Strategies for Connecting and Motivating the “At-Risk” E-Learner

Renee Wallace, PhD
Florida A&M University

Essential to the learning process is the ability to effectively connect and motivate the “at-risk” students enabling them to transform the teaching modality utilized into a personal educational experience. While this is significant for the classroom, the online classroom poses a new set of challenges as the dynamics of the human interface are redesigned and facilitated by the methods of telecommunication rather than the physical presence and interactions of “at-risk” students and professional educators. As e-learning continues to expand in education, many of the complexities of connecting and motivating the at-risk e-learner continues to challenge us. Without the visual clues from the “at-risk”, the online professional educator must develop a new set of communication skills to connect, motivate and implement effective instructional practices while translating them into an effective teaching and learning environment. It is an daunting and exciting challenge. The purpose of this paper is to provide essential strategies to equip the professional educator for connecting and motivating the “at-risk” student in an online environment!

The “at-risk” leaner enters the virtual classroom with the same basic academic needs as the face-to-face (f2f) learner. The learner usually is seeking knew knowledge and academic skills, to validate who they are and what they have goals to achieve through the school process journey, and/or to be connected to their peers for camaraderie, motivation, and collaboration as they continue their matriculation. Expectations may on the surface appear to be diminished. There might be expectations that of having more free time or that the academics will be much easier simply by choosing the online paradigm. Added to those expectations there might be many apprehensions and fears that problems with technology will develop and one will not be able to function effectively online without the physical presence of a professional educator to help when problems and questions arise. On the forefront though, the “at-risk” online learner should be encouraged to value learning in their own time and space as more important than a physical classroom bound by time and space. While the connection to their immediate world is a high priority, they do still seek a sense of support, motivation, and connection to online learning. Thus, the effective utilization of strategies to connect and motivate the “at-risk” learner to the online paradigm becomes essential.

The “at-risk” e-learner must be taught a unique set of skills independent of the traditional learning environment. E-learning not only requires a high level of responsibility and independence on the part of the learner, but also an ability to attain proficiency in the utilization of technology to facilitate their learning. Motivation, perseverance and problem solving take on new dimensions in the “at-risk” e-learners academic world.

Instructing “at-risk” e-learners provides a significant opportunity to create an effective teaching and learning environment, if done properly. The online professional educator’s role is that of developing, delivering, and creating a learning partnership within the community of online e-learners. There are now many tools available to assist not only in
the creation of online learning environments, but also for communicating, connecting and motivating the “at risk” e-learner.

Connecting and motivating the “at risk” e-learner is at the core of effective online learning. It is an art that requires an educator to effectively utilize the tools within the e-learning environment to deliver not only curriculum content, but to nurture, motivate, sustain and challenge the “at risk” e-learner in collaboration with the other e-learners.

**Strategies for Connecting with the “at risk” E-Learner**

**Select an effective delivery system (e-learning environment)**

Each e-learning environment has a delivery system whether it is simply a series of newsgroups, or as complicated as a multi-dimensional learning portal. Even though it is not the intent of this research to focus on the various types of delivery systems available, a significant strategy for consideration when assessing your goals and objectives and learner outcomes for the “at-risk” e-learner is what features and tools the delivery system offers for communication, motivation and collaboration.

Things to consider when selecting a delivery system:

- Is it “user friendly”, easy to set up, edit?
- Whose server does the curriculum content reside on? Is it stable? Always accessible?
- What technical support services are available for the e-learner and instructor?
- What collaborative tools are available for asynchronous and synchronous discussion?
- Is the interface transparent or is transparency easy to learn? Does the interface hinder learning? After one session, will the “at-risk” e-learner no longer think about the delivery system, but focus on the curriculum?

