

# Online Courses The Real Challenge Is “Motivation”

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## ABSTRACT

*Among the academic disciplines, business has led the way in offering Internet courses to its students. While online classes give students more opportunity and flexibility to integrate courses into their daily schedules, many concerns have developed from this form of distance education. Research on distance education indicates that the keys to effective online versus traditional classes includes the development of new teaching methods, frequent and timely interaction through e-mail, weekly discussion boards, the use of collaborative student groups, and an appreciation for students with multiple backgrounds and experiences. All of these “keys” are practical; however, when you consider the old adage “you can take a horse to the water, but you can’t make him drink,” the researcher believes that intrinsic motivation can play a key role in online student success. This research paper was designed to 1) exam literature related to online courses, 2) discuss some indicators that support the notion that intrinsic motivation is attributable to student success; and 3) provide some strategies that may be used to increase intrinsic motivation in online courses.*

## INTRODUCTION

*A*mong the academic disciplines, business has led the way in offering Internet courses to its students. While online classes give students more opportunity and flexibility to integrate courses into their daily schedules, many concerns have developed from this form of distance education. Most of these concerns focus on the constructs of effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction relative to traditional classroom-based courses (Baer, 2000; Carr-Chellman, 2000).

Critics of online distance education have alarmed the public recently with reports of severe drop rates and attrition in online classes. The notion that more students will drop out of online classes than traditional face-to-face classes enjoys the widespread acceptance usually reserved for scientific precepts (Carr, 2000). More importantly, though, many educators imply that the observed high drop rates should disqualify online education as a high-quality option to traditional education ("Distance Education," 2001).

Drop rates are among the characteristics that have routinely prompted distance education studies (Cookson, 1990; Dowdall, 1991; Parker, 1999). Drop rates for distance classes have been consistently higher than those of traditional classes and, according to some researchers, tend to suggest academic non-success (Diaz, 2000a; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999; Ridley & Sammour, 1996).

Though higher drop rates may accurately reflect a fundamental difference in outcomes between online and traditional educational environments, the mere fact of high drop rates is not necessarily indicative of academic non-success. Research on distance education (Carr-Chellman, 2000; Cooper, 2000; DeSanctis & Sheppard, 1999) indicates that the keys to effective online versus traditional classes includes the development of new teaching methods, frequent and timely interaction through e-mail, weekly discussion boards, the use of collaborative student groups, and an appreciation for students with multiple backgrounds and experiences.

All of these “keys” are practical; however, when you consider the old adage “you can take a horse to the water, but you can’t make him drink,” the author believes that intrinsic motivation can play a key role in online student success.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

After examining literature related to online courses, what are some indicators that support the notion that intrinsic motivation is attributable to student success; and what are some strategies that may be used to increase intrinsic motivation in online courses?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM**

Today, most of the higher education schools in the U.S. are providing online courses for students--56% provide at least a few courses taught at a distance, without a classroom. Interestingly, public colleges are ahead in this trend, with 89% of them online, versus 40% of private colleges. Actually, this trend seems to be more than just an experiment or a pilot project: about three million students are enrolled in 120,000 different online courses. Most of the colleges that offer these courses are fully accredited, traditional bricks-and-mortar institutions that offer hundreds of courses in the classroom, along with a few dozen online. (National Center for Educational Statistics)

Conversely, it's not just a few courses here and there: one in five colleges allows students to earn a degree through online courses only, never setting foot in a classroom. Only a few degrees are offered in this manner, mostly in subjects that lend themselves to distance learning. Also, the proportion of online courses and degrees seems to be higher in graduate professional programs than in the traditional undergraduate liberal arts.

Some people say it will take the place of schools and colleges. Others suggest we are in the midst of a revolution as far-reaching as the invention of the printing press. However, most of the literature suggests that online education will never duplicate the intimacy of the classroom or the central role of the teacher. Many consider the attention being paid to learning over the Internet to be a fad with lots of hype but few concrete results. Why? The answer to this question lies in the fact that students are not hurriedly enrolling in the online courses, and when they do, they often drop out. Since colleges are revolutionizing their distance learning programs, it behooves us to understand why students are not “flocking” to the plate.

## **LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING RESEARCH**

Information for this project was collected using several Internet resources, books, and journal articles (both referred and scholarly). Time restraints would not permit the accomplishment of a definitive study; hence, no concrete data via experimental research was used to determine the findings and conclusions.

Many factors could be considered relative to student success or failure in online courses, but the researcher chose intrinsic motivation as the “key” factor.

## **INTRINSIC MOTIVATION THEORY**

Intrinsic motivation theory is a construct of Deci and Ryan’s (1985) Self Determination Theory (SDT). The basic assumption of SDT is that “people are active organisms, with innate tendencies toward psychological growth and development, who strive to master ongoing challenges and to integrate their experiences into a coherent sense of self (p. 120).” Particularly important is the role that the environment plays in development. Ryan and Deci (2000) explain that the process of development does not occur automatically but is either supported or thwarted through social context.

Although not yet used by the researcher, an instrument that may be used to assess intrinsic motivation is called the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI). The IMI assesses the following characteristics:

- participants' interest/enjoyment,
- perceived competence,
- effort,
- value/usefulness,
- felt pressure and tension,
- perceived choice while performing a given activity, and
- experiences of relatedness.

According to various research, the IMI is considered useful in measuring students' subjective experiences in Internet courses because it determines the extent to which students believe that their experiences are useful or valuable. The IMI has been used and validated through several experiments related to intrinsic motivation and self-regulation (Ryan, Koestner, & Deci, 1991; Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994).

