

Research Supported Strategies and Tactics That Can Help Educators Positively Influence  
Motivation Within Online Learning Environments

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## Research Supported Strategies and Tactics That Can Help Educators Positively Influence Motivation Within Online Learning Environments

It is a well documented problem that in fully online learning environments, especially massive open online courses (MOOC), completion rates are much lower compared to traditional face to face learning environments (Onah, Sinclair, & Boyatt, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). One of the primary reasons cited for this in studies is a lack of learner motivation. I feel that to be an effective online educator one must understand the potential reasons for a lack of motivation in students so that they can implement strategies to overcome them. If an online course or program is to be successful then the issue of learner motivation must be understood and addressed by the instructor in order to increase the likelihood of student success. In this paper I will explain four research supported strategies and tactics that online educators can use to enhance learner motivation: (1) building a community environment, (2) communicating through multiple channels, (3) help learners to manage their time and workload, and (4) make the course applicable to the careers and lives of students. In my conclusion I will outline how I feel that these strategies can be implemented in a K-12 education system.

The first strategy to increase student motivation in online learning environments is to establish a community where learners feel connected to their peers and the instructor. A study done by Chen, Jang, and Branch (2010) used Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to investigate the main determinants of motivational well-being in online learners. The study found that autonomy, relatedness, and affiliation are three of the main factors that influence motivation in online learners. The authors recommended that online learning practitioners should adopt strategies to promote learners perceived autonomy to keep students motivated. They also found that online practitioners should create an interactive learning environment that fosters

learners' feelings of affiliation. This could include embedding community building strategies such as collective reflection, small group case studies, and optional face-to-face activities. If instructors want to enhance student satisfaction they need to allocate more resources to promote social interactions. If learners feel they are connected to and supported by their peers and the instructor it can reduce feelings of isolation and make them accountable to something larger than themselves.

In another study done by Durksen, Chu, Ahmad, Radil, and Daniels (2016), Self-Determination Theory was used to analyze the motivation of learners in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). MOOCs have been well documented to have even higher drop-out rates than traditional online courses. This study found that according to SDT there are three basic needs that, when met give rise to optimally motivated behaviour: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Due to their nature, MOOCs provide more opportunities for relatedness or isolation. The study concluded that MOOCs may be more conducive to autonomy and competence, but present challenges in the area of relatedness because there is little opportunity for genuine instructor-to-learner interactions. The authors suggest that learners may feel a greater sense of belonging if the MOOC community is organized into smaller communities that are driven by social engagement and knowledge sharing. The greater role learners play in co-creating their learning environment the more they will feel connected to the course and will therefore experience higher relatedness and higher motivation.

A second strategy to increase student motivation in online learning environments is to communicate effectively through multiple channels, including mobile communication tools. An article by Chaiprasurt and Esichaikul (2013) examined if mobile communication channels between learners and instructors have an impact on learner motivation. It compared groups of

online learners who were taught through an e-learning system with and without the support of mobile communication tools. The authors propose that the physical separation that learners have from their peers and instructors may result in a lack of communication, interaction, and a weaker sense of belonging to a classroom community. This lack of communication can lead to a lack of motivation and contribute to poor performance, dissatisfaction, and dropout. Mobile communication technology that allows students the ability to interact with their peers and instructors instantly at anytime and place seems to be effective in encouraging interaction between learners and instructors. Mobile technologies that were included in the study were: SMS messaging, mobile RSS feeds, assignment feedback tools, gradebook tools, attendance reporting tools, MIM, mobile blogging, and mobile polls and votes. The study found that mobile tools had a favourable impact on learners' engagement, level of interaction, and completion rate. There was no significant effect on the number of learners dropping out or the average scores on midterm and final tests, but the learners who did not drop out submitted more assignments, made more help requests, and had higher average scores on assignments.

A third strategy to increase student motivation in online learning environments is to help learners manage their time and workloads. A paper by Alario-Hoyos, Estevez-Ayres, Perez-Sanagustin, Kloos, and Fernandez-Panadero (2017) focused on the way in which Open Educational Resources (OER) are bundled and consumed by learners as well as learning strategies that can be used to assist students in keeping pace in MOOCs. The study concluded that learners who take MOOCs feel that time management skills are an aspect they needed to improve to be successful. The authors recommended a number of strategies that teachers can use to help learners in MOOCs better manage their time. Teachers should provide early and precise estimations of the weekly workload in the course as well as the workload of each assignment.

They should also provide detailed specifications of mandatory and optional tasks, as well as average times devoted by learners to tasks these tasks. Another Study done by Onah, Sinclair, and Boyatt (2014) found that a lack of time and a lack of support were two of the top eight reasons why students drop out of MOOCs. Student backgrounds and personal circumstances are very diverse and a one size fits all approach does not work for most students. Teachers in online learning environments need to flexible and willing to adapt to the individual needs of students in order to ensure the greatest chance of success for all students.

A fourth strategy that can be used to increase student motivation in online learning environments is to make the course applicable to the careers and lives of learners. A study by Yoo and Huang (2013) researched strategies to engage adult learners in online learning environments. The study concluded that online degree programs targeting adult learners must incorporate workplace related considerations and career development opportunities in order to fully engage adult online learners. The course must also be applicable to solving real-life problems. While this study focused on adult learners, I believe that motivation can be increased in students of all ages if the students feel what they are learning has real life applications and implications. Students are more likely to be engaged in what they are doing if they understand the purpose behind it and feel that they are going to gain something personally from it.

To conclude, this paper has outlined four research supported strategies that online educators can use to positively influence motivation and increase success rates amongst their students: (1) building a community environment, (2) communicating through multiple channels, (3) help learners to manage their time and workload, and (4) make the course applicable to the careers and lives of students. I believe that implementing these strategies in the K-12 education system could be made easier if a blended learning model, as outlined by Staker and Horn (2012),

is used instead of a fully online learning model. If students are made to spend some time in a face-to-face learning environment they can develop more meaningful relationships with their instructors and peers which can help to build a community environment. It can also make them feel more connected to their learning, and reduce feelings of isolation. In a blended learning model students' can also communicate with their instructors more easily and receive more support to help them manage their time and workload. Blended learning also allows students more time to apply their learning to real life scenarios outside of school in off-site work placements or co-op programs. If online educators want to ensure the success of their students, they need to implement strategies to keep them motivated and engaged. I feel that in the K-12 system a blended learning model is a very effective way to implement the strategies outlined in this paper.

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