**Utilize the delivery system’s interface to effectively motivate, communicate and present curriculum**

For e-learning, how you utilize the capabilities of the interface becomes your vehicle for communicating the content of the course. This involves first the use of instructional design elements in a manner that we as professional educators have never been required to implement before. We are so frequently dependent on the “lecture” instructional modality in education. An instructional modality that has been the object of research investigating the effective teaching/learning strategy/environment. Moving instruction online forces the professional educator out of the lecture instruction modality and into the interactive instructional modality. A more effective instruction pedagogy. It should be remembered that the instructional design of the curriculum within the interface as the most significant element. It is where the learning actually revolves, where the “at-risk” e-learner formulates many first impressions, and often decides what kind of an e-learner they want to be in the environment. For the face-to-face classroom, and the physical
interactions with peers and instructors these factors may determine these learning outcomes. The interface for course delivery and the method in which the content is received becomes the external environment of the virtual classroom. One should ask self:

- What will you do to motivate the “at-risk” e-learner?
- What will you do to promote inquire and learner construction of the knowledge instead of merely reading pages of text driven online materials?
- How will you design an instructional environment that stimulates and encourages the “at-risk” e-learner to increase academic achievement?
- How will you engage the “at-risk” e-learner without your physical presence?

In delivering online curriculum, discovering and utilizing the wealth of resources available in the e-world are critical. You should resist the temptation to take current teaching strategies in the face-to-face classroom and try to transfer them online. Avoid the tendency to scan pages and pages of lecture notes, post “scroll down pages”, videotape entire lectures, and to post pages upon pages of text driven information. Remember online curriculum should be dynamic and interactive.

Things to consider in designing and delivering online curriculum:

- Are you utilizing a variety of ways to present the information e.g., visually stimulating presentations with graphics, colors, bulleted lists, graphs, audio and video clips, interactive portable document format (pdfs), internet resources, etc…?
- Does your content have built in learner accountability? Is there a communication system that allows the e-learner to interact and respond to the content to demonstrate learning and continued comprehension of knowledge?
- Is the content in manageable learning chunks? Because e-learning is no longer bound by time and space, content needs to be “resized” to maximize flexibility and empowerment for the e-learner. It should be noted, that brevity utilized online reinforces attentiveness.

**Invest in the E-Learner—Connect, Motivate, Communicate, and Collaborate**

Obviously, this is the foundation of any effecting teaching pedagogy. The online environment is not different, but in significant ways requires a different time and instructional commitment on the part of the professional educator. In the online environment, visual cues are almost non-existent, so gaining a sense of teacher/learner presence is the more challenging, investing in the e-learner with effective ways of motivating, communicating, and developing a sense of community becomes essential. E-learning provides various distinct opportunities to effectively connect, motivate, communicate and invest in the “at-risk” e-learner. It should be noted that the online environment one creates needs to include a high level of collaboration not only with the professional educator that creates the online course but with fellow colleagues to avoid isolating twenty “at-risk” e-learners. Although the task at times may be daunting, it is well worth the learning outcomes. An effective virtual classroom can produce learning
outcomes sometimes not obtainable in a face-to-face classroom. “At-risk” e-learners cannot “hide” behind other learners, e-learners have more time to reflect on their “verbal” contributions, and e-learners have access to a non-threatening, risk-free learning environment in which the hierarchal levels of instruction become an equal communication arena. Within this arena are many different interaction communication tools that can be effectively and successfully utilized. Online communication tools can be categorized into two (2) groups—synchronous and asynchronous. Tools that facilitate synchronous communication allow the “at-risk” e-learner participant to communicate at the same time within a common virtual space. Tools that facilitate asynchronous communications may share the same space (as in threaded discussions), but the “at-risk” e-learners are working and collaborating at different times. It should be remembered that the space is virtual, not physical.

Below are some common and effective online communication tools available to the online professional educator to effectively connect, and motivate the “at-risk” e-learner as well as some strategies.

**Synchronous Communication Tools**

- **Telephone**
  
  Sometimes this simple and effective communication tool is forgotten in the online environment. It is essential to connect with each “at-risk” e-learner via telephone in the beginning so that you and the e-learner can “hear” each other’s voices and establish a connection with a familiar modality. Because the online environment is often times initially invisible to the “at-risk” e-learner, a simple telephone call would be very helpful in providing motivation and getting the e-learner started.

- **Virtual Classroom**
  
  Many delivery systems currently include a “chat” area where synchronous conversations and collaborative work can occur. This is great way to virtually motivate, meet and work with e-learners. Also within some delivery systems, many have white boards and capabilities of recording conversations. Although there is often a small learning curve to be able to function within the environment, there are powerful teaching tools embedded to enhance synchronous online instruction.

