

Motivation Online : Must... Finish... Paper...

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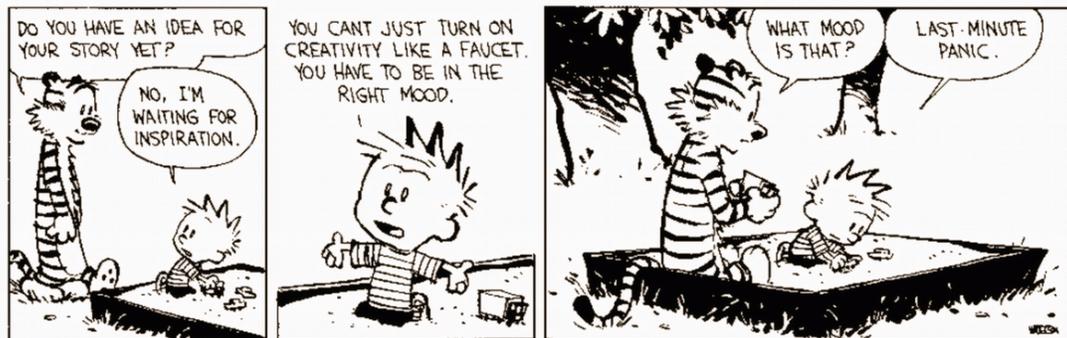
### Abstract

Working off from an earlier submission, this paper takes on the previous topic of motivation (and volition, aka, self-regulation) within the context of online education or e-learning. Initial discussions of Langer's work on mindful learning relate with issues of motivation. A selection of recent works states the value of high intrinsic motivation as a key factor for online education to be successful, while touching on distinct points that can support against attrition. Particular instructional tactics and design strategies are then enumerated from current literature to aid in motivation and regulation, and the ability of e-learning to activate and maintain student engagement. Conclusions drawn from these different approaches point towards relatedness, relevance, course design, and instructional methods as the important considerations for the motivation to engage and complete online learning programs. The paper, taking a cue from an online learning strategy, the blog, employs the personal writing style of a first-person narrator and self-appointed-critic.

*Keywords:* mindful learning, motivation, volition, online education, e-learning

### Motivation Online : Must... Finish... Paper...

As Bob Dylan writes in “All Along the Watchtower” (1968), the hour is getting late. And the wiring in my brain is on the verge of shorting out. Why is this happening? My head stings me with irony as I recall a strip from Calvin and Hobbes (by Bill Watterson), below:



Part of me exclaims, “No way! You are more mature and professional than that...”, while another part of me rolls his eyes and says, “Oh really? Mature and professional now, are we?”

And so as I grapple with issues of self-honesty, I also begin to recall my dubious yet quasi-effective work ethic that I have developed through years of architecture training and practice. I have become a nocturnal being that allowed pressure to squeeze juice of design creativity as needed. Certainly, I know better: my creative ability is not absolutely dependent on looming deadlines that steal into the night like a thief. No, my joy in thinking creatively, laterally, alternatively, is always in play as I participate in the design studio and classes I teach. Hence, my inaction is not a product of pure-flavored laziness. I realize now it is more insidious.

My procrastination is a cunning and opportunistic sprite like Puck (Dirksen, 2012). I enjoy yet wallow in my well constructed self-deception (Perry, 2012). And within such a defensive operating system, I call on my dark, back-alley beast of avoidance-motivated creativity to achieve my required goal with my desired standard of competence (Roskes, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2012).

### **E-learning: Be Gentle, It's My First Time**

It should not have been this complex nor this difficult. Yet it became so. Admittedly, I am the major player that set this climate into motion; but I also recognize that some particular external events nudged me to weave this tangled web (these have no finger-pointing intentions; they only have dark-comedy storytelling aspirations). Presenting some pressure points...

My initial topic would tackle the issue of why architectural students are so averse to and amotivated in technology classes. The idea was to look at reflective practice in creative learning and whether particular methods of the flipped classroom may effect better student engagement. It is an excellent idea to explore. I gave it a shot, but I had to accept that I am not yet capable to take it on at this time. That truly demotivated me. Thankfully, my advisor also gave me an alternative topic: the issue of motivation in an e-learning context. This topic, related to my earlier submission, saved me from oblivion. The decision to shift occurred during thanksgiving break.

