Autonomy & Motivation in Distance Learning

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Abstract

This paper examines current research on motivation building and learner autonomy in ESL distance education environments. It makes suggestions about what curriculum designers and instructors can do even though distance learning courses tend to be more inflexible than classes held in real space. With careful consideration to design and implementation, online courses have the potential to make learning tasks as motivational as regular classes and give students autonomy not previously available in traditional environments. This is becoming easier in some ways with the emerging read/write web publishing space and multimedia platforms which allow learners to share and interact with a global audience through new publishing methods never previously imagined only 10 years ago.

Introduction

Many issues need to be taken into consideration when creating distance learning programs: online media format, social presence, online guidance and instruction, feedback, assessment, appropriate use of technology, student isolation, learner motivation, student support, and learner autonomy. This paper deals specifically with the last three issues, learner motivation, learner autonomy and student support in an online environment. This paper investigates the relationships between student motivation, autonomy, and student support, how each impacts the other and the factors that are necessary for improved learning.

Part one of this paper looks at ways in which distance learners can become more autonomous, ways that online course designers can increase student motivation, and different ways that instructors and teaching assistants can improve student support. Part two of this paper continues with motivational examples and then moves to specific examples of how recent technology is directly influencing motivation with the advent of the Web 2.0 and the read/write Web phenomenon.

Part 1

Autonomy, motivation, and student support

Success in learning is motivating. A successful student is generally a motivated one. Even though the feeling of success is a result of many complex factors, motivation is an essential element for initiating and maintaining effort in the long term. This is especially true for language learning since it takes many thousands of hours of study. In the classroom a good teacher can quickly ascertain what students need and then adjust materials on the spot to give students the support and motivation they need. But how does an instructor adjust materials when they do not have face-to-face contact with students and may not know what trouble students are encountering with materials, as in the case of online courses?

Online courses tend to be more rigid than classroom based courses. The amount of work put into developing them is significantly greater due to the technical and material resources used in creating them, making frequent on the spot adjustments often impractical. Once an online course is developed it is usually used for several years, with only minor adjustments made for such things as broken web links or updated statistics. Also, with distance learning, students need to be more self-reliant and are required to have a better knowledge about their own abilities and attitudes regarding learning strategies.

Distance learners need to be more autonomous than the average student (White, 2006). Several aspects of autonomy include metacognitive knowledge, strategic competence and the ability to be self-reflexive of the learning process. The learner needs to be able to intervene on his or her learning environment (Wenden, 1991). Given this, there appears to be a built in catch-22 for online learning courses: Distance classes require the learner to be more autonomous than in a regular classroom; autonomous students need to be able to intervene on his or her learning environment, however, online courses allow for less student and teacher intervention than a normal classroom. Even though this may be the case, there are several ways around this apparent catch-22. Below are ways educators and researchers have worked with these issues.

Autonomy is directly linked to learning and learner strategies. Those students who involve themselves directly with the learning process learn more effectively (Oxford, 1990). Different researchers divide learning strategies differently (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1996; Oxford, 1990) but there is a general consensus of the major categories. These broad categories are cognitive (applying a specific

technique to a particular task), metacognitive (executive processes used to plan, monitor and evaluate a learning task), and socio-affective (interacting with others for practice or to combat isolation or anxiety) (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Several ways in which one distance program helps learners with strategies are given in (Hurd, Beaven, & Ortega, 2001). They give seven specific ways in which learners can develop autonomy in distance language programs.

1. Objectives are clearly explained so that students can feel they have ownership of the course materials.
2. Extra homework or tasks are given for difficult areas but are not compulsory.
3. Other activities or tasks are given that enable students to transfer what they have learned to other contexts specifically to contexts relevant to their own needs or interests.
4. Constant and varied suggestions for learning strategies are presented so students can experiment with and find those that work best for them.
5. Students are given opportunities to think and reflect on how they learn by using learner diaries.
6. Learners are given opportunities for self-assessment and self-evaluation.
7. They are given opportunities to relate what they are learning to what they already know.

