level of instructor expectations; and active involvement of students in classroom learning contributed to situational interest. Shih (1998) showed that online adult learners are motivated by competition and high expectations of themselves and by their instructors. In Le Febre's study it was demonstrated that online adult learners had increased confidence when course materials related to their lives and their life experiences (2004).

Control

Online adult learners are motivated by the convenience of online learning (Styer, 2007; Roblyer, 1999). Due to work, family constraints, and personal preference, online adult learners prefer to set their own time, place, pace of learning, and flexibility but they may be anxious about deadlines with no set meeting time to serve as a motivator.

Extrinsic Motivating Factors

Online adult learners are intrinsically motivated when they enroll, but both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are needed to sustain motivation (Menager-Beeley, 2003). When course materials are deemed relevant to educational, personal, social or vocational goals learners find them important, useful and valuable. When learners value a task they select that task and avoid non-valued tasks. (Atkinson, 1964; Meece & Midgley, 1983; Feather, 1982; Weiner, 1992; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992; Menager-Beeley, 2003).

Recommendations

Benchmarks and best practices for the creation of better online courses that motivate adult learners to be successful follow.

Design

A well designed online course needs to have a good, simple, and easy to navigate visual design with no typos or dead hyperlinks. Learners should not have to click through more than three or four levels to access required information and, if the course management system software allows for it, learners should be able to navigate from one sublevel to another without having to return to the course homepage.

Lecture materials and notes should be available online for learners to refer back to as often as needed and to print, if so desired. Hyperlinks should be included allowing learners instant access to reference and support materials to enhance and advance learning and understanding.

Learner and instructor expectations must be clearly defined. Learners need to know when, how often, and how they are expected to interact online. Learners need to know when they can expect feedback from their instructor and the timeframe they can expect for an e-mail response.

Interest

Online courses targeted at adult learners need to include examples, tasks and activities that build on the learner's life experiences. Authentic activities that show learners how they can apply what they are learning beyond the course room promote engagement and interest and should be a part of online courses. Online adult learners have high expectations of themselves and the learning context in which they are participating, so tasks and activities need to be of high quality and challenging. Tasks that are too easy, not well thought out, and where no clear application is evident will be avoided. Different instructional techniques should be considered in task and activity design to provide interest, minimize monotony and to support different learning styles.

Learner to instructor interaction is important in maintaining learner motivation and interest. Online

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