

## Chapter VI

# We'll Leave the Light on for You: Keeping Learners Motivated in Online Courses

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## Introduction

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Motivating online learners is a key challenge facing instructors in both higher education and corporate settings. Attrition rates and low participation levels in course activities are frequent instructor complaints about online learning environments. Part of the problem is a lack of sophistication in online tools and courseware (Bonk & Dennen, 1999). Added to this problem is that, even when tools exist for engaging and motivating students, instructors lack training in how to effectively use them. Instructors not only need to know the types of online and collaborative tools for engaging students, but also how to embed effective pedagogy when the technologies are weak.

Consider for a moment a traditional classroom. Why do students attend their classes? Perhaps their presence is being recorded by the instructor, or perhaps they are particularly interested in the topic. Regardless, upon enrolling in a face-to-face course, learners are aware that they are expected to devote significant blocks of time each week to that course. But why do students participate in face-to-face course activities? To start, they already are seated in the classroom, so they may as well participate. Additionally, the

effects of instructor modeling of desired activities and peer participation can motivate the reluctant learner to become more active.

In the online class, attendance is distinctly different. Unless explicitly told how their attendance will be noted, such as through a minimum number of messages posted per week, online learners do not know how or if their course participation will be determined. Consequently, online students turn to required assignments outlined in the course syllabus (Dennen, 2001). The end result is that students complete the basic graded components of the course, but little more.

Learner participation in an online class has sometimes been called an “act of faith” (Salmon, 2000). Key problems learners encounter include not knowing participation expectations, not feeling comfortable engaging in activities with people they have never met, and not having enough time to participate in activities. Whereas these first two reasons are clearly linked to motivation, the time factor is also related since highly motivated students will typically budget adequate time to participate.

In reviews of the research on motivation, certain key strategies are consistently found to be effective in conventional classrooms. For instance, effective instructors create a supportive but challenging environment, project enthusiasm and intensity, provide choice, create short-term goals, and offer immediate feedback on performance settings (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Reeve, 1996; Stipek, 1998). As these researchers have shown, instructors might also attempt to stimulate student curiosity, control, and fantasy. Naturally, they should make content personal and concrete by using relevant and authentic learning tasks and by allowing learners to create and display finished products. Finally, instructors should foster interaction with peers, create fun and game-like activities, embed structure as well as flexibility in assignments, and include activities with divergence or conflict.

Many of these principles relate to the highly regarded learner-centered psychological principles from the American Psychological Association (1993) and can be incorporated in Web-based instruction (Bonk & Cummings, 1998). In a recent Delphi study of top distance learning experts in the United States, many of these same principles (i.e., relevancy, authenticity, control, choice, interactivity, project-based, collaborative, etc.) were identified as key indicators of effective online learning environments (Partlow, 2001).

If so much is known, why are online courses often suffering from a lack of motivational elements? Problems exist in part because instructors are unsure of how to manipulate this instructional medium, and in part because adequate instructor support is not yet available. According to recent surveys of college instructors and corporate trainers (Bonk, 2001, 2002), the proliferation of Web courseware and training programs has yet to match the pedagogical needs of higher education and industry. When corporate respondents were asked about various intrinsic motivational techniques, activities such as job reflections, team projects, and guest mentoring were considered highly engaging and useful online. When asked about tools and activities that were more motivational for adult learners in the workplace, respondents favored Web-based learning that contained relevant materials, responsive feedback, goal-driven activities, personal growth, choice or flexibility, and interactivity and collaboration. Unfortunately, such techniques were rarely used online.

*Table 1. Motivational elements addressed by different online activities*

Online Activity →	1. Ice Breakers	2. Self-Assessments	3. Surveys and Polling	4. Cases	5. Conference Tracks	6. Brainstorming	7. Electronic Guest Lectures	8. Debates and Role Play	9. Critical Friends and Peer Feedback	10. Gallery Tours
1. Tone/Climate	X					X				X
2. Feedback		X	X	X					X	X
3. Engagement	X		X	X		X		X		
4. Meaningfulness			X	X	X	X	X	X		X
5. Choice			X	X	X	X				
6. Variety					X	X	X			
7. Curiosity			X			X	X		X	X
8. Tension				X				X		
9. Peer Interaction	X			X	X			X	X	
10. Goal Driven		X		X	X	X		X	X	X

According to the findings of these surveys, the motivational climate of online instruction is currently deficient. Therefore, in addition to the evaluation of student learning and completion rates, organizations should step back and evaluate the motivational characteristics embedded within their courses. Of course, there also is a need for further research here since the key motivational principles for online training are only starting to emerge.