Hurd et.al. gives the above seven examples illustrating that it is still possible to incorporate learner autonomy even though a distance learning environment has a more rigidly fixed curriculum than a regular classroom.

In a study conducted on student feedback, Hyland (2001) concluded that feedback can influence student performance, help with learning strategies and can play an important role in socio-affective areas such as encouraging and motivating students. She suggests that in distance learning environments there is a need for 'live' interaction. One way to provide this is through telephone contact between course tutors and students. Another way is by eliciting types of feedback students wish to have in the form of a short questionnaire or cover sheet on their first assignment and then give feedback in written form on subsequent assignments. Even though her findings were somewhat inconclusive in that there was significant variation in the type of feedback students wanted and significant individual differences in feedback that tutors gave, it was clear from her study that feedback does positively influence learner motivation. She also concluded that much more research is needed in the area of motivation and distance learning.

Lamy and Goodfellow (1999) investigated tutor interactions with students in an online environment and classified the tutor styles into two categories, one termed

the social tutor and the other termed the cognitive tutor. The social tutor places a greater emphasis on the socio-affective needs of the student by encouraging socialization, and the cognitive tutor emphasizes syllabus content and tends to be subject matter oriented. They go on to hypothesis that a tutor who exhibited both teaching styles would be better than a tutor with only one.

Student support in open and distance learning (ODL) environments was looked at in Tait (2000). Delivering quality courses through ODL media requires a balance of at least six factors which he gives as 1) student characteristics, 2) technological infrastructure, 3) program scale, 4) geographical environment, 5) demands of the program, and 6) the requirements of management. Although he discusses student support from a global perspective, one interesting conclusion is that there is no universal blueprint for establishing student support systems. Since these variables are in tension with each other, none of them should be taken as an overriding element when deciding student support. It is important to consider each ODL situation separately making sure to carefully balance the above factors.

Exploring expectations and learner beliefs, White (1999; 2003) reports that these factors changed over time in a longitudinal study. Reports and questionnaires revealed that students shift from an external to internal locus of control and are able to increase their tolerance for ambiguity. In follow up work in 2006, she reproduced her results and showed that students continued to restructure their beliefs and expectations of distance learning in order to maintain optimal learning conditions.

Hauck and Hurd (2005) explored the links between anxiety and learner self-management in distance learning contexts. They reiterate the need for ODL students to be more autonomous than regular language learners stating that distance learners need to develop self-awareness and self-management skills as part of developing autonomy. After examining sources of anxiety and ways that learners deal with anxiety, giving extensive lists and examples, they conclude that self-management is an essential strategy for language learners in general but even more important for ODL students. These strategies include self-knowledge and a reflexive capacity which allow learners to manage affective considerations such as anxiety and motivation. Another issue which they discuss is the role of the tutor in providing good feedback as an integral part of the system of reducing anxiety and keeping motivation levels high, similar to the Lamy and Goodfellow study.

Part 2

Specific examples of motivating students

In one of Dornyei's seminal works (2001), Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom, he discusses many issues which can be applied in ODL environments. Although not written for distance learners, many of the concepts can be modified for the media. On page 29 he gives a rubric for motivational teaching practice: Creating the basic motivational conditions, generating initial motivation, maintaining and protecting motivation, and encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation. The book then goes on to give 35 concrete ideas that instructors can do which fall within these four broad categories. Several we have already covered in the literature review above, such as the importance of tutor feedback (Dornyei's strategy #32), goal setting (#21), curriculum-student needs relevance (#15), increasing learner autonomy (#29) and self-reliance (#30), build learners' confidence in their abilities by teaching them various learner strategies (#26), help diminish language anxiety by reducing anxiety provoking elements in the learning environment (#25), help to create realistic learner beliefs (#16) and make the curriculum and teaching materials relevant to the students (#15).

