Motivating the Distant Learner to be a Self-Directed Learner.

Kathryn Ley
Associate Professor & Instructional Technology Program Coordinator
University of Houston Clear Lake

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to strategies for motivating the distant learner based upon current learning theory and research on self-regulation (SR) and motivation. Self-directed learning here refers to learners who, in addition to self-regulating, self-motivate. Therefore, the instructional strategies suggested will address self-regulation and motivation, that is the tendency for the learners to engage in self-regulatory and motivating activities. A self-regulated learner continually engages four activities; planning, organizing, monitoring, and evaluating his learning processes (Corno, 1989; Zimmerman & Paulsen, 1995). Being self-regulated entails using all the skills that enable one to metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally participate in one’s own learning process (Zimmerman, 1986). In short a self-regulated learner can and will actively support her own learning cognitively, metacognitively, and motivationally. They know what to study; how to learn; they have confidence that if they expend effort they can learn; and the most sophisticated among them, will know that effort and effective strategies are necessary. Specific self-regulation and motivation conditions associated with specific learning activities fortunately are easy to embed in distance instruction, many requiring minimal if any instructor time. Embedding self-regulation strategies and tools in a course integrates self-regulation support with the learning environment (Ley & Young 2001). Six principles capture strategic learning activities often associated with success among self-regulated and motivated learners.

Motivation and SR

Motivation by definition requires voluntary effort; instructional motivation is voluntary effort expended to learn instructional objectives. Self-regulation activities are motivated by definition since they would be voluntary and, to a greater extent, planned and implemented by the learner. In the case of SR support, SR activities are induced with instructional cues and tools. Self-regulated learners create learning-support environments, seek assistance when needed, and self-instruct and reinforce their own learning performance (Karabenick & Knapp, 1990). Self-regulated learners tend to exhibit goal directedness, manage their academic time, meaningfully direct their practice, use cognitive and metacognitive strategies appropriately, and possess self-efficacy for the task (Zimmerman & Paulsen, 1995). Self regulated learners effectively use a variety of learning strategies in their toolbox of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. They monitor their progress and adjust cognitive strategies to compensate for difficulties or increase progress (Garner, 1990; Ridley, Schutz, Glanz & Weinstein, 1992). Active learners have a slight tendency to outperform passive learners in a hypermedia environment (Anderson, 2001). Faculty will appreciate another reason – this kind of support answers the distant learner’s most common questions before they even ask them.

Six Principles for Embedding Motivation in Distance Education

ARCS, a model for instructional motivation (Keller, 1987), identified four motivational factors that influence learner motivation, attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction. The intuitively appealing research-based model suggested motivating instruction would gain and sustain the learner’s attention, provide relevant learning experiences, build the learner’s confidence and offer the learner a satisfying instructional experience. Over the years, only confidence, also known as self-efficacy, has been consistently associated in research results with achievement and performance. Research results have
associated motivation with increased self-regulation activity, higher self-efficacy and more effort and strategy attributions. Learner self-efficacy and attributions have increased learning outcomes.

In the last 20 years the research on self-regulation has continued to define its relationship to achievement. “Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated clear relationship between students ability to self-regulate their learning and academic performance” (Anderson, 2001, p. 56). Of all the activities associated with self-regulation, four conditions frequently distinguished higher from lower achieving students; these four conditions are a proper learning environment, the meaningful organization of learning resources and materials; routine progress monitoring, and learning strategy effectiveness evaluation; these are represented by the POME instructional principles for embedding self-regulation support (Ley & Young, 2001).

Prepare The Learning Environment

Poorly self-regulating learners may spend to little time and attention on their learning environment. If asked where they study they often have no specific place or identify places associated with noise and distraction. While most instructional designers spend little time considering the learner’s study environment, research suggests that establishing a quiet, comfortable learning environment was one of the distinguishing traits between high- and low-achieving college students (Ley & Young, 1998). To prepare learning environment, instruction might include embedded learning environment preparation tools or activities might include providing study environment checklist; listing common distractions with advice for eliminating them; suggesting appropriate study conditions; including a print guide to structuring a study environment.

Set Learning Goals

Goal setting is an essential part of the monitoring process, probably the most powerful SR process in terms of contributing the most to learning outcomes. Monitoring is so powerful that one researcher got a significant difference in student course grades by assigning one group to complete a self-monitoring study activities tool (Lan, 1996). Two types of goals differ dramatically in their origination and their effect. Learners who want to know something have learning goals; learners who want a good grade or do well have performance goals. Mastery goals improve learner competence or understanding and can generate feelings of pride, success, and accomplishment while performance goals emphasize comparisons between a learner's ability and others’ abilities (Meece, 1994). Although learners can and do have both kinds of goals, “more energy should be focused on enhancing mastery goals. . .the deterrent to motivation occurs when the concern for performance is stronger than the concern for learning or mastery” (Alderman, 2004, p.88). Goals can increase feelings of competence and interest if attainable in a reasonable amount of time and as the result of specific actions (Meece, 1994). Encouraging learners to establish specific and attainable goals can enhance metacognitive monitoring (Winne & Stockley, 1998). To support goals setting instruction may include giving the students measurable end-of-course and interim learning objectives provides proximal and distal goals; providing a list of assignments with due dates implicitly establishes each as a goal; giving partial assignments to build a final project establishes interim goals for a final project.