Teaching design foundation (DFN) studio and the accompanying design communication (DCom) class for freshmen was maneageable, though certainly not light. The last few weeks, with final design projects and exercises that culminate in critical reviews and competitions, made for a crazy-loaded month. This consumed time and energy. Only a few days left...

I am a rookie student once again. As a teacher, it must sound ironic. Yet it is not reviving a learning groove that was a concern, it was the online class experience that was totally new to me. My only two previous experiences were professional-education webinars. Totally dull and boring (sorry presenters, you did not engage). Will online class be like this? Thankfully, my first two online class experiences at GSU were generally positive. Still, I had to adapt and adjust to this no-face, screen-only, keyboard-tapping environment. Could I handle this? How do we interact? How is learning supposed to take place, particularly in this alternative "room"?

And it is at this point that I am again drawn towards Ellen Langer's work about mindful learning (1997); in her book, Langer addressed seven learning myths or mindsets:

1. Basics must be learned so well they become second nature.
2. Paying attention means staying focused on one thing at a time.
3. Delaying gratification is important.
4. Rote memorization is necessary in education.
5. Forgetting is a problem.
6. Intelligence is knowing "what is out there."
7. There are right and wrong answers.

The industrial-age context in which these are rooted is not lost on us. To see these in practice is to witness the training of mindlessness as an acceptable paradigm. The timeliness of the book's arguments coincided with my evolving views regarding student-centered learning, the engagement of learners to topics, and their ability to master and apply knowledge thoughtfully to different situations. Little did I know that these basic areas of concern are quite significant, and perhaps more so, with online learning and the motivational obstacles that accompany it.

Today we may consider as our norm updated paradigms of learning with associated contexts and links, understanding rather than just memorizing, thinking critically instead of taking things for granted, and so on. And yet for many of us, until recently, the formal learning experience has invariably been set in a classroom with a group of peers, a teacher, and a set time schedule. We were instructed with material, we learned with our many senses; we read information as much as read faces, we listened, we talked, we took notes, we recited; we expressed, we experimented; we thought by ourselves, we collaborated with classmates. School was as much about knowledge mastery as it was about social relations, and self-ability (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Would online education be able to deliver as well?

**Online Class: “Can Anyone Hear Me? Hello?”**

E-learning can be generally defined as instruction and learning as supported electronically by information technologies such as multimedia and the internet (Nehme, 2010). Recent years have seen the continued growth of online education in universities, running parallel with the current generation’s “connected” culture with examples of social media, cloud navigation, and online gaming. Upon diving into this ever renewing world, we discover an endless array of information sources, unlimited attractions and features, and no end to the many possibilities of engagement. But do we actually do that? Postman (1992), speaks about how a technopoly quickly supplants society’s long-held values with self-serving efficiency, while advising us on technology’s double-edged sword. I have personally seen how people getting the newest smartphone would, after a short period, seek the next new smartphone. Advancements in communications technology promise better connections, implying a pathway to improved focus; yet the technical ability to connect to many pages and apps simultaneously, with the inability to pay proper attention to all of them, only results in poor, shallow awareness overall. Though this phenomenon is not impossible to address, its frequency of occurrence is personally alarming.

So, here lies my crux, my paradox. How do I focus and learn in this online environment, when the same environment has fragmented my ability to focus? How can the same channels (websites, blogs, Youtube, etc.) that have cut my attention into pieces, be used as the tools to construct knowledge anew? Add to this my rookie-ness to some of these platforms such as blogs, and wikis... To say that intrinsic motivation and self regulation are desired qualities (requisite, even) in online learners is an understatement. With the actual dis-connects (absence of visual, auditory, and social stimuli) of an online class environment, efforts must be made in other areas of the class’s design and operation to encourage alternative means of bonding digitally.

