

Learners' Motivation in a Distance Education Environment

Khitam Azaiza

INTRODUCTION

Motivation is "a force or drive that influences behavior to achieve a desired outcome" (Millette & Gorham, 2002, p. 141, as cited in Jung, 2006). Motivation is one of the key factors affecting students' performance and learning, particularly online learning success (Cole, Field, & Harris, 2004; Ryan, 2001 as cited in Smart & Cappel, 2006). Learners' motivation evolves with commitment to their study goals and to their institution. Motivated students are those who

are willing to achieve their goals, prepare for class, and turn in assignments on time. Student motivation is crucial because it is related to students' learning outcome (Jung, 2006). This article briefly addresses the elements of learners' motivation, the variety of motivating factors that distance education students may experience while pursuing their educational goals include self-motivation, learner-to-learner interaction, instructor-to-learner interaction, and content and institutional support.

ELEMENTS OF LEARNER MOTIVATION

The goal of motivational design is to develop tools and strategies that are helpful in increasing learners' motivation in achieving their objectives. Thus, for the last 20 years Keller has been developing and testing the learner motivation theory for systemically integrating motivation into instructional plan (Driscoll, 2005). Keller's theory consists of four different characteristics of learners' motivation which is known as the ARCS model of motivational design:

Attention can be gained by employing several methods. These methods can be perceptual or inquiry. Perceptual attention can be gained through the use of (a) surprises that catch the learners' interest with the course, (b) hands-on activities such as games to get the learners involved with the course and the instructor, (c) variety of methods in presenting the course materials



Khitam Azaiza,
Web Developer/Analyst, Nova Southeastern
University, 1750 NE 167th St.,
North Miami Beach, FL 33162.
Telephone: (954) 262-8466.
E-mail: azaiza@nova.edu

such as video, discussion group, group projects, presentation, et cetera, and (d) balance amount of humor and real examples to maintain learners interest in the course. The inquiry method can be achieved by providing questions or problems as activities for the learners (Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009).

Relevance refers to things we perceive in meeting personal satisfaction (Driscoll, 2005). Relevance contributes to increasing learners' motivation by using real examples and language that learners are comfortable with (Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009). Keller addressed six elements to enhance relevance: experience, present worth, future usefulness, needs matching, modeling, and choice. By following these elements, the learners will increase their personal desire to learn (Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009). Instructors should relate coursework to their learners' experience, and they should provide examples and opportunities that match learners' values and motives (Driscoll, 2005). Driscoll stated "finding ways to actively engage students in learning can be an effective means in motivating them, irrespective of whether they yet see the relevance of the learning activities" (p. 336).

Confidence helps in engaging learners with the learning environment. Learners' confidence can be enhanced by helping them to understand the success of their learning. This success can be achieved by providing objectives for learners to help them estimate the probability of success, allow for meaningful success, and permit growth during the learning process. Furthermore, providing feedback is an important factor to support learners and help them achieve success (Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009).

Satisfaction can be achieved through natural consequences, positive consequences, and equity (Driscoll, 2005). Natural consequences can be generated by providing opportunities to use newly acquired

knowledge in a real setting and that cause the learner to feel that skill is useful (Driscoll, 2005; Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009). Positive consequences can be achieved by providing learners with rewards such as verbal praise and real or symbolic rewards. Equity can be achieved by matching outcomes to expectation but not to over-reward the easy tasks (Driscoll, 2005; Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009).

Many elements during the developing of a course can affect motivation (Keller, 2006). These elements include materials teachers or designers use, teachers' behaviors, the structure of a lesson, and the overall structure of the course (Keller, 2006). Each element of Keller's theory helps teachers and designers to analyze different teaching approaches and enhance their teaching skills by employing motivational strategies (Keller, 2006). These strategies provide instructional designers and teachers with strong and effective ways to integrate motivation in a learning environment (Driscoll, 2005). According to Clark (2001), there are huge cultural differences in motivation that would be a factor to influence the design of instruction. It is important to consider student interest and learning styles in order to effectively implement instruction. Since motivation plays an important role in students' learning, media and method should constantly be changed and adapted as delivery tools of instruction to avoid boring students with more of the same.