Organize Learning Resources

Proven organizing strategies suggested for instructors include advance or graphic organizers, concept mapping, and previews (Driscoll, 2000; Nist & Holschuh, 2000). Organizing, an essential study activity (Di Vesta & Moreno, 1993) and SR activity (Zimmerman & Paulsen, 1995) entails transforming and rearranging instructional materials to facilitate learning. Strategies for organizing content, for example, concept mapping, schematizing, and structured overviewing have enhanced performance in several
studies (Jonassen & Grabowski, 1993). Add one or more activities or tools to organizing learning resources. For example, embedded organizational tools or activities might include an outline of reading assignment content; identify key points; list order for studying or suggest how to study for a given assignment or test; provide an assignment schedule; distribute instructor course notes or outlines; add or have students prepare advance or graphic organizers, concept maps, or previews.

**Monitor Learning Progress**

Cuing students to keep records does increase their learning, motivation, and self efficacy (Zimmerman, 1989). Keeping records and monitoring frequency was one of five significantly discriminating self-regulating differences between students who scored above and those who scored below the minimum standardized test score for college admission eligibility (Ley & Young, 1998). Keeping records and monitoring frequency was the second strongest predictor for discriminating self-regulating differences between eighth grade students from higher and lower achievement tracks (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986). Self-monitoring occurs when a student is observing and recording (1) whether or not she has done something, or (2) a learning outcome to monitor if their performance has met a set criteria (Belfiore & Hornyk, 1998). When matching an outcome to specified criteria, the criteria become goals when learners embrace them as an attainable performance standard.

Add one or more activities or tools to monitor goal progress. For example, embedded monitoring tools or activities might include providing and collecting goal/study time monitoring forms; giving self-test questions for reading; providing grades online and announcing when grades have been posted; providing an assignment calendar; identifying scores required to make a given grade; suggesting what activities learner should be completing to prepare graded assignments.

**Evaluate Learning Effectiveness**

Learners must be able to determine if the strategies they are using are effective and how to revise an ineffective strategy. Add one or more activities or tools to evaluate learning activity effectiveness and induce attributions to effort and strategies. For example, embedded evaluation tools or activities might include giving frequent ungraded quizzes; analyzing feedback from tests, assignments; comparing effort to learning – this also encourages attributions to effort; identifying effective/ineffective learning strategies –this also encourages attributions to strategies.

**Build Self-Efficacy and Effort/Strategy Attributions**

Self-efficacy is a “specific and situational view of perceived competence” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 161) and it also implies a predefined goal, the object of the person’s competence feelings that he or she can accomplish the task. Therefore if the task is to learn then both the learner’s self-efficacy for successfully learning and performing the task influence a learner’s task accomplishment. An effective learner must feel confident that he can regulate his own learning processes effectively enough to successfully achieve the learning goal; self-efficacy for self-regulation is essential for cognitive development (Bandura, 1997). Self-regulated learners possess motivational beliefs including belief in their ability to apply the strategies appropriately and to continue using cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Karabenick & Collins-Eaglin, 1995). Attributions, or how a student explains his or her personal academic successes or failures, can affect learner motivation. Likewise, whether or not a student believes he or she can complete the on-line course, expectations and self-efficacy, may enhance or undermine motivation.

To build self-efficacy, and appropriate attributions to effort instruction may build confidence with moderately challenging, proximal (to be achieved in the near future) goals and clear measurable learning
objectives; build self-efficacy for the learning objectives and self-efficacy for self-regulation; provide instructionally relevant materials to build volition; require learners to evaluate and compare learning strategies to performance such as test scores.

References


**Biographical Sketch**

**Kathryn Ley** is an associate professor and Instructional Technology Program Coordinator at the University of Houston Clear Lake. She has been investigating self-regulation and learning for a decade. Her academic interest has been investigating characteristics associated with motivation. She and her colleague, Dawn Young, have published studies on self-efficacy, self-regulation, motivation and instructional principles for systematically providing strategic self-regulation support in any course.

Address 18036 Bal Harbour Dr.  
Houston TX 77058-4308  
E-mail  ley@cl.uh.edu  
Phone 281.283.3585  
Fax 281.283.3565