As Bonk and Dennen (in press) contend, online instruction is not a simple task; most instructors still do not understand how to adapt different technology tools to engage their students. At the same time, few designers of e-learning tools have thoroughly considered the motivational or pedagogical principles behind adult learning (Firdyiwiek, 1999; Oliver, Omari, & Herrington, 1998). How can such tools motivate adult learner participation while fostering student thinking and collaboration? And what can be done to motivate learners in online environments? These questions must be addressed in order for online education to thrive and be a positive learning experience for students.

This chapter focuses on 10 key elements for motivating online learners. Each element is discussed separately, along with corresponding course activities that can be used to address that element. Indeed, it is possible to address multiple motivational principles with one well-designed activity (see Table 1). At the same time, not every instructional situation calls for the use of each motivational element. Context-based instructional design and pedagogical decisions should always be made by the individual instructor.

## Tone/Climate

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The tone or climate of an online class is set at the beginning. These opening moments have the potential to engage and interest learners so that they want to be active

participants for the semester, or alternatively to isolate them and provide little motivation to participate (Salmon, 2000). Much like in the physical world, if one visits an online location and finds little reason to go back, feels uncomfortable in that place, or is uncertain of its purpose, one is not likely to participate actively in that space.

Social ice-breaking activities can be used to set the tone of an online class as well as to help learners become acquainted with one another. They also serve the purpose of familiarizing learners with the course tools without the stress of dealing with course-related subject matter. Some activities that might be employed include:

- **Two Truths and One Lie:** Everyone must post two truths and one lie about themselves. Fellow classmates then try to determine which one is the lie. This activity generates a series of messages and responses, and is a quick way to bring out learner personalities (Kulp, 1999).
- **8 Nouns:** In this activity, everyone is required to post eight nouns that describe him or herself. Near the end of this task, it becomes difficult to come up with nouns, thereby forcing participants to share a good deal of information about themselves that their peers as well as the instructor might refer to later in the course. In effect, it creates some initial shared understandings and common knowledge (Schrage, 1990).
- **Coffee House Expectations:** In this activity, students share their expectations for the class—why they enrolled and what they hope to get out of it. Not only does this activity help the instructor shape the class, it is vital for the goal-oriented behavior of adult learners. In effect, posting expectations gives adults with chaotic schedules something definitive to work toward. As an extension, students also can be asked to share what they have to offer to the class community.

These activities are often fun ways of sharing personal information. While learners may not share this much personal information at the beginning of a traditional course, in an online course it is a way of discovering student commonalities and differences. From our experience, both instructors and learners tend to refer back to the messages generated by these activities to get a better sense of who their classmates are. Using the eight nouns activity, for instance, we have had males describe themselves as “knitters,” “tea kettles,” and “dishwashers.” Such comments have made for interesting, and often humorous, social interactions in each of these courses.

Research by Dennen (2001) indicates that the instructor should model the expected responses to such activities. An instructor, for instance, might post eight nouns about himself so that learners can know him better. Just as the learners need to know who their peers are, they need to know that their instructor is more than a name.