### **Got some Mojo-vation? Bring It!**

Literature abounds which speak of intrinsic motivation's importance for successful online learning, and as a key against attrition (Bennett & Monds, 2008; Artino & Stephens, 2009; Pittenger & Doering, 2010; Shivetts, 2011; Kim & Frick, 2011; Spies, 2011). This is articulated with research pointing to higher intrinsic motivation and lower procrastination levels among graduate students versus undergraduate students (Rovai, Ponton, & Wighting, 2007; Artino & Stephens, 2009). However, Nehme (2010) points out that many online class designs take this issue for granted, "due to the assumption that e-learners are self-motivated and active learners". In addition, Hartnett, St. George, & Dron (2011) state that research works into motivation in online settings hold a prevalent view that online learners are already intrinsically motivated.

As a resurrected, new-to-online student with a shaky motivational foundation and a love-hate relationship with procrastination, am I consigned to swimming upstream? Are learners with weaker intrinsic motivation doomed to poor online learning performance? Surely this direction towards sorting those with motivation from those without can not be the acceptable outcome of the access-for-all online culture. And, what are we to make of the observation that graduate students outrank undergraduates in terms of motivation, when undergraduates (and youth in general) are better connected online than their immediate elders? Kind of ironic, at first glance.

While it becomes apparent that shifting from a traditional class to an online environment may necessitate appropriate adjustments for a state of "readiness" (motivation, online skills, even courage), to induce higher motivation and engagement from the less prepared (yes, that would be me) via a fast-paced (What just happened?), distraction-filled (oh! Got a message!), disconnected screen would require systematic and responsive structuring of the online learning venue and how it is conducted (Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011). Which of the many aspects can be tackled?

### **Towards Meaningful Connections**

Motivation, while understood simplistically in extrinsic and intrinsic terms (Pink, 2009), is more complex and multifaceted (Reiss, 2012). Similarly, it would not be correct to assume that online learners are always motivated (Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011), nor that online presence or activity should be equated to learning motivation (Chyung, 2007). The making of a meaningful-connection culture presents itself as the logical overall guiding principle to strengthen the threads of engagement. It seems only poetic that a more personal and caring touch would be the saving grace in the noisy, digital world. Commitment, content, collaboration, and community is strongly endorsed (Barcelona, 2009), while similar objectives of autonomy (informed choice), competence (effective and relevant feedback), and relatedness (conveying concern and respect in communications) are recommended (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Nehme, 2010).

Communication, in fact, is a huge key factor in maintaining engagement and motivation while improving the unique professional-personal bonds between teacher and learner (Cumming, 2004) and affecting the relatedness to peers, to the instructor, and to the material (Shin, 2010). While the form of online communication is quite different (due to the absence of facial and tonal cues), this is made up for with the varied use of **FONTS**, size, marks (#@\$%), emoticons (^\_^ :), and other text-graphic devices (OMG!). However the form mutates, its underlying aim is to convey part information, and part expression. In e-learning, communication shows concern. Despite its qualitative limitations, that email thread goes a long way.

Online chats (synchronous) and offline texts (asynchronous) are precious lifelines of communication in the WWW environment. In fact, having a balance of both forms works by shoring up peer-interaction-relatedness through conference-chats, and encouraging reflective participation through blog articles and email (Hrastinski, 2008; Xie & Ke, 2011).

The email, once a shining marvel of written message efficiency, then supplanted by online chats like google-talk and skype, has been reduced to a basic lowly staple of any netizen with a computer, a tablet, or a phone. It has become so common as to become a verb akin to calling (“I’ll email ya later”), disintegrating into digital ubiquity. Yet, this cheap (it’s so ordinary it’s essentially free) and banal a device is a crucial backbone for online class communication. So much reinforcement and supporting information has been distributed by myself to my classes, just as they have replied-to-all to keep everyone in the loop. The contents may be typical and expected of a class email, but the actual sending and receiving amongst the members of the mailing group strengthens the identification with a class. Imagine how you would feel, even in a traditional classroom setting, when you are not one of the recipients of a pep-talk email before a big class presentation. If that hits home, its value is appreciated even more in e-learning. This is why such cheap and easy tools such as email and blogs (Bennett & Monds, 2008; Huett, Kalinowski, Moller, & Huett, 2008; Xie & Ke, 2011; Yang & Chang, 2012 ) have been observed to be effective means to support motivational depth and momentum.