- **Instant Messaging**
  
  Similar to the telephone, instant messaging actually provides a unique mode of connection to the “at-risk” e-learner(s). “Buddy lists” can be created so that the e-learners, when online can have a sense connection to not only the professional educator, but to each other for support and collaboration. The sense of aloneness and isolation that can easily occur in the online learning experience disappears. This particular tool is significant and effective motivator for the “at-risk” e-learner. A great feature with Instant Messaging is that one can choose when they want to be available/visible to others and when they do not want to be.

**Asynchronous Communication Tools**
✓ **Snail Mail**
This can be a motivating tool for the “at-risk” e-learner encased in the online environment. The professional educator can send a written note of encouragement or a small “motivating” package at some point during the virtual class. This can be a powerful connection tool.

✓ **Email**
Generally, everything in an online class revolves around this particular basic communication tool. One does not have to go through layers to us and/or retrieve it. The key to effectively utilizing email is organization, and management. The professional educator should take the time and effort to educate their “at-risk” e-learners on the use of effective subject headers that include their name and assignment, and an email management system.

✓ **Threaded Discussion**
This tool can be utilized as the center of classroom issues, learning and conversations, threaded discussions allow for significant reflection and interactive discussions. Author editing and being able to view all conversations/threads at the same time are a part of this interface. This can be a significant forum for professional educator/”at-risk” student interaction, it can additionally be utilized to keep the “at-risk” e-learner on task, move the learning to the next dimension, and allow for constructing knowledge in unique and meaningful ways. The key is to teach “at-risk” students how to include parts of previous conversations so that the discussions are contiguous and the flow is maintained.

✓ **E-Journals**
Many delivery systems have a method within the interface in which students and the professional educator can interact privately. Similar to what can be done in email, e-journals provide an environment within the virtual classroom for one-on-one personal reflection and interaction with the professional educator. They are private and are an excellent tool for motivation and establishing an effective relationship while gaining valuable insight into individual learning outcomes.

✓ **Data Collection Resources**
This is a place where “at-risk” e-learners and professional educators can share online resources they feel are important to the learning objectives. Utilizing a space in the online environment for resource sharing also allows for networking.

✓ **Document Sharing**
This is a part of collaborating, reflecting and learning from each other’s work. While this a dimension of online learning, a significant factor to consider is how students are required to share their documents whether it be as a word document, portable document (pdf), PowerPoint presentations, web sites, or all of the above. A document sharing interface area greatly facilitates this form of communication versus
having the “at-risk” e-learners send their work as attachments to emails. “At-risk” e-learners’ work becomes an expression for all to benefit from when appropriate.

✓ **Online Gradebooks**
In the online environment, it is most effective to provide feedback weekly. Feedback is an essential part of the communication process.

**Other Helpful Strategies**

✓ **Timelines**
One of the common challenges in the online environment for the “at-risk” e-learner is time management. Because of the newfound flexibility, often the “out of sight, out of mind” phenomenon takes over. It is helpful and effective to divide the modules (sessions, weeks, workshops) into time frames in which the modules are “time released.” It is also extremely beneficial to set participation criteria in the online classroom so that there is adequate collaboration and construction of learning.

✓ **Useful Software**
It should be noted that word processing software is essential for online work. Acrobat is also a powerful tool for sharing work as portable document files (pdf) preserving the fonts, graphics and the look the author intended for their work. If possible invest in utilities such as Stuffit Deluxe (for Mac) and WinZip (for PC).

✓ **Class Size**
The ideal manageable online class size for both professional educator and “at-risk” e-learner is contingent on hardware, software, and technological skills. It should be noted that smaller is better. Take into consideration the increased level of interaction, responses and collaboration that occur within the virtual classroom—much higher than a face-to-face classroom. To adequately service each “at-risk” e-learner and also provide him or her a manageable environment, class size is a continuously debated issue. There are many misconceptions that it is much less time consuming to teach online—simply not so if done effectively and dynamically.

While these are a few of the most common communication and collaboration tools, there are others that may prove useful. It is important to focus on the effective utilization and implementation of any online tool to motivate and to break down the barrier of connecting and empowering the “at-risk” e-learner. One of the unique benefits of motivating and connecting with the “at-risk” e-learner in an online environment is the equal playing field that emerges. The hierarchy between professional educator and “at-risk” e-learner disappears online. “At-risk” e-learners whether synchronously or asynchronously have an equal voice and chance to participate, learn and develop.
References