## Feedback

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Feedback motivates online learners by letting them know how well their performance meets course expectations. Monitoring one’s progress toward a goal is motivational to

many students (Anderson, 2001). Whereas feedback points are typically built into all courses in the form of graded assignments, in an online class, students often feel the need for feedback at other, more formative points in time. This feedback helps them gauge their own performance and motivates them to either maintain or improve the quality of their work. Feedback may come in many forms:

- **Self-assessments:** Self-assessments can easily be built with most courseware tools, thereby allowing the technology to control the feedback.
- **Reading reactions:** Discussion activities in which learners post their reactions to course readings are useful because they allow the learners to know if they are on-track, and let the instructor know if the learners understand the material. Additionally, learners are more motivated to do the required readings if they know they must discuss them. Peer feedback opportunities can be built into such activities, making sure all learners get a response in a manner that is pedagogically beneficial, yet not labor intensive for the instructor.
- **Instructor feedback:** Feedback to instructors is also critical to online course success. Instructors, for instance, might have anonymous suggestion boxes on the Web. Watson (2000) recommends that the instructor post the suggestions as well as the corresponding decisions for learners to read. Similarly, Brown (2002) indicates that one-minute reflection and muddiest point papers using e-mail or threaded discussion forums also are highly effective in providing formative course feedback.

## Engagement

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Motivated learners are engaged learners. While all of the motivational methods mentioned in this chapter are in some way engaging, electronic voting and polling is one technique that can be used to engage learners at the beginning of a new unit of instruction. An instructor might survey class attitudes on an upcoming topic using a free survey tool such as Zoomerang, SurveyShare, or SurveyMonkey, and keep the results sealed until an appropriate point during the instruction. The instructor might then use the results to engage learners in a discussion of the minority point-of-view and then have learners revote or self-assess whether their attitudes have changed as a result of the discussion or additional course instruction.

## Meaningfulness

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Extensive research points to the importance of task meaningfulness and problem-based learning (Singer, Marx, & Krajcik, 2000; Williams, 1992). Simply put, people want to

participate in activities that they deem meaningful, authentic, and relevant (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Savery & Duffy, 1996). In the traditional classroom, meaningfulness is important, but an instructor still can corral students to participate just because they are physically present. In contrast, in the online class, meaningfulness might make the difference between participation and non-participation.

Online activities that are meaningful to students often involve real-world scenarios and allow learners to discuss or present their own opinions and experiences relative to these scenarios. For example, students might be asked to post reflection statements that relate their job or field experiences to the concepts being learned. They also might be asked to develop written cases that exemplify a concept, and then respond to the case of a peer with a possible solution or alternative perspective (Bonk, Daytner, Daytner, Dennen, & Malikowski, 2001; Bonk, Hara, Dennen, Malikowski, & Supplee, 2000). Such meaningful and motivating activities give learners an opportunity to practice and apply what they know with peers around the globe.

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## Choice

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Helping students make a personal investment in a course is one way of providing motivational support (Maehr, 1984). Giving learners choices allows them to be active participants and feel in control of some aspect of their learning environment (Bonk, Fischler, & Graham, 2001). It also demonstrates that the instructor is aware that the learners have entered the learning situation with their own personal goals.

Online classes can be highly designed experiences wherein learners feel they have no choice and must follow the course outline in a lockstep order. Fortunately, there are many ways in which choice may be built into an online experience. Using a motivational perspective, learners may be given the opportunity to select which discussion topics they wish to participate in. In some cases, they may even be asked to help develop the discussion topics as appropriate. Learners might also sign up for leadership roles in the weekly discussion according to personal interests and expertise (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000). Similarly, the selection of roles or personalities for online role play gives the learners a sense of control over their learning environment as well as an opportunity to be creative and spontaneous. Some classes might use a conference track approach, in which parallel sets of course requirements are proposed, each addressing a slightly different focus. Learners can then choose to fulfill the requirements that most closely match their goals or interests.

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## Variety

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Repeating the same set of online tasks for each course activity or module will be boring for learners. Our experience indicates that learners enjoy variety in online courses—

knowing that there is something new for them to master keeps them alert and attentive as well as interested. Thus, instructors should select a range of different online activities rather than redundantly relying on the same ones.

Brainstorming is one simple activity that can interject new life and variety into a course. Learners can be asked to generate as many ideas as possible on a particular topic, without worrying about backing them up, demonstrating the applicability or practicality of the ideas, or ranking them in any way. The results of a brainstorming session might be topics or activities to be addressed or completed later in the course. Collecting multiple class responses, instead of allowing some students to dominate discussion or team projects, is another way to vary the course activities. To really make the course spontaneous, an instructor might utilize “just-in-time teaching” or a “just-in-time syllabus” (Novak, 2000). In this technique, the course skeleton is completed at the start of the semester, but can be modified in response to student interests and course performances as well as current events.

