

Motivating Students in Distance Education

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The dropout rate in distance education courses is often much higher than in similar courses taught face-to-face. Reasons given for dropouts from distance courses include lack of finance, lack of time, the isolation of the distance learner, lack of self-discipline, and lack of motivation.

Some of these issues are beyond the control of the instructor or the course designer, but motivation is something that can be improved. A learner may be initially excited to work on a course, but as the course goes on without the daily or weekly "face time" with the instructor and

other students, motivation may flag. Eventually, without an infusion of motivation, the learner may drop out of the course.

Keller's (1987a, 1987b) ARCS Model of Motivational Design provides a structure for the infusion of motivational tactics into instruction in order to create and maintain the students' motivation to learn. The ARCS model organizes the various theories that are commonly thought of as motivational processes into four categories, asking how we can:

- gain and keep the learners' **Attention**.
- make the instruction **Relevant** to the learners.
- increase the learners' **Confidence** that they can succeed.
- ensure that the learners will have a sense of **Satisfaction** of having done well.

The answers to each of these questions are in the form of motivational techniques, or tactics, that can be designed into a course to increase the students' motivation. Some of the tactics specific to distance education courses are outlined below, in the context of the four ARCS motivational categories.

ATTENTION

The best designed distance course will have no effect if it does not first

get the learners' *attention* or activate their curiosity. Curiosity comes in two forms: appeals to the senses (perceptual curiosity), and appeals to the mind (conceptual curiosity).

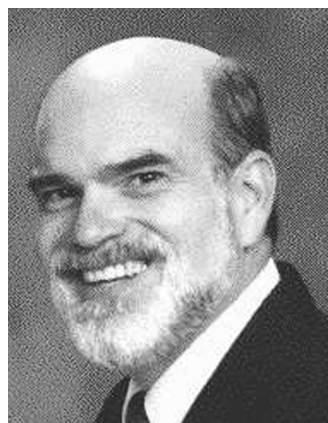
PERCEPTUAL CURIOSITY

Things that are unexpected or out of the ordinary, such as sudden flashes or sounds, will stimulate perceptual curiosity. On the computer screen, unique or moving icons, pop-up windows, or other animations will attract attention. Streaming video or audio may be sufficiently out of the ordinary that students are likely to look at it.

A simple way to stimulate perceptual arousal in a live presentation is to include a picture or piece of text upside down (Keller, 1999). In a synchronous PowerPoint show, an upside-down slide can be made to look accidental. PowerPoint's News-Flash transition can give the impression that the slide is being turned right-side-up.

Perceptual tactics in distance learning need not be restricted to visual or aural effects. The learner can be instructed to manipulate a real object, taste a certain kind of food, or even use a scratch-and-sniff card.

Perceptual tactics usually create only a momentary effect. Once we get the learner's attention by appealing to the senses, we want to maintain it and turn it toward the



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purpose of the instruction by appealing to the mind.

CONCEPTUAL CURIOSITY

Engaging the mind by arousing a sense of inquiry has a more lasting effect on attention, and is usually more relevant to the topic of instruction than appeals to the senses. Conceptual curiosity, or inquiry arousal, is about ideas, as in "I wonder why...." You can introduce a topic by asking a question to which the students will not have the answer until they complete the assignment. For example, telling learners in a chemistry lesson that table salt is a combination of two poisonous chemicals (sodium and chlorine) can get them speculating on how that can be.

A WebQuest (Dodge, 1997) is an online problem-solving project that takes advantage of the lasting effects of conceptual curiosity. In *Preventing mad cow disease in California* (Grassi, 2004), the learner is cast in the role of a public health officer whose task is to create a public service announcement concerning the facts about the disease.

VARIABILITY

Another way to maintain attention is to vary some of the things about the course. You can vary the presentation methods, assessments, and interaction. If most of the units are online text, a streaming video or a game can break up the sameness. Include links or references to outside resources, such as Web sites, textbooks, or articles. If most of the assessments are multiple-choice tests, sprinkle in matching, short answer, essay, or project-based assessments. Interactions can be in the form of bulletin boards, synchronous chats, telephone conferences, and so forth. An occasional change of background color can relieve the uniformity.

Variability can easily be overdone. If everything is different from everything else, then the difference becomes the norm. There should be a pattern so the variant tactic will stand out.

RELEVANCE

Once we have attracted our students' attention, we have to use other techniques to keep them motivated. The second category in the ARCS model is *relevance*. Relate the instruction to their everyday lives by showing them how the skills they are learning will apply to their needs, and by giving them familiar examples. Use familiar terms for the course components and assignments, such as class sessions, bulletin boards, and homework (even though all the work may be done at home). A short piece of instruction on the Web can be called a "lecturette."

Use visuals and examples liberally, but be sure they are appropriate to the subject. Irrelevant pictures used only for decoration are more likely to cause confusion than to create motivation. Use visuals that the students will recognize easily. Analogies to familiar subjects are good relevance tactics.

Get to know the students, and use their names frequently (Brophy, 1998). Whenever they see their own names, the message is automatically relevant to them. Use a salutation in emails, and be sure to find out what name they prefer to go by; you will get a better rapport with Juanda if you call her Jaye, the nickname she uses with classmates.

