



Book review

Motivation in Online Education

Dr Bill Anderson

Hartnett, M. (2016). *Motivation in online education*. Singapore: Springer. (pp. 134).

We know motivation is an important factor in education; we also know that, in the tertiary sector, online education is the norm. Whether students are on campus or at a distance, full time or part time, school leavers or adult students, they will probably spend more of their total learning time accessing study material, communicating, and producing study-related artefacts (whether for assessment or not) using digital technologies, than they will through any other means.

When students actually are studying at a distance, the ongoing online nature of study can be almost guaranteed. A book that ties motivation and online education together provides reason enough for any online educator to read it, but there are others.

In *Motivation in Online Education*, Dr. Maggie Hartnett explores the nature of motivation to learn in online contexts, and the factors that impact on that motivation. She tells us that motivation “has been shown to play an important role in determining whether a learner persists in a course, the level of engagement shown, the quality of work produced and the level of achievement attained” (Hartnett, 2016, p. 13). Think of the factors mentioned—persistence in a course, quality of work, level of achievement. Obviously, knowing how motivation plays out in online contexts is essential in education today.

Dr Hartnett’s book is a slim volume, but in my reading lifetime it’s always seemed that the books that punched well above their weight were like that. This book is more targeted than the others I’m thinking about—books such as Gee’s *Situated Language and Learning* (2004) or Edwards and Mercer’s *Common Knowledge* (1987)—but it has the same quality of pushing me away to make me think, then drawing me back to re-read and re-imagine my work as an educator.

The book is organised in a way that belies the effort and challenge involved in the research that underpins it. It has only six chapters, but at a mere two pages, Chapter One doesn’t really count. Chapter Two takes us through the literature; Chapter Three provides us with a report of the research; Chapter Four brings the findings together in an extremely accessible structure; Chapter Five uses that structure to develop guidelines for teachers and designers in online learning environments; and Chapter Six highlights the key ideas from the book and looks at possibilities for further research in the area.

The core of the book lies clearly in Chapters Two to Five. I found myself wondering which of those I valued most. I certainly appreciated the well sign-posted and well-paced jaunt through the literature on motivation that Chapter Two provided. Yes, it was a review that focused on motivation—in the context of online learning—although it also explored central concepts in online learning that intersected with the motivation literature, such as interaction, autonomy and control.

This gave me the first clue as to why I found this book useful. It was the solid engagement with core concepts—old friends with a solid pedigree—that drew my attention. So much is known

about motivation in a wide range of contexts that you'd ask what was left to uncover. Yet, in focusing on those core concepts and tying the issues of motivation and online education together, the author argues for a perspective on motivation that reflects the online learning context. This perspective recognises the learner, the learning environment, and the relationships between the two, and asks what supports or hinders learner motivation.

Discussion of the findings in Chapter Three teases out the complex patterns of motivation that are experienced by learners. Motivation is clearly not a binary state where you are or you are not motivated. Students experience a range of motivational factors that impact differently, and they have a multi-dimensional experience of motivation at any time. As one section heading puts it: "Different types of motivation co-exist in a complex mix" (Hartnett, 2016, p. 80). This didn't come as a surprise since my work in the area of approaches to study (deep, surface, strategic), and the way they are orchestrated, taught me that students show evidence of using all three approaches at differing levels in a single learning context. However, it does alert readers to the fact that a wide range of factors support or undermine motivation, pushing or pulling in different directions simultaneously. However, the part of this chapter I most enjoyed was the provision of extensive quotations from students in support of the depictions of factors that affected motivation. All online educators who pay attention to their students will recognise the feelings and sentiments expressed by the research participants. The quotations bring the research context to life.

Chapter Four proceeds to add some flesh to the bones of the skeleton assembled in Chapters Two and Three. This chapter is also a pivot point in the book. Discussion still concerns the three areas of motivation – autonomy, competence and relatedness; however, it is based on the principal components of the learning environment – teachers, learning activities, and peers (fellow students). As we read, we discover how each component can support or undermine students as they attempt to meet their motivational needs.

This is a helpful change in direction. While soundly academic in content, the book's tone and style indicate it is written primarily for an audience of practitioners. Chapter Four provides opportunities for any online teacher, e-learning student, or learning designer to subject their practice to critical reflection that draws on the substantive analysis of the learning contexts that were examined in the research. Such reflection is supported even further in Chapter Five.

The penultimate chapter provides guidelines for "professionals tasked with building online educational environments as well as those teaching and learning within them" (Hartnett, 2016, p. 115). If I was a busy teacher/designer/student who had time to read only one chapter in this book, this would probably be it. The ways in which actors in the learning environment can play a role in supporting the motivation of online learners are clearly laid out. There is no escaping the fact that we can all do something in support of motivation to learn. However, the caution (wisely offered), is that these are not prescriptions; they are guidelines. Actions are situationally dependent.

Allied to that last point is another that surfaces earlier in the book but could escape attention. It is recognition of the importance of students **perceiving** that their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are being met. Perception is clearly important. At stages throughout Chapter Three we saw several ways in which actions from lecturers, or design elements in the course material, that were intended to offer support to students in one or more of the areas (autonomy, competence, relatedness), were in fact perceived as doing the opposite and thus undermining motivation. How do we know how students perceive our actions or the design of a course? If you think it matters, perhaps this is a question to leave you with.

With the essence of the book laid out, the final chapter reiterates the main points about motivation and looks towards future directions for research. Having read Chapters One to Five thoroughly, and continuing to dip into them, I decided there was a missing element. I have long been interested in the support offered to distance learners by the communities in which they live—their family, friends, professional colleagues, and so on. These are people outside the immediate learning context, yet there is some evidence that they have a useful role to play in supporting distance learners. Why was there no mention of this? The answer came when I read Chapter Six. The question had certainly been considered and was noted as an area for future research.

With a book as worthwhile as this, I find it hard to make the next comment. It concerns a feature of the hardcopy book that I didn't like—the referencing. Each chapter concludes with its own reference section. This is handy if you are only interested in what happens in one chapter, but when your concern is the whole book it is useful to have an aggregated set of references. The decision to have separate chapter reference sections is understandable, since each chapter is available separately, online. But I wish the publishers had provided a full set of references for the hardcopy edition that I was reading.

I can't finish with this slight criticism. This book is too valuable and too useful for my slight misgiving to flavour your final impression of this review. The style and clarity of writing, the sustained focus on motivation in the online learning context, and the interplay of theory and practice combine to make this book one that I will return to in future. I urge you to take my advice. Read it.

References

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Biographical note

Bill Anderson has previously been involved in distance and online education at Massey University and the University of Otago as a lecturer, researcher and administrator. Since retiring around 3 years ago he has continued to engage with distance educators and their students through teaching and research projects.

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