Chapter 13

Motivation of the E-Learner: Theories, Practices, and Perceptions

Lex McDonald
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Allie McDonald
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

The study of motivation in E-learning is an emerging field but there is a paucity of data about what learners and facilitators believe are the important factors involving and sustaining the interest of the learner. It is emphasised that more prominence needs to be given to the key players’ perspectives in balancing what is known about E-learning motivation. In this literature review, consideration is given to how E-learning evolved and impacted upon learners. Theoretical approaches to understanding learning and motivation are discussed and the importance of instructional design as a motivating factor identified. Research concerning the motivational matrix of the E-learner, facilitator, and educational environment is then detailed to provide a context for understanding E-learner motivation. Following this, phenomenologically-oriented research related to learner and facilitator perspectives on what motivates the E-learner is discussed and links to the social cognitive theory are acknowledged. Implications and an exploratory model of E-learners’ motivation are detailed followed by recommendations for future research.

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid growth of the World Wide Web and technology over the past 20 years, there have been immense changes in learning, communication and accessing of information (Bonk, 2002). Moreover, Keller and Suzuki (2004) suggest technology offers many innovative features to make instruction more appealing and hence the issue of motivation in E-learning has become a central focus. However, although there has been considerable research concerning the benefits and limitations of E-learning (e.g., Kruse, 2004) and instructional design (ID), relatively little has been written about why the motivational issues of those
Motivation of the E-Learner involved in these programs are an important consideration (Kim, 2009). As Cocea and Weibelzahl (2006) note, although ID is important for motivation, knowledge about the processes of learner motivation can help with tailoring the content and interventions. Therefore, it is the purpose of this review to examine E-learner motivational issues and then, in more specific terms, identify if the learners’ and facilitators’ perspectives about the processes that engage the learner are consistent with this literature.

E-learning is a relatively new term and is associated with notions of computer-based learning, but it is much wider than this. Kaplan-Leiserson (2003) defines it as “a wide set of applications and processes, such as Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration.” (para 85). E-learning enables education to reach a diverse and geographically dispersed student base in a cost-efficient manner and it can be on demand, at any time, and at virtually any place (Clark & Mayer, 2011). It is a mode of learning adopted by many institutions but more research is needed to examine the circumstances of its operation (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2010; Kim, 2009).

As indicated, this review is about motivation and the E-learner, and following a consideration of the background and contextual research the perspectives of the learners and facilitators are examined. Learner and communication variables were considered important by both learners and facilitators and task variables were also given prominence by the learners. Relating these findings to the social cognitive theory (SCT) provides an important context to understand the research. Various sources of information were accessed and specialist librarians and others having E-learning knowledge became valuable sources. All the data relating to perceptions were then considered in relation to the development of an exploratory integrated model of how motivational issues are perceived by the learners and facilitators.

The Context and Methodology

It is accepted that E-learning has assumed a particular significance in facilitating the knowledge economy (Clarke, 2007) and, accordingly, this has generated investigations into its qualities as an instructional mode. Importantly however, it is necessary to consider E-learning within the context of general education theories and acknowledge that there is a growing awareness of E-learning and motivation issues which adds to E-learning theory (Keller, 2008). However, it is also essential to note that E-learning is also linked to theories related to computer mediated communication (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004) and hence concepts of communities, complex multi-way interactions, and synchronous and asynchronous communications need to be incorporated within the explanations. Given this, it is understood that although research into E-learning is relatively new, there is considerable literature on what motivates learners – but little on what motivates learners to engage with E-learning (Kim, 2009). However, some exploratory studies are emerging such as the research undertaken by Kim (2009) and Ke and Xie (2009) who have examined participants’ perceptions of their motivation to engage with E-learning. In this survey of the literature, both positive and negative motivational factors were considered as having impact on the student but only qualitative data were considered but reference made to some quantitative studies. What is also required is a context for understanding and interpreting such studies.

Relevant literature was located by accessing scholarly articles via electronic databases. Descriptors, ‘E-learning’ and ‘motivation’ (or synonyms), yielded many results; however, overall there were relatively few reports linking the two key descriptors and even fewer relating to the reported perspectives of the learner and facilitator. Essentially, the review examined three categories of research information: motivation in E-learning,