Dornyei also discusses the need for instructors to choose their motivational techniques as their situation dictates, not trying to use every strategy all the time, but recommends using the ones that the instructor is comfortable with and ones that are relevant to their teaching situation. Dornyei lists many strategies but two that look promising for ODL environments are, (a) demonstrate and talk about your own enthusiasm for the course material and how it affects you personally, and (2) develop a personal relationship with students. These two strategies are extremely difficult in online situations but not impossible as seen in the Lamy and Goodfellow study on types of tutor feedback. Similarly, promote the development of group cohesiveness (#6), is illustrated on chat-boards when students develop personal online conversations with each other. Many other of Dornyei's motivating strategies can easily be incorporated into the design of courses by careful attention to curriculum content, such as make learning more stimulating and enjoyable by breaking the monotony of regular events (#17), and increasing the attractiveness of the tasks (#18), provide learners with regular experiences of success by setting homework to the right difficulty level (#23).

How technology is helping with student motivation and autonomy

Central to the theme of motivation and autonomy is learner contributions in distance language learning. Learner contributions deal with what learners bring to ODL, how their interactions change and effect their motivation and the quality of their learning. There is a whole new field of research now being undertaken because of the changing landscape of education on the internet. With the birth of Web 2.0 or the read/write web, students can become the authors of works that can reach a global audience through wikis, blogs, podcasting, web publishing, video blogs, and a host of other web tools that makes publishing viable for anyone with a highspeed connection and a relatively modern computer. These new capabilities are causing teachers to rethink their roles in the digital age. The teacher's role is shifting from content expert to guide who shows students how to find and evaluate online resources, communicate with online experts, and publish their own creations for a much wider audience than just their classmates (Richardson, 2006). This new publishing medium is even changing the nature of writing, (Warchauer, Shetzer, & Meloni, 2000). Warchauer et. al. compared the differences in traditional classroom writing versus multimedia authoring, illustrating the advances and wider opportunities that learners now have, see Table 1.

Table 1   Comparison of Traditional vs Online Writing Styles

Products of traditional classroom writing	Products of multimedia authoring and publishing
Written texts	May incorporate written text, graphics, images, sound and video files
Organized in a linear fashion	Organized in a nonlinear fashion through hyperlinks
Self-contained	Can include links to external multimedia materials
Usually written for the teacher	Written for public audience on the WWW
Usually created individually	Often created collaboratively
Once completed and turned in are out of the students hands and unchangeable	Once published are accessible to the student for further change and updating

Warchauer, Shetzer & Meloni, 2000

One area that can be changed and updated in online courses is homework, links to web pages, and assignments. As can be seen above, when learners produce a piece of work for the web or for online publication they need to consider a wider range of issues than just writing in the traditional format for a class grade. Information gathering can consist of opening authentic materials from any number of web pages, using multimedia materials which usually include audio and video files, then students can produce multimedia works for a much larger audience. But even if the

audience is limited to their classmates and teacher, it is easier to work on much more sophisticated presentations and multimedia materials and collaborate with others using asynchronous methods then previously possible. One example of a task using authentic communication in EFL classes is illustrated in Campbell (2004). He highlights the potential of social software like LiveJournal for encouraging greater autonomy and self-direction in the foreign language classroom. In a series of online student activities, learners engage in a large weblog community, LiveJournal, with built in social networking features to provide students with a target language community centered on their own personal interests. This personalization in an authentic environment motivated students to take more control over their own learning, thus creating greater learner autonomy. Along similar lines, Kung and Tun-Whei (2002) introduced five different ESL multimedia websites to their students through a series of homework assignments and in-class tasks. They concluded that student interest in authentic online materials outweighed any minor technical difficulties that occurred during task completion. To even further enhance learning, Chang (2007) looked at ways to increase web based language learning through self-monitoring and raising student autonomy. A control and one experimental group were both instructed on a web based task. The experimental group was given additional instructions regarding online self-monitoring techniques in the form of recording study time and environment, learning process, predicting scores, and self-evaluation. Their results showed that students who applied the self-monitoring strategies outperformed those students who didn't, on both academic performance and motivational beliefs regardless of their English proficiency level. They strongly recommend self-monitoring strategies for web-based instruction.

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