Motivation in Distributed Learning

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Overview

Distributed learning has been a part of our education system for many years, even before the computer age. Traditionally, students and instructors used the postal service to exchange correspondence and assignments. This was slow, and there was little interaction between student and instructor, and virtually no interaction between students enrolled in the same course. The completion rate of courses taught using correspondence was quite low (Matheos & Archer, 2004). With the advent of the computer and the internet, distributed learning has changed radically. Students and instructors can communicate quickly and easily. This development in distributed learning has transformed the way education can be achieved in our society. It is no longer necessary to attend classes at a certain time and place, or to wait for the postal service to deliver course work and instructor feedback. Courses can be completed nearly anywhere in the world, as long as there is access to a computer and the internet. With this increased accessibility, everyone should be able to be successful in their educational endeavours.

However, the dropout rate for DL is quite high. Park and Choi (2009) note that the dropout rate for adults is 70%. They also found that motivation was an important consideration in the decision to complete or drop out of online learning. Muilenburg and Berge (2005) identified student motivation as one of the major problems in online learning. They concluded from their study that motivation was the second most severe (next to lack of social interaction) barrier to successful completion of online courses.

I have worked with high school students taking distance education courses. These courses were a mix of print and online education. The students attended school daily, and were expected to
work on their courses during school hours. They completed modules, and sent assignments to another school to be marked. I was a teacher-on-call at this school, and often found myself helping the students with their coursework. I noted that motivation seemed to be a huge factor in the success of these students. Several of the students were determined to pass their courses, and put effort into completing and passing. Most of the students, however, were bored with this method of learning, and failed to complete their courses. I felt that there really must be a better way to use distributed learning to teach these students. They were all capable of doing the work, but certainly were not motivated by the method of education that they were presented with.

I have also taken a number of distributed learning courses. These courses range from the old-fashioned correspondence to online, paced web courses. I have always completed them, but have often felt my level of motivation waxing and waning. I know that for me, the subject, and more specifically my interest in it, is probably most important in my motivation level, and the type of assignments given is a very close second. The question that follows from these observations and this knowledge is how can distributed learning courses be designed to maximize student motivation?

Critical Account

The studies used in the research for this paper most frequently based their research on one of three theories of motivation suggested by Holmberg (1986), Keller (1987) and Moore (1991). While there are many theories of motivation, the theories presented here are postulated with distance learning at their core. Holmberg suggests that student motivation can be supported in distance teaching if the study is relevant to the learner, if there are feelings of rapport between the learner and the institution, and if the learner is engaged in activities and discussions. Keller’s
theory of learning motivation is represented by the ARCS model. This acronym stands for attention (active engagement in the learning activity), relevance (meaningful relation to the learner’s goals), confidence (learners believe they can succeed) and satisfaction (positive rewards and recognition). These are the four principles of motivation that Keller identified. Keller (2010) has also added a fifth principle (volition or self-regulation). Moore claims that motivation is influenced by dialogue (interaction between student and instructor), structure of the program, and learner autonomy (personal responsibility). All three theories have some overlap in how they explain student motivation.

Kelsey and D’souza (2004) tested Holmberg and Moore’s theories that interaction between student-content and student-interface would improve learner motivation. Kelsey also studied the importance of learner-learner interactions. Kelsey and D’souza interviewed eighty-eight graduate students who successfully completed distance education course work. They concluded from their study that, as suggested in Holmberg and Moore’s theory, students benefited from interactions with their instructors. They also noted that students did not feel that interacting with other students was necessary for their success. The first part of Kelsey and D'souza’s study corresponds with best practices identified in DL (Grant and Thorton, 2007; DiPietro Ferdig, Black & Preston, 2008); instructor and student interaction is important. The second question addressed in the study contradicts DL best practices. Student-student interaction was not an important component of student success or motivation. This study supports my own feeling about DL. I do not feel that interacting with other students is important to my success. That being said, I have learned many things and been exposed to a number of ideas and viewpoints from my peers. Most of this learning occurred from reading their postings on the class blog, and
not by actually interacting with them. I do find that interaction with the instructor helps me keep on track, and have a desire to complete assignments in a timely manner.

Keller’s ARCS principles were the theoretical basis of a study by Huett, Moller, Young, Bray, & Huett (2008). This study looked at the confidence component in the theory. It was postulated that students who were assisted throughout the course with confidence-enhancing tactics including emails, course design and discussion, would do better than students who did not have those supports. The study showed a statistically significant difference in the performance between the supported group and the control group. The supported group did better on the course overall, even though those students did not report feeling any more confident. Huett et al concluded that because of the design of the course and the study, there was likely some overlap in Keller’s principles. They felt that the attention, relevance and satisfaction components of the theory may also have been increased by the methodology used to enhance confidence. In the analysis, Huett et al state that “overall motivation was enhanced in learners through the application of external factors” (p. 124). This is an important finding for educators designing DL courses. It reinforces the idea that it is possible and desirable to design the course in a way that will increase motivation. Best practices for DL courses need to include methodology that will positively motivate learners.

Hartnett, St. George & Dron (2011) also found that extrinsic factors, including course design, had an effect on student motivation. Hartnett et al conducted two case studies involving students in a New Zealand post-secondary institution. Data was collected in a variety of methods including online questionnaires and interviews. Hartnett et al concluded that student motivation was “multidimensional” (p.32). There were a number of factors affecting motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic. Educators have virtually no control over intrinsic factors; however, they
do have some control over extrinsic factors. Hartnett et al noted that care should always be taken to design the program with relevant, meaningful tasks that reflect learning goals that are important to the learner. These conclusions support aspects of all three learning theories discussed above. Hartnett et al’s findings also point to the importance of using best practices in creating DL courses. One consideration in DL best practices is creating quality assignments that reflect the learning objectives of the course.

**Synthesis**

Motivation must be an important consideration for educators when designing and implementing a distributed learning course. While motivation has intrinsic components, studies have shown that motivation can also be influenced by extrinsic factors. It is important to build as many of these extrinsic factors into the course design as possible. The instructor can and should construct the course with consideration of the theories of motivation.

I like Keller’s ARCS model of motivation. It is easy to understand, and is comprehensive enough to be able to use in the designing of a course. Assignments and activities in the course need to actively engage the learner, and be designed so that they challenge, but do not overwhelm the student. Many studies on learner motivation emphasize that it is important to have relevant activities for the student. One way to do this might be to have assignments based on real life problems. Huett et al discussed a number of ways to build a learner’s confidence, and a well-designed DL course should include some of their suggestions. These include elements such as expectations of the learners should be outlined in clear, observable behaviours, content should be organized in a clear, easy to follow order, activities should be sequenced from simple to difficult, exercises should be consistent with the objectives, and learners should be allowed to
go at their own pace. The authors of this study felt that by addressing confidence in the learner, they were also addressing the attention, relevance and satisfaction components of the theory.

The satisfaction principle of Keller’s theory relates to instructor-student interaction. It is important for the instructor to develop a relationship with the student and to give prompt, helpful feedback.

While doing my research on this topic, I found that the methods identified as best practices in DL were also the methods recommended to increase motivation. You cannot have best practices in DL without considering motivation of the student. If the learner is not motivated to complete the course, then the remaining elements are irrelevant.
References