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## Curiosity

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Learner curiosity should be cultivated in an online course, including allowing them to explore ideas beyond those expressed by the instructor. If all learners look to the instructor for answers, their curiosity can only be addressed through limited perspectives. To spark learner curiosity and bring in additional viewpoints, electronic guests may be invited into the online class for short, synchronous chat sessions, some with follow-up asynchronous discussions with those who seek further information. Along these same lines, learners may be mentored electronically by peers or practitioners to help bring in diverse perspectives.

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## Tension

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Points of tension are points of discussion; if we all agree then we probably have little to discuss. The term “tension” frequently has negative connotations, but it can be used to generate fruitful learning discussions. Students however, may not elect to engage in tension on their own, so debates and assignments that involve role play dialogues can be particularly useful to generate tension in a manner that feels safe to students. Frequently, when students are assigned roles that promote unpopular points of view, they will preface their remarks with statements like “I was told to be the protagonist, so ...” or “As the devil’s advocate here ...” Such declarations allow them to engage in the activity while distancing themselves from the viewpoints they uphold in the activity.

## Peer Interaction

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Peer interaction helps engage students with each other. In traditional courses, even when the instructor does not explicitly facilitate peer interaction, students tend to discuss course-related topics before or after class. In an online class, that informal peer interaction is absent since it is often self-paced or the instructor does not grasp how to facilitate it. As a result, the students may feel extremely isolated and drop the course.

Many of the techniques referenced in this chapter involve peer interaction on various levels. Discussion-based activities tend to require peer interaction in order to be successful; one-person conversations generally are not motivating. Moving beyond generic discussion, goal-oriented interactions such as collaborative problem solving activities are particularly motivating to learners because of both the peer interdependence and the ability to judge their own knowledge and skills against that of their peers (Hacker & Niederhauser, 2000). Student interaction can also be promoted through activities such as online symposia, press conferences, and expert panels. Our research indicates that these techniques are effective, since students in online classes are motivated by measures of how they are performing not only as compared to the instructor's expectations, but also as compared to classmates (Dennen, 2001).

Peer interaction may be considered a key course goal or activity. One technique found effective is the use of the critical friend activity (Bonk, Ehman, Hixon, & Yamagata-Lynch, 2002). In this activity, learners are matched or partnered to provide each other with constructive feedback on assignments. Alternatively, they might be required to send each other reminder messages of upcoming assignments and due dates. These activities may take place publicly via courseware or privately via e-mail. Peer interaction activities help ensure that students are receiving valuable feedback with a minimum of burden on the instructor.

## Goal Driven

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Student motivation to participate in online class activities tends to be goal driven. If the goals as presented and valued within the course structure and assessments focus on test performance, students are motivated to study for the test. Group problem-solving activities are a great way of avoiding such isolated, low-motivation scenarios. Students who have group goals or final projects to work toward will be motivated to interact with each other. Group problem-solving activities can be semester-long projects or small group-sharing activities akin to a 15-minute group brainstorm in a traditional class. And final projects might be posted online in an online gallery of student work.

## **Group Based vs. Self-Paced**

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One of the dimensions of online courses that influences an instructor's motivational options is whether or not it is possible to facilitate group interactions. Many people choose distributed learning to meet their educational needs because they desire the flexibility of working at their own pace. Working in isolation, however, can provide some motivational challenges. In part, motivation must come from within, and in part, it is affected by the design of the learning environment and activities. In group-based activities, learners often are motivated by the knowledge that peers will be reading and commenting on their contributions. However, fostering motivation for the independent learner who operates in the absence of social motivators can pose some extra challenges. Allowing for choice, variety, and independent learning styles can help in this regard, as can using active terminology such as "seek" and "explore" when describing learner tasks (Canada, 2000). Self-assessments also serve to motivate the independent learner who might be hungry for feedback.

