

The Little Engine That Could – How to Start the Motor? Motivating the Online Student

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Motivation is a function of initiating and sustaining goal-directed action. In addition to individual variables, student motivation is influenced by situational variables that include course design, instructional approach, and to a great extent, faculty behavior. This article presents classic literature on motivation and offers a grounded set of instructional methods and strategies with which faculty can spark and sustain motivation that leads to deep rather than superficial learning in the online learner. These classic motivational techniques have a direct relationship with today's online learner. The authors highlight the significance of external influences and describe some of the many opportunities available to faculty to enhance the motivation of online students to learn.

Introduction

With the growth of distance learning and changes in family working roles, the typical student profile has shifted from the "traditional" 18-22 year-old full-time undergraduate student residing on campus toward the employed, older college student who struggles to balance education with job and family (Allen and Seaman, 2006). Allen and Seaman suggest that online students tend to be older, work full-time or hold additional employment, and have more outside and family responsibilities when compared to the more traditional student. Valued rewards vary according to personal goals. This paper examines how faculty in colleges and universities can motivate and meet the needs of online adult learners and thereby play a critical role in improved rates of completion of continuing higher education.

Any analysis of student achievement, in order to guide strategies for improvement, must include an examination of what drives behavior – motivation. Why is motivation so important for learning success? It is the "key to persistence and to learning that lasts. The challenge is to help each person clarify his or her important purposes and then to find, or create, the combination of educational experiences that lead to those desired outcomes" (Chickering and Kuh, 2005, p. 1).

Student motivation both typically and naturally has to do with the student's desire to participate in the learning process. Motivation reflects the reasons or goals that underlie their involvement or noninvolvement in academic activities (Lumsden, 1994). Greater initiative, tenacity, and self-discipline are needed to take courses in the online environment than in the traditional classroom (Mandernach, et al., 2006). A student who is *intrinsically* motivated undertakes an activity "for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, the learning

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it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes" (Lepper, 1988, p. 290). Conversely, an *extrinsically* motivated student performs and strives to succeed "in order to obtain some reward or avoid some punishment external to the activity itself," such as grades or teacher approval (Lepper, 1988, p. 290). For example, some students are motivated more by the goal of the degree than the education; some may be motivated by the promotion that follows the degree; still others by the prestige in the eyes of their family and friends. Although students may be equally motivated to perform a task, the sources of their motivation may differ. As instructors we must find these differences and, subsequently, the differing motivators. We must determine if they are *intrinsically* or *extrinsically* motivated, or a combination thereof. In this article the authors explore motivation to learn, and propose specific approaches for online faculty interested in strengthening their students' motivation to learn.

Goal Orientation

Motivation derives from a variety of forces. It is dynamic, highly subject to change, and a major factor in readiness and desire to learn (Cashin, 1979). Students choose to exert a specific type and level of effort, and their reasons are as diverse as their attitudes and abilities. As these authors have discovered, students may be equally motivated to perform a task, yet the sources of their motivation may differ. Online instructors must recognize, monitor, and attempt to influence those factors that motivate students.

A number of factors are important to online students. They want independence; however, they also want and value timely faculty interaction (Northrup, 2002). It is important, beneficial, and useful for online instructors to make their classroom settings as "real" and live for the student, through strategies such as "hands-on" empirical research assignments, using student mentors, including oral communications (telephone, video, MP3, two-way synchronous chats, etc.), and working with local practitioners to coordinate student internships (Mandernach, et al., 2006).

Among the motivation-related concepts examined was achievement goal orientation (Dweck, 1986). Dweck proposed that students who possess intrinsic (or mastery) orientation long for new skills and knowledge. They find satisfaction in the innate rewards of learning. This attitude guides their achievement behavior, which emphasizes contextualized learning. Intrinsically or mastery oriented students engage with the content, their peers, and faculty, netting a longer retention span and a greater ability to use what they learn. Such students are independent, lifelong learners (Chasteuneuf, 2006).

In contrast, students with extrinsic (or performance) orientation concern themselves with achievement chiefly in relation to their peers (Vansteenkiste and Lens, 2006). They use rote memorization and study for immediate gain according to what they expect to see on a test. These behaviors may be observed in students enrolled in introductory-level courses or general education requirements. Such learning carries a brief life expectancy and is superficial (Ames, 1990). In the experience of these authors, extrinsically motivated students are seeking benefits such as grades, positive feedback or other indicators of teacher approval. Many such students openly disclose the incentives that motivate their efforts, such as maintaining a grade average to preserve financial aid, fulfilling degree requirements, improving career prospects, or winning the approval of significant others.