Recall the ARCS model by Keller, and its guiding presence can be felt in research work studying the benefits of different communication modes that support motivation in online learning. Online class participants connect to content and interact with each other through simple means like email and blogs; but they also sustain and encourage their own efforts, and each other, through the sharing of media resources such as audio and video podcasts (Choi & Johnson, 2005; Bolliger, Supanakorn, & Boggs, 2010; Spies, 2011). Students appreciated the enrichment of their focus through the use of varied media (this echoes Langer’s argument against fixed-focus attention), and the effort of the instructor in keeping the updates, feedback, and overall communication frequent. Digital as these are, it still boils down to caring.

### **Oh, A Few More Things...**

Keeping connected and being interactive with the class content, and its participants accomplishes much in the way of establishing and nurturing the bonds towards the learning objectives. But there is more. Once I confirm my proper place and acceptance in the group, I often return to the question that I must ask (to myself, quietly) of every class : “This class seems important, I know... but really, what’s in it for me?” Not so long ago, I would have slapped myself for such an impudent, even insolent tone. Rude or otherwise, however, the question remains valid. Thus, my answers are relevance, structure, and access. These have been true for me in my many years of learning; and it is true once again in my first online classes.

My motivation to learn is energized by the presence of relevance; it must mean something of value to me, intellectually and personally (Chyung, 2007; Shin, 2010; Sansone, Fraughton, Zachary, Butner, & Heiner, 2011). This already aligns with the attention and relevance elements of Keller’s model. Concurrent with appeal and relevance would be the structure’s design (how the course and its contents are assembled for timely, sequenced participation) of this knowledge (Dennis, Bunkowski, & Eskey, 2007; Shivetts 2011; Kim & Frick, 2011). I may say that I would rather have things presented easily to me; yet I know myself well enough to recognize that I learn better when I am able to have a degree of freedom in responsible choice (autonomy), and I can demonstrate learning at a level of meaningful competence and challenge (Kim, 2009). Finally my drive to learn is supported if I recognize the accessibility to be part of that relevance. This would entail me having the requisite skills to operate and navigate in the digital environments, or that I would have models or patterns constructed for me to follow (a form of navigational scaffolding) (Pittenger & Doering, 2010; Xie & Ke, 2011; Alias, 2012).

### **Conclusions**

One may think that this is so much effort for online learning; why bother? I would frame the question a bit differently by asking “If we do not respond to these online learning issues, would we be OK in denying educational opportunity to those who are, for whatever reasons, unable to attend regular schooling?” Mind you, e-learning may be experiencing all these different advances in info-media (Postman, among others, foresaw this information glut), such that serious knowledge management is critical to filter the useful from the drivel. Nevertheless, the fruits of technological efficiency dressed in attractive java, flash, and animated formats, only contribute to the desensitizing noise of information, particularly over the last few years (Fresh Air, 2012). A learning experience in the WWW ocean faces distraction, disconnection, and disengagement.

In the end, education, an act of drawing out the latent genius within, requires the constructed relationship of the educator and the educee, with the solemn pact for each one to give their best and see each other through to an elevated state. This collaborative and communal relationship becomes crucial in e-learning as the humanizing, and motivating factor to uplift the online learning agenda above the din of the internet. Disconnected by nature, instruction must ensure or develop skills to navigate the many digital avenues, provide frequent, inter/active communication, while designing for highlighted autonomy and relevance. Counterintuitive as it may sound, encouraging creativity to stimulate risk and exploration will empower the learner’s bid for ownership of their competence (Muirhead, 2007). And it is with such caring and confident mentoring strategies that online learning may succeed for struggling students where traditional classes have not (Davis, 2009).

As Theodore Roosevelt states, “People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care”. And isn’t that the truth!

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