## **Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Communications**

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Most of the activities presented here may be adapted to accommodate either synchronous or asynchronous communication technologies and may be used across disciplines. Certainly some activities seem better-suited to live interaction, whereas others might be more fruitful when learners take advantage of a lengthy time span for participation or reflection as afforded by asynchronous technologies. In addition, each activity might be varied to further motivate online learners. Table 2 presents some of the adaptations that might be made based on the differences in the communication tools.

Regardless of whether one's communication tools are synchronous or asynchronous, careful consideration should be given to the archiving of learner interactions and work. Such archives prove useful both in promoting learner reflection, as well as in enabling learners who have fallen behind to catch up. For example, a learner who has missed a guest lecture that occurred via a synchronous chat might feel disenfranchised if there were no event archive tools to replay what transpired.

## **Conclusion**

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The 10 motivational elements presented here are essential to the success of online learning environments. Online, as well as live, instructors should look for pivotal points where they can comfortably address these principles within their course design. The important point here is to focus on motivational elements and principles, not just on the

Table 2. Synchronous and asynchronous learning issues and elements within different online activities

<i>Type of Activity</i>	<i>General Structure and Elements</i>	<i>Synchronous Issues</i>	<i>Asynchronous Issues</i>
Ice Breakers	Everyone gets an opportunity to share or participate. There are a wide variety of potential activity frameworks, including Two Truths and One Lie, Coffee House Expectations, and Favorite Web Site Postings.	Turn taking is necessary since it is difficult to hear from everyone. Of course, certain activity frameworks will work better than others.	Learners may only selectively participate and read messages. Effort must be taken to encourage them to “meet” all classmates or read all messages in a new topic ice breaker.
Role Play	Learners are assigned a role or personality to play such as optimist, pessimist, journalist, coach, sage, etc. Alternatively, they might be assigned a particular person or author to assume such as Kant, Nietzsche, Mother Teresa, Sir Edmund Hillary, etc.	Learners must fully understand their roles in order to be able to play them out in real time. Some form of turn-taking must be in place to ensure that all participants are active.	Learners must have participation guidelines and deadlines to ensure that dialogue takes place. Summarization of discussion is important to bring closure, though effort must be taken to encourage learners to read the summaries.
Guest Lectures	Guests from outside of the class, such as experts in the field or authors/scholars that the students have read, are invited to join students for a discussion during a particular period of time. Typically, the guest answers learner questions, although the guest may be asked to comment on work the class has already completed.	Turn-taking must be carefully facilitated or the chat should be moderated to ensure the guest is not bombarded with too many questions at once. Preparation of questions in advance is useful.	Expectations of guest participation (how many times the guest will contribute and when) need to be clear for all participants. Early questions should be posted in advance of the guest’s first interactions.
Debates	Learners may be assigned a topic and a side, either as an individual or group, and given time to research and generally prepare for the topic.	Turn-taking must be carefully facilitated to ensure equality for both sides and all members of a group.	Timing must be carefully structured to allow for dialogic interchange between sides. Rebuttals should be deeper and more reflective than in a synchronous debate and appropriate resources and references should be cited.
Peer Feedback	Learners are asked to review and comment on each other’s ideas and work. Rubrics may be provided to help students focus on the appropriate criteria.	Students providing feedback must review material in advance and be prepared. Students receiving feedback benefit from the ability to seek clarification of muddy points in real time. It is important to have a way of saving feedback for later use.	Asynchronous peer feedback encourages more highly reflective feedback than synchronous feedback sessions. As a result, the timing of making the work available for critique and providing feedback is critical. The instructor may wish to

Table 2. cont.

			allow learners who receive feedback time to ask their respondents for clarification.
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range of possible tasks, since activities are simply vehicles through which effective motivation and learning can take place. In addition, the activities presented in this chapter are not intended to be exhaustive in terms of their exemplification of how to motivate online students. Instead, our intention was to provide a few useful examples and ideas that can be adopted and adapted by online instructors in higher education as well as business learning environments (for additional ideas, see Bonk & Dennen, in press). And as online motivational ideas are modified and expanded, they can now be instantaneously shared with other instructors around the globe. When that occurs, there will hopefully be fewer bored online learners and frustrated online instructors.

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