Metacognition

Motivated students direct their learning very deliberately. After goal orientation, another factor associated with motivation and learning success involves

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self-regulating and monitoring strategies, known collectively as metacognition (Flavell, 1979). Students possessing metacognitive skills and habits are aware of their cognitive processing methods and employ study behaviors appropriate to the situation. Hallmarks of metacognition include a heightened awareness of one's thinking, selection of processing strategies from a repertoire, reflection and readjustment, and sustained motivation to achieve (Paris and Winograd, 2004).

Self-Efficacy

Another individual variable relates to perception of one's ability to learn subject matter successfully. Self-efficacy, as described by Bandura (1986), refers to one's sense of ability to succeed at a given task to a specified level. Self-efficacy is a task-specific quality; a student may be a talented and confident pianist (and therefore enjoy a sense of self-efficacy at piano-playing), yet be painfully aware of low achievement in a history class (and will feel inefficacious there as a result). Students who perceive themselves as limited in capability lack the confidence, energy and motivation that successful study efforts bring. Their achievement behavior is limited. They regulate themselves away from attempting a rigorous academic effort because, based on experience, they do not "see" it happening (Ames, 1990).

Situational Variables

While some would suggest that a student's goal orientation, and by extension the student's motivation, affects response to individual or situational variables, Chasteauneuf (2006) countered that the real issue is how those internal and external variables inform a student's choice of goal orientation. This is a powerful thought, since external factors such as social forces clearly affect motivation (Bandura, 1971). Situational variables take many forms. Motivation in most students is socially mediated, affected by influences including classroom dynamics. Consider the effects of sarcastic or deprecating comments following a student's erroneous statement – which sometimes occurs in the classroom. When it happens in the online environment, the authors believe its effects can be especially damaging because peer replies are visible onscreen for weeks to come. The hapless student who spoke in error cannot soothe his embarrassment with hopes the gaffe will be forgotten; it is in full view of everyone. He or she is unlikely to volunteer another statement soon.

According to Ames (1992), motivational considerations include various cues found in the course, such as learning expectations stated in the syllabus or by the instructor. Students utilize these cues to form impressions of the value or importance of a learning task, assignment, or the course as a whole. For example, students may respond to an assignment by deciding that it is of little consequence, so they decide not to exert their best effort. In such a case superficial learning may not be followed by deeper consideration of the topic. Students gauge the difficulty of the course and assess its value for their needs and purposes. In a course that fosters commitment and motivation to learn, students can thrive.

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Faculty Behavior

Of all the situational variables affecting student motivation, perhaps none exerts such a strong and pervasive effect as faculty attitudes and behavior. Instructional communication such as giving feedback on performance constitutes a prime opportunity either to enhance motivation or decimate it. Receiving feedback or a grade on performance creates a high-stakes situation for students, for they take it very personally, and not only in the academic sense. Their self-esteem and

self-efficacy are affected; they either find themselves on solid footing or in quicksand. Therefore, the manner in which feedback is delivered, particularly in the online environment, is of paramount importance.

Lacking the opportunity to provide the face-to-face immediacy found in the physical classroom, online instructors are challenged to find other means of closing the social and psychological distance between themselves and their students (Arbaugh, 2001). Verbal interaction between instructors and students is vital. Instructors in online courses, more so than in face-to-face courses, must seek evidence of students' feelings and motivation, especially their reactions to the written word, which is devoid of vocal tone. This interaction can be fostered by using students' names in discussion posts, sharing personal anecdotes related to course concepts, and encouraging students to respond to instructor questions as well as to comments made by their peers (Hutchins, 2003). Working with peers reduces learner anxiety and is an effective method of increasing the motivation of online students (Moore, 2006). The more effort online instructors put into closing that social and psychological gap in their class discussions using appropriate immediacy behaviors, the greater the reward in student interaction (Arbaugh, 2001).

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In order to improve performance and at the same time sustain desire to learn, feedback is best delivered respectfully, tactfully and constructively, so as to save face. Face refers to the positive self-image students hope to internalize and preserve through interactions with others. If face is threatened, a student may withdraw from interaction and engagement with assigned tasks. Consequently, the level of motivation declines. On the other hand, faculty guidance, recognition and approbation yield an increase in student motivation to exert greater effort (Kerssen-Griep, 2003).

Additional strategies to enhance motivation include guiding students toward their own discoveries of facts and relationships. Self-esteem grows when students realize success in acquiring, storing, and retrieving key information (Alutu, 2006). They accomplish this through thoughtful questioning and being encouraged to construct knowledge that is personally meaningful and durable over time. Further evidence of the impact of instructor interventions on goal and learning orientation, motivation, achievement and retention of online adult learners was established by Chyung (2000), who determined that the motivational attraction of online instruction for adult learners related to perceptions of the learning climate, learning outcomes, and improved retention of students.