In chat sessions, use classroom-type terms for protocols to help the learners relate the procedures to familiar activities. They can "raise their hands" to ask a question by typing a question mark, or type an exclamation mark to make a comment (Ko & Rossen, 2001).

Invite a well-known "speaker" to attend a chat session. The author of their text or another recognized expert in the field would be an excellent choice. Another possibility is a previous instructor, who can discuss the relationships between this course and previous instruction the students have received.

CONFIDENCE

Students should be encouraged to have *confidence* that they can succeed in the course. There are two sides to this concept; confidence that they will be able to master the skills being taught, and confidence that they will be able to pass the course.

Make available an orientation to the course and to the course delivery technology, and make sure students use them. Ensure that the students can find the course objectives and grading criteria. You could set up a quiz in the form of a "treasure hunt" in the first week of the course to find specific facts about the course, to make sure they have read the syllabus and have explored the course Web site. Give access to the entire course site as early as possible, and get them to use the tools early in a nonthreatening context, such as a noncredit quiz or a practice discussion topic. To help personalize the course, have the students post a personal or professional profile in the discussion area. This will help them get familiar with each other as well as get practice with the tools.

Distance students are less likely to ask "minor" questions about the assignments that might be asked in class just before dismissal, so detailed objectives and grading criteria are essential. Include examples of assignments. Good examples are useful, as well as poor examples with the correctional feedback. If you use previous students' work, be

sure to get permission, and remove personal identifications.

Allow chat time for off-topic and social interaction (Ko & Rossen, 2001). Either set a specified time at the beginning of a chat for social discussion, or ask that it be held until the end of the session. When a student shares the announcement of having passed a certification test, or reports on the progress of the new baby in the family, it helps foster the development of the class into a community.

Feedback, both formal and informal, is highly important in distance settings. Communicate often. Documents submitted electronically can be edited or annotated in the file and returned to the student. You can use the "comments" or "track changes" features of the word processor, or type your comments directly in the text, using a different color to make the comments stand out.

Students are often unsure that their emailed submissions actually go to you rather than disappearing into cyberspace, so send receipt notices for assignments. Most course management systems can send automated receipts from the digital drop box.

PERSONAL CONTROL

Another way to increase the students' confidence is to give them some personal control over the learning experience. Asynchronous courses usually allow for more personal control than do synchronous courses. The students choose when and where to access the course, and often choose how long they take to complete the course. Where prerequisite knowledge is not an issue, students can be allowed to complete the sections of the course in any order. In synchronous settings, students should be allowed to ask questions as they would in a face-to-face classroom.

SATISFACTION

Not only should students be confident that they will succeed, but they should also be able to have *satisfaction* in having succeeded. This can be done by ensuring that the consequences of success are valued by the students. Consequences consist of extrinsic rewards and the natural consequences of the instruction or skills.

EXTRINSIC REWARDS

Most instruction is set up with an external reward, whether it be a certificate of completion, a grade, or a promotion. Grades are usually the first thing that comes to mind when considering external rewards. If assignments are arranged so grades are available early and often, students will know how they are doing, increasing both confidence and satisfaction. The online gradebook function available in many course management systems allows students to keep track of their progress during the course. In a training course in which formal grades are not used, self-checks or progress checks can be used to keep track of progress. The course menu can show the modules or assignments completed in a different color.

There's a lot more to extrinsic rewards than just grades. When sending feedback on assignments, try to start the message with something positive, even if it's "Thanks for sending your assignment." Using students' first names or nicknames can increase their sense of satisfaction with the course. Occasionally sending encouraging messages has been shown to increase student satisfaction with a course (Visser, Plomp, Amirault, & Kuiper, 2002).

NATURAL CONSEQUENCES

The intrinsic rewards that derive from the instruction are called natural consequences. The good feeling that comes from mastering a new skill is a natural consequence. The ability to do one's job faster or better is another.

Authentic assignments can increase the natural consequences of the instruction itself. I encourage my instructional design students to design an instructional unit that they can use in their workplace (this also increases relevance; many tactics cross the lines of categories).

EQUITY

The final component of the satisfaction category in the ARCS model is "equity" (Keller 1987a), both in assessment and in the value of the course. Equity in assessment means that similar quality of work will receive equal rewards (grades). Even if grades are not posted, students will compare grades, particularly if they have created a good learning community.

Equity also means that the perceived value of the reward is equal to the perceived amount of work required to complete the course. Make sure your expectations are known at the beginning, and let the students know that the goal is attainable. Review the expectations occasionally if the course lasts more than a single session.

In cases where the course is available both by distance and in person, the two delivery methods should require the same amount of work, and the grade or other reward for the distance course should be as valuable as that for the in-person course. The same goes for "testing out" of a course; if the goal is to reward the learner for having mastered the skill, the reward should be the same for demonstrating the skill, regardless of how it was learned.

SUMMARY

Course designers and instructors can affect the motivation of their distance students through good motivational design of the instruction. Getting the learner's attention, making the instruction relevant, and increasing the learner's confidence and sense of satisfaction will help reduce the dropout rate that seems to come with the distance education model.

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