Chapter 13

Encouraging Student Motivation in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

While motivating students to enroll, participate, and complete any learning activity has always been a challenge, distance education adds a new dimension of complexity to the problem. This chapter will explore the development of distance education and the internal and external motivational factors that need to be considered when attempting to encourage student motivation in distance education.

INTRODUCTION

The term distance education has become synonymous with online learning in today’s technology focused world. But it has a long history of providing courses and directing learning in situations where the instructor and learner are not co-located. The image of today’s students attempting to learn from their handheld devices in short intervals between meetings or riding on public transportation may be new, but the issues of motivation are not. Influenced by a plethora of external and internal motivational factors, the learner distanced from the instructor has always had to prioritize life’s responsibilities and struggle to keep their remote responsibility from falling to the bottom of the list behind pressing face-to-face issues.

While Chapter 12 addressed the importance of engaging students to affect learning, it assumes that they are already motivated to learn. Therefore this chapter gets to the heart of the learning issues: what motivates them to enroll (commit to learning) and what motivates them to continue their commitment throughout the duration of the course or learning activity.

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DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education presents issues inherent in any interaction between persons at a distance. It is also important to realize that distance education existed in many forms before the advent of computers. Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner (2007) explain that “the defining characteristic of all forms and generations of distance education is the separation of student and teacher in time or space. What in the literature is often termed first-generation distance education consisted of print-based correspondence courses, a form still in existence. How many generations follow differs by author; but the simplest model has the second generation being broadcast and television technologies, followed by the third generation of information technologies of which web-based courses are a part. (pp. 39-40). Conrad (2005) adds to these categories by suggesting that this third generation is “distinguished by an increased degree of learner control and flexibility, interactive communication and group-oriented processes” (p. 445). This would certainly imply the inclusion of Web 2.0 technologies with their social networking strengths. Lau (2000) views history from a slightly different prospective and offers a more restrictive definition of distance learning. She notes that “distance learning was pioneered at Stanford University more than 30 years ago to meet the increasing demand for high-tech engineers and computer scientists at Silicon Valley” (p. i).

Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) suggest that “online learning is a form of distance education, which has a long history of serving adults who otherwise would not have access to continuing and higher education” (p. 39). There are numerous reasons why these adults might not have access but Li and Irby (2008) describe one group of them as “busy working people, often on shift who want to advance their career, frequent travelers, those who physically find it difficult to attend college and parents who want to or have to spend more time at home with their children” (p. 451). There is likely a connection between this profile information noted by these two authors and the information reported by Piskurich and others on retention.

Piskurich (2006) cites statistics that indicate that 60–80% drop out of elearning courses. Li and Irby (2008) also mention the low rate of retention but add concerns for lower student performance and the need for enhanced specific skills such as writing, communication, time management, organization, and the ability to work independently.

In spite of these issues, distance education opportunities in both the continuing education arena and rigorously academic programs have thrived. Lau (2000) reports that “today, nontraditional bachelor and master’s distance learning programs are offered by more than 150 accredited academic institutions in this country (p. i). This number has likely risen since Lau’s writing so it is worth investigating the motivating factors that bring students to these programs. Most authors distinguish between factors internal to the individual learner and those that are external.

Motivational Factors

The subject of motivation has attracted the attention of numerous theorists and researchers over the past decades. Kolb (1984) developed a theory that was consistent with that of humanistic educators who viewed learning as a highly personal endeavor and motivation as intrinsic, emanating from the learner. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) explain that “from a learning theory perspective, humanism emphasizes that perceptions are centered in experience, and it also emphasizes the freedom and responsibility to become what one is capable of becoming. These tenets underlie much of adult learning theory that stresses the self-directedness of adults and the value of experience in the learning process” (p. 282). Both self-directedness and experience are essential components of Knowles theories of andragogy. Knowles (1980) suggested that “individuals are