Data Collection

Effective teaching, support and motivation involve faculty research. What works, and what does not? An optimal way to determine what instructors do to support and motivate their students is to observe them and ask them. The authors formally collected data on over 200 online adjunct instructors during AY2006–2007. Their observation illuminated a number of key areas: what works; what does not work; what students like; what students do not like; student complaints vs. student praise; stimulating discussions vs. dead spots (Bunkowski, et al., 2006).

This examination of more than 200 online adjunct faculty and courses enabled the authors to identify five key dimensions of effectiveness: Interaction, individual attention, timeliness of information and response, information transmission, and accessibility and skill at moderating the flow of learning. These were viewed and assessed through bi-weekly assessments of online student-student and faculty-student interaction in the classroom.

Success Formula

Based on their research, the authors have compiled a "short list" of key elements for consideration by faculty wishing to improve their effectiveness in motivating online students (Bunkowski, et al., 2006):

Whenever possible, course topics should be current (for every discipline). A textbook will never be as current as today's primary news medium, the Internet. Excellent resources include CNN (<http://www.cnn.com/>), Fox (<http://www.foxnews.com/>), CBS (<http://www.cbsnews.com/>), and BBC (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/>). Information from these sources can be integrated in a course and revised as necessary. Students are increasingly savvy and enjoy discussing current events in the city, state, county, region, nation, or world with their classmates.

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A wealth of information is available to students. In gathering appropriate material for online discussions, faculty can dispense some of the responsibility to the students. A semi-structured approach allows students some latitude while ensuring they address the course objectives. These authors have discovered that students generally rise to the challenge of exchanging information, directing questions, and seeking clarification at a surprisingly sophisticated level.

The online discussion forum is not a place for domination. The key is keeping students on their toes through moderation. Occasional refereeing may be necessary as a last resort. Motivation to learn occurs at strategic intervals, beginning prior to start of term. Faculty have opportunities to spark student interest as course syllabi are posted to the course platform.

Figure 1 divides a course into specific points at which suggested motivational strategies can be used with success. More detailed information on ways to engage learners can be found in Appendix A, where The Nine Events of Instruction (Gagne, 1985) are provided along with comments from these authors. Appendix B explains the use of "R₂A₂"; and Appendix C offers an actual case study illustration of faculty-facilitated metacognition.

Connection between Faculty and Student Motivation

A critical component of student motivation and the success of the online learning experience is the motivation of the instructor. Student performance, according to Crumacker, is "contingent on instructor skill and level of effort of motivation" (2001, p.1). The factors that influence faculty motivation include positive factors or incentives, and negative factors or obstacles. Recent studies of online faculty reveal the following motivating incentives for online instruction (McKenzie et al., 2000):

- Flexible working conditions
- Enjoyment of on-line instruction
- Enhanced technological skills
- Interaction with a diverse student population
- Increased job satisfaction
- Ease of updating and revising courses
- Ability to ensure that course topics are relevant

Financial considerations such monetary awards do not appear to be a significant motivating factor (Rockwell et al., 2000). Release time and reductions in faculty workloads are reported to be more desirable than financial rewards – at least to senior faculty (Rockwell et al., 1999).