In a recent study conducted by Walker, Wallace, & Juban (2004), the IMI was used to assess students' experiences in online classes. Walker, et.al, found that the level of perceived intrinsic motivation, rather than demographic variables, were significantly correlated to students' level of satisfaction in courses and final grades. They concluded that "The key component in students' perceived level of intrinsic motivation was directly related to meaningful communication in the course (p. 40)."

According to Walker, et.al, (2004); Wegerif (1998); and Baer (2000), the researcher will discuss communication strategies that may be useful in creating and maintaining online courses. Given these strategies, the researcher hopes to promote student development and success in the online environment in which she plans to teach.

## **STRATEGIES TO INCREASE INTRINSIC MOTIVATION**

Setting up an environment to create a sense of community and providing meaningful feedback is more likely to establish a connection among students and faculty in an online course. As stressed by Wegerif (1998), collaborative learning is central to the feelings of success or failure in an online course, and social factors are important to this type of learning. He further reports that students who felt they had gained most from the course moved from feeling like outsiders to feeling like insiders. In addition, Brown (2001) contends that building a sense of community is important because it can affect such things as student satisfaction, retention, and learning. Instructors can develop strategies when creating online courses to enhance and encourage collaborative learning among students to establish a sense of community and set the stage for meaningful feedback.

Student Homepages. One way to create community and open communication among students is to require them to create homepages. Most online classes use a Web-based environment, i.e., Blackboard, Web CT, etc. Using a course platform, students can fill in a form, upload a picture, and express their backgrounds and interests by merely filling in text boxes already built into the program.

From a practical standpoint, "building a homepage" is an easy and quick assignment for an instructor to include at the beginning of an online class. Students need pictures of themselves and some time to reflect on their interests and backgrounds. By getting students to express themselves about some of their personal and academic experiences, they can find connections to other students in the class. Hence, the instructor could use each homepage as a basis to create or craft motivating and interesting assignments.

Further, allowing students to begin their course experience by creatively expressing themselves with photos and descriptions of their choosing helps to establish a sense of autonomy. In addition, taking the time to examine each student's homepage and giving feedback about the student's work helps the instructor establish a connection with the student. In general, people usually feel more comfortable communicating when they "can place a face with a name." Both an increased sense of autonomy and an increased feeling of relatedness to the instructor are positive indicators of intrinsic motivation.

Discussion Boards. Discussion boards are an integral part of online classes because they encourage students to use their critical thinking skills, allow students to communicate their ideas to one another, and provide another environment that increases students' sense of autonomy. Instructors can easily create interactivity in an online course by posting questions on a discussion board and requiring all students to participate (Walker, et.al., 2004). Discussion board questions that do not have a "right" or "wrong" answer, such as questions dealing with ethical dilemmas, often stimulate the best communication efforts by students.

Additionally, discussion board are great tools for creating interest in course topics and establishing a sense of relatedness with other students and the instructor. Also, this form of online pedagogy can be successfully managed by the instructor without having to expand the time and effort of addressing each student's response individually.

According to Walker, et., al., (2004), the instructor should set timelines for the discussion board forum. After the forum, the instructor should collect, read, and summarize the themes developed from student discussions. A summary of discussion board responses can then be posted for all students to read. Discussing general themes and providing general feedback about students' responses helps to increase students' perceived competence in the course material.

When all students participate in the discussion board, students will develop a sense of belonging to a group as well as sense of contribution. However, an important component of the discussion board feedback is to mention key players who made significant contributions to the discussion. In doing so, instructors not only increase the perceived competence of individuals who had provided meaningful discussions, but also encourage other students to work harder in subsequent discussion board forums. Everyone would probably seek to be individually acknowledged to their classmates.

Group Activities. Developing groups online can be easily accomplished by using the tools found in online course platforms (Baer, 2000). By using the online platform tool, group members can collaborate and communicate with each other without the observation of the entire class. Files can be transferred, real-time conferencing can be scheduled, and private e-mail and discussion group exchanges can be accomplished within the group. Establishing groups online creates a comfortable atmosphere where students have all the advantages of online technology but no time or physical meeting constraints.

To increase intrinsic motivation, use online groups to assign projects that give students the opportunity to apply real-world skills. In doing so, value is added to the class because students perceive how these skills benefit their development as students and their transition to real-world work environments.

Meaningful and Timely E-mail. E-mail is the primary medium for individual correspondence with students online. To be effective, however, e-mail responses need to be timely and meaningful, which sometimes can be an overwhelming activity for instructors. Cooper (2001) offers several tips to make correspondence more meaningful without consuming all the time of the faculty. Cooper based these tips on previous experiences with online teaching and surveys of other instructors who teach online.

- Give students a 24-hour turnaround time.
- Allow flexibility for turning in assignments—plan for system downtimes, and electronically forced obstacles that a student could face at any given time
- Establish a time each day or every other day that students know you will read and answer e-mail.
- Post announcements, frequently asked questions, and discussion board questions that will give students a place to check for answers before they e-mail the instructor.

## **CONCLUSION**

Because online classes are becoming a more prominent choice for all types of students, educators are challenged to find ways to make those courses relevant, effective, and satisfactory. Based on various research

findings, the writer believes that intrinsic motivation can be increased by enhancing: 1) perceived competence, 2) interest, 3) value, and 4) relatedness to faculty and other students. The enhancement of these factors will contribute greatly to online course success.

In addition, today's businesses are increasingly requiring skills that emphasize analytical thinking, team skills, communication skills, information processing, and mastery of technology. What better way to prepare students for the business world than by using online learning and the tools encompassed by this technology? Online learning changes the course environment to an interactive workplace, where students become independent learners who gain knowledge and competence that will benefit them in the real world.

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**NOTES**