FACTORS OF LEARNER MOTIVATION

According to Jung (2006), there are two types of motivation: primary and secondary. Primary is an unlearned way to be motivated and it occurs naturally by addressing bodily needs of food, sleep, feeling of self-esteem, and confidence. Secondary motivation, on the other hand, occurs when motivation is provided by people who surround us. Secondary moti-

vation can be divided into subfactors: extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation can be rewards and punishments or can be derived from some value associated with the activity. For example, students who display classic signs of extrinsic motivation will study for the SAT or ACT test and keep retaking the test until they achieve the appropriate score to be awarded a scholarship or to get them into their dream university. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation involves one's own needs such as choosing to read or write a book for personal pleasure.

Most motivated distance learners, especially women, are self-motivated. The development of women's self-motivation and self-directedness in any educational undertaking is important. With all of life's responsibilities, including family, children, and housing, women learners are encouraged to manage their time, practice control over their own learning processes and goals, and be able to function effectively with the limiting factors of their respective society (Gokool-Ramdoos, 2005). According to Chen (2001), most successful online learners are self-motivated, self-directed, and responsible. On the other hand, unmotivated learners will express negative perceptions of their online course.

Learner-to-learner interaction is another factor of motivation. Interaction provides motivation, feedback, and dialogue between learners as well as instruction (Chen, 2001). This occurs during learners' interaction via discussion activities, chat sessions, group projects, and/or peers consultations. Furthermore, a blended course format is another way for interaction among learners. Blended courses can help to motivate learners who would otherwise feel isolated in a fully online course (Durante & Koohang, 2003). Interaction can lead the learner to construct personal meaning.

Among the most important factors that influence the motivation of learners is the relationship between learners and instruc-

tors (learner-to-instructor interaction). This relationship is the best way to motivate learners and to increase their learning outcomes (Sahin, 2008). Thus, communication is very important in a distance learning environment. This will create motivation for learners, which leads them to function effectively and achieve their educational goals. The communication in distance learning can be easily translated for use with several types of media such as Elluminate, chat, discussion, and so on. In rural communities, instructors may use cell phones to text messages students to keep them engaged and motivated. Contributions to the asynchronous discussion board, a synchronous chat room, or a combination of the two are additional tools instructors use in students' motivation and satisfaction when accessing and manipulating online courses. One group that was interviewed in Churchill's (2005) study summed up that

the important elements of e-learning are timely access to the course materials, engaging e-learning materials, reliable technical infrastructure, and most important, the e-tutor, who facilitates the e-learning experience by encouraging, monitoring, and inviting responses from participants, and ensuring smooth operation of the course. There should also be a contingency plan when things go wrong. (p. 5)

Instructors should strongly consider motivation during the development of a course curriculum. According to Simonson (2005), distance instructors are "becoming designers, organizers, motivators, and assessors, among other things; roles that teachers have long been advocating as vital to the education process, even more important than presenting" (p. 40). Instructors need to create interactive resources such as graphs, models, spreadsheets, and simulations to help students interact with the course content (Sahin, 2008). It is also incumbent on the learner to

be engaged with the course through chat, discussion group, and problem solving activities.

Instructors' immediacy behavior is very important to motivate students. Instructors who use vocal variety, address students by name, and respond to students' inquiries with prompt action are considered immediate instructors (Jung, 2006). Increasing the distance between the instructor and the student presents both challenges. Learners need to feel comfortable and want to be able to get in touch with the instructor as needed. The instructor, on the other hand, needs to encourage students and make them feel that he or she is always there to help.

The instructor should use multiple ways of providing quick feedback (e.g., FAQs, automated quizzes, self-assessments, peer review of work, and instructor feedback on discussions and on assigned activities). The instructor should be able to manage students' expectations for faculty response time to individual or group questions. Feedback lets students know that the instructor received their questions or assignments. Furthermore, providing feedback is an important factor to support learners and help them achieve their success.

Institutional and content motivations are the most important factors for accomplishing successful distance education programs. In order for an institution to have an effective online course, important tools must be available. For example, Al-Quds-Open University (QOU), which is located in Palestine, uses valuable tools to offer an effective, motivated, and enthusiastic course (Matheos et al., 2007). The QOU also has the staff to support the courses including academic specialists, instructional designers, and technology specialists in online development, video and audio production, and multimedia production. To be able to motivate learners, the staff and faculty must also be motivated because a person would not provide some-

thing that he or she doesn't have. Thus, using the case in QOU, staff in the media production center are offered continuous opportunities for training. The trained staff are required to share their new skills with the rest in the department, which will definitely develop a motivating and an effective atmosphere within the department. As result, they work together as a team and are willing to produce the best quality materials needed to have successful online courses (Matheos et al., 2007).