Figure 1: Strategic Steps for Successful Students

| Pre-term wk. | Day 1 of Term | End of Week 1 | Weekly | At Midterm | Final Week |
|---|---|--|--|--|--|
| Post syllabus and specific "success" tips | Vividly describe course's value in real-life context | Urge formation of peer learning support pairs | Aid discovery via good questioning | Post & praise student reports of learning improvements | Summarize & reinforce CLOs* within context of the major, global society, etc. |
| Post photograph and a friendly introduction | Log in 2-3 times; be responsive and genuinely enthusiastic | Introduce peer critiques of thinking/writing | Encourage links among course, life experiences, current events | "What is/isn't working well in our course?" Asked of the class | Emphasize the value of overt learning for academic & career success |
| Ask students to post photos and introductions | Guide students' reading (look for <i>this...compare...</i>) | Demonstrate & promote deep versus superficial thinking | Illustrate type of performance expected | Summarize course journey to date | Encourage all students to extend insights by constantly re-framing the subject matter |
| Incorporate some choice on class topics and assignments | Summarize self-assessments & improvement goals; urge peer support to aid all students | Stress belief in students' ability to succeed and grow via course | Model & discuss expert thinking & processing | Schedule time for reflection on subject and on learning successes & challenges | Urge students to explore the more complex issues & their implications on broader scale |
| Verify effective use of section headings, color, text, intuitive flow of course | Post "primer" on metacognition & model it in a discussion post | Create context | Praise, reinforce quality efforts | Plan efforts & focus for rest of term | |
| Create a thread to post weekly Teacher's Tips & Tricks and invite student sharing of their best tips | Ensure an early success for each student; praise and document it | Introduce R ₂ A ₂ <i>Recognize Relate Assimilate Apply</i> (Hill, 1960) See Appendix B | Give feedback to each student 1:1 | Devise a plan to motivate self for balance of course | Reflect, record lessons learned while teaching this course, for future use |
| Create a virtual lounge-students only | Recognize every student in some manner | Summarize and connect the core course elements | Correct privately and respectfully | Continue using psychological lens to view each student's attitude, effort & performance & adjust yours accordingly | HOW CAN YOU USE THESE EXPERIENCES TO IMPROVE YOUR OWN TEACHING & LEARNING? |
| Ask students to assess their learning skills and areas for improvement | Decide to reduce "mental miles" between faculty and students | Clarify course expectations, performance, and grading | Re-assess the nature and ways of <i>your</i> thinking | WHAT ELSE CAN YOU THINK OF? | *CLOs = Core Learning Outcomes |
| State desire to support learning improvement & your goal that all students will select effective strategies | Internalize caring & show sincere interest in course and all students | Ask students for their best effort: <i>to benefit them</i> | Reflect upon the impact you have on your students | | |
| | Consider cultural, diversity factors that could affect motivation | Question to self: What effect am *I* having upon my students' motivation to learn? | JOT DOWN YOUR IDEAS HERE: | | |

According to McKenzie et al. (2000), the major obstacles interfering with instructor motivation include:

- Decreased live, face-to-face interaction with students
- Lack of time to plan and deliver an on-line course
- Lack of support & assistance
- Burden of training time to learn & update technology skills
- Inadequate compensation & incentives
- Heavier workload
- Slow computer access

Deubel (2003, p. 1) argues that "an instructor's attitude, motivation, and true commitment toward instruction delivery via distance education programs" have a direct bearing on the quality of online instruction. To optimize faculty motivation and thereby enhance student learning and foster student motivation, one must maximize the incentives and minimize the obstacles. As instructors move from the traditional classroom to the online learning environment, their roles change from "teacher" to "facilitator, mentor and coach" (Yang and Cornelious, 2005, p. 216), or "learning catalyst" (Volery and Lord, 2000, p. 4).

The following suggestions can help to support online faculty as they make this transition, and to sustain their satisfaction and high level of motivation (Crumpacker, 2001; Deubel, 2003; Rockwell et al., 2000; McKenzie et al., 2000; Rockwell et al., 1999; Yang and Cornelious, 2005):

- Training with emphasis on:
 - Online pedagogy
 - Adult learning theory
 - Technology skills
 - Course facilitation
 - Institutional Policies & procedures
- Communication with administration
- Peer mentoring
- Evaluation of instructors & courses
- Ongoing training in course delivery/management system
- Professional development opportunities
- Ongoing technical support
- Manageable class sizes
- Reward system (Priority course assignment, stipend awards, release time, etc.)

Motivated instructors are better able to guide and motivate students as they assume a more active role as online learners. Students are more likely to have a positive learning experience with instructors who hold a positive attitude about teaching online (Yang and Cornelious, 2005; Volery and Lord, 2000).

Conclusion

As we shift from an institution of face-to-face student-instructor interaction to online instruction it is increasingly important that we dedicate the needed time and resources to programs that address the unique challenges of online students. It is important that we embrace the factors that motivate our students, predict the success of our students and reflect the practices of successful online instructors in online teaching.

From this research, we may both gather and add to the best practices employed by instructors in the motivation of online students. As indicated by the observations of the authors within the context of this study and through faculty evaluations and observations, a clear distinction exists between the needs of in-class versus online students. Further, the motivators of online students include, but certainly are not limited to, timely course material, information sharing between faculty and students, and mediation and moderation by involved instructors. Each of these factors involves dedicated and motivated instructor interaction which, in turn, affects student motivation. The current research points to a need for ongoing and further research in the area of motivating our growing population of online students.

