

Chapter 1.61

We'll Leave the Light on for You: Keeping Learners Motivated in Onine Courses

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INTRODUCTION

Motivating online learners is a key challenge facing instructors in both higher education and corporate settings. Attrition rates and low participation levels in course activities are frequent instructor complaints about online learning environments. Part of the problem is a lack of sophistication in online tools and courseware (Bonk & Dennen, 1999). Added to this problem is that, even when tools exist for engaging and motivating students, instructors lack training in how to effectively use them. Instructors not only need to know the types of online and collaborative tools for engaging students, but also how to embed effective pedagogy when the technologies are weak.

Consider for a moment a traditional classroom. Why do students attend their classes? Perhaps their presence is being recorded by the instructor, or perhaps they are particularly interested in the

topic. Regardless, upon enrolling in a face-to-face course, learners are aware that they are expected to devote significant blocks of time each week to that course. But why do students participate in face-to-face course activities? To start, they already are seated in the classroom, so they may as well participate. Additionally, the effects of instructor modeling of desired activities and peer participation can motivate the reluctant learner to become more active.

In the online class, attendance is distinctly different. Unless explicitly told how their attendance will be noted, such as through a minimum number of messages posted per week, online learners do not know how or if their course participation will be determined. Consequently, online students turn to required assignments outlined in the course syllabus (Dennen, 2001). The end result is that students complete the basic graded components of the course, but little more.

Learner participation in an online class has sometimes been called an “act of faith” (Salmon, 2000). Key problems learners encounter include not knowing participation expectations, not feeling comfortable engaging in activities with people they have never met, and not having enough time to participate in activities. Whereas these first two reasons are clearly linked to motivation, the time factor is also related since highly motivated students will typically budget adequate time to participate.

In reviews of the research on motivation, certain key strategies are consistently found to be effective in conventional classrooms. For instance, effective instructors create a supportive but challenging environment, project enthusiasm and intensity, provide choice, create short-term goals, and offer immediate feedback on performance settings (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Reeve, 1996; Stipek, 1998). As these researchers have shown, instructors might also attempt to stimulate student curiosity, control, and fantasy. Naturally, they should make content personal and concrete by using relevant and authentic learning tasks and by allowing learners to create and display finished products. Finally, instructors should foster interaction with peers, create fun and game-like activities, embed structure as well as flexibility in assignments, and include activities with divergence or conflict.

Many of these principles relate to the highly regarded learner-centered psychological principles from the American Psychological Association (1993) and can be incorporated in Web-based instruction (Bonk & Cummings, 1998). In a recent Delphi study of top distance learning experts in the United States, many of these same principles (i.e., relevancy, authenticity, control, choice, interactivity, project-based, collaborative, etc.) were identified as key indicators of effective online learning environments (Partlow, 2001).

If so much is known, why are online courses often suffering from a lack of motivational elements? Problems exist in part because instructors

are unsure of how to manipulate this instructional medium, and in part because adequate instructor support is not yet available. According to recent surveys of college instructors and corporate trainers (Bonk, 2001, 2002), the proliferation of Web courseware and training programs has yet to match the pedagogical needs of higher education and industry. When corporate respondents were asked about various intrinsic motivational techniques, activities such as job reflections, team projects, and guest mentoring were considered highly engaging and useful online. When asked about tools and activities that were more motivational for adult learners in the workplace, respondents favored Web-based learning that contained relevant materials, responsive feedback, goal-driven activities, personal growth, choice or flexibility, and interactivity and collaboration. Unfortunately, such techniques were rarely used online.

According to the findings of these surveys, the motivational climate of online instruction is currently deficient. Therefore, in addition to the evaluation of student learning and completion rates, organizations should step back and evaluate the motivational characteristics embedded within their courses. Of course, there also is a need for further research here since the key motivational principles for online training are only starting to emerge.

As Bonk and Dennen (2003) contend, online instruction is not a simple task; most instructors still do not understand how to adapt different technology tools to engage their students. At the same time, few designers of e-learning tools have thoroughly considered the motivational or pedagogical principles behind adult learning (Firdyiwiek, 1999; Oliver, Omari, & Herrington, 1998). How can such tools motivate adult learner participation while fostering student thinking and collaboration? And what can be done to motivate learners in online environments? These questions must be addressed in order for online education to thrive and be a positive learning experience for students.

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