Training faculty is very important to have a motivated online environment. Faculty in a distance education environment should be aware of the technology used for delivering content; "Teachers must know something about the potential of technology to facilitate learning and to enhance their own effectiveness" (Beaudoin, 1990, p. 1). Teachers should be able to use tools effectively and incorporate them to meet the learning outcomes. Thus, ongoing training on teaching using technology within online course is essential. Beaudoin (1990) asserted "in-service programs must offer convincing, no-nonsense and ongoing training that deals with how to teach at a distance, not merely how to manipulate new instructional technology" (p. 5).

Many universities have a department designed solely for training faculty to use all the available tools for delivering online courses effectively. Many universities offer a student support center including learning assistance center and tech support center to motivate students to persist in their programs. Students can access the learning center online to improve their skills in mathematics, reading and writing academic materials, research and so on. Individual tutors will address a student's particular questions, etc. The online service could include both prepackaged learning materials and live tutoring (Matheos et al., 2007). Students may access the tech support system via phone, live chat, or e-mail for any technical difficulty they may face in their online courses. Furthermore, the

media center is a very important factor in the motivation of online students. Students will have the motivation to continue with their program if they have easy access to all necessary research materials.

SUMMARY

Motivation in a distance learning environment is the key success for learners to achieve their educational goals. Furthermore, motivation helps learners gain knowledge faster. The concept of Keller's theory, the ARCS model, is to systemically integrate motivation into the instructional plan (Driscoll, 2005). Self-motivation, learner-to-learner interaction, instructor-to-learner interaction, content, and institutional support are the major motivational factors that definitely have an effect on students' performance and persistence in distance education. McKeachie (2002, as cited in Smart & Cappel, 2006) stated that "Students who are motivated to learn will choose tasks that enhance their learning, will work hard at those tasks, and will persist in the face of difficulty in order to attain their goals" (p. 19).

REFERENCES

- Beaudoin, M. (1990). The instructor's changing role in distance education. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 4(2), 21-29.
- Chen, Y. (2001). Dimensions of transactional distance in the World Wide Web learning environment: A factor analysis. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 32(4), 459-470.
- Churchill, T. (2005). E-reflections: A comparative exploration of the role of e-learning in training higher education lecturers. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 6(3), 1-9.
- Clark, R. E. (Ed.). (2001). *Learning from media: Arguments, analysis, and evidence*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Driscoll, M. (2005). *Psychology of learning for instruction* (3rd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Durante, A., & Koohang, A. (2003). Learners' perceptions toward the web-based distance learning activities/assignments portion of an undergraduate hybrid instructional model. *Journal of Information Technology Education*, 2, 105-113.
- Gokool-Ramdoe, S. (2005). The online learning environment: Creating a space for Mauritian women learners. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 6(3), 1-15. Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/264/430>
- Jung, H. (2006). *Transactional distance and student motivation: Student perception of teacher immediacy, solidarity toward peer students and student motivation in distance education* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). West Virginia University, Morgantown.
- Keller, J. M. (2006). *What are the elements of learner motivation?* Retrieved from <http://arcsmodel.com/Mot%20dsgn%20A%20cate.htm>
- Learning Theories Knowledgebase. (2009, May). *ARCS Model of Motivational Design (Keller)*. Retrieved from <http://www.learning-theories.com/kellers-arcs-model-of-motivational-design.html>
- Matheos, K., MacDonald, M., McLean, C., Luterbach, B., Baidoun, S., & Nakashhian, S. (2007). *A comprehensive evaluation of Al-Quds Open University*. Retrieved from <http://www.qou.edu/homePage/english/manitobaReport/qouFullReport.pdf>
- Sahin, S. (2008). The relationship between student characteristics, including learning styles, and their perceptions and satisfaction in web-based courses in higher education. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 9(1), 123-138.
- Simonson, M. (2005). Teacher as skeuomorph: Teacher as what? *Distance Learning*, 2(3), 40.
- Smart, K., & Cappel, J. (2006). Students' perceptions of online learning: A comparative study. *Journal of Information Technology Education*, 5, 201-219.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.