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Appendix A: Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction

| Instructional Event | Specific Action for Faculty |
|--|--|
| <i>Gain and control students' attention.</i> | Enthusiastically describe your own interest in the course/topic and its value to you. Motivation sparks motivation. |
| <i>Inform students of expected outcomes.</i> | Describe the journey about to begin. |
| <i>Stimulate recall of relevant prerequisite capabilities.</i> | Remind students of their previous mastery of necessary verbal and intellectual skills. |
| <i>Present the stimuli for learning, according to the kind of learning required.</i> | Introduce course material in an orderly and well-organized fashion. |
| <i>Offer guidance for learning.</i> | Carefully constructed questions induce discovery. Students practice using concepts; solve problems, etc. |
| <i>Provide feedback.</i> | Prompt, frequent, specific feedback during early stages is critical to achievement, self-efficacy, and motivation. Encourage and guide students to provide their own feedback – assess their own learning for completeness and accuracy (metacognition). |
| <i>Appraise performance.</i> | Provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate and verify achievement. This promotes retention, self-efficacy, and enhances motivation. |
| <i>Make provisions for transfer of knowledge.</i> | Periodically ask students how they are connecting what they are learning to their own lives. Generalizability promotes learning, motivation, etc. |
| <i>Insure retention.</i> | Assign practical learning tasks that require recall and significant effort, etc. |

Appendix B: R₂A₂

Recognize → Relate → Assimilate → Apply
"R₂A₂"

Napoleon Hill, author of the highly acclaimed 1937 book, *Think and Grow Rich*, is credited with this phrase. Hill, an American, was referring to a systematic method by which a person could grow in wisdom and thereby become more successful in achieving his or her goals. Hill's powerful and practical words resonated with millions of Americans who were struggling against the Great Depression.

To apply R₂A₂ to teaching and learning in the online environment, an instructor might assign a learning activity such as a well-focused discussion forum. Students would be expected to identify connections among course material, posts by their peers and instructor, and their own contributions to the discussion. The first step is to *recognize* a concept as familiar, then to *relate* or connect that concept to

another concept – perhaps a newly introduced idea, or even a foundational concept from previous course material.

Once the student has recognized and related the concepts, he or she is to *assimilate* or weave them into the context of the discussion, unit, and course. In so doing the student actually uses the material which embeds it further into memory.

As the new information becomes personalized knowledge it can be applied to present and future situations. In the online learning environment, such situations might include further discussion postings, online debates, case studies, or essays such as position papers. Each of these learning activities strengthens student engagement with the material, and thereby potentially enhances learning outcomes.

Appendix C: Training in Metacognition – Case Study

One method for enabling students to achieve metacognition that fosters the development of mastery orientation is to introduce readings and discussion designed to stimulate introspection about motivation and the learning process. As Svinicki (2005) indicates, two main areas of student motivation exist:

1. Extrinsic, performance oriented – externally driven; where students are motivated by grades, diplomas, career advancement, increased status, renewed financial aid, etc., which leads to more superficial learning with shorter retention.
2. Intrinsic, mastery oriented – internally driven; where students are motivated to learn purely for the sake of learning which leads to deeper learning with more enduring retention.

The two motivations can exist simultaneously (Svinicki, 2005). The goal for educators is to encourage students to place more emphasis on intrinsic learning.

To accomplish this in the instructor of an online *Introduction to Women's Studies* course requires the students to read Adrienne Rich's essay "Claiming an Education" during the first week of class (Rich 1977). Rich gets to the heart of student motivation. She encourages students to accept responsibility and become active participants in their learning. She tells students to take risks; to take courses that challenge them; to seek out criticism. "It means assuming your share of responsibility," she writes, "for what happens in the classroom." Overwhelmingly, Rich's essay is successful in conveying her message. The following excerpts from student reaction papers, quizzes, and discussion forum postings demonstrate how effective this assignment is in evoking student introspection:

Student A: Adrienne Rich states to think of yourself as claiming your education rather than receiving your education. I thought to myself, "Hey, I never thought of it that way."

Student B: If you're claiming your education you are always finding new ways to challenge yourself in school. You're also taking criticism, and using it to push yourself further. To receive an education is to be passive and not involved, not taking things serious at all including yourself.

Student C: To claim an education is to go to college knowing that you want to satisfy yourself and to receive an education is to go to college to satisfy someone else's desire for you.

Student D: "Claiming an Education" is about how women have the right to claim an education and not just receive one. I never really thought of the word "claim" in the context of getting an education before.

Student E: It is about taking responsibility toward ourselves. That means pushing yourself to the limits and learning all there is to be learned. Taking the harder classes and taking it all in. Not selling yourself short.

Student F: Rich explains that in order for students to claim their education they need to "demand to be taken seriously" which includes seeking out criticism, recognizing that it is great when someone demands that you push yourself further and shows how much and how far you can go. All in all, receiving an education would be getting a normal education and not exploring, but claiming an education would be demanding and pursuing every aspect of education to its fullest.

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