WHAT MOTIVATES STUDENTS IN THE ONLINE COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM? AN EXPLORATION OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine instructional strategies used to motivate students to engage in online communication courses. Eighteen undergraduate students, seven graduate students, and ten faculty members were interviewed individually or in small focus groups. Results indicate the significance of instructional strategies that promote autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness in motivating students. Two instructional strategies that promote autonomy (i.e., conveying choice in instructional language and validating negative feelings associated with arduous or tedious tasks) were not discussed by participants in this study, which poses interesting challenges for instructors. The results reveal the utility of Self-Determination Theory in aiding contemporary scholars in understanding the particular needs of online learners and the distinct challenges for today's teachers.

Keywords: motivation; Self-Determination Theory; online learning; online communication courses; instructional strategies

INTRODUCTION

To be motivated means "*to be moved* to do something" (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p. 54). Instructors want their students to be moved to engage actively in their classes and to care about what they teach, but how can instructors motivate students online given that students are largely self-directed in such a context? VanHorn, Pearson, and Child (2008) surveyed 240 instructors of online communication courses with the intention of discovering the challenges that such instructors face. One of the most often mentioned challenges was motivation. Other scholars have found the same. Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, and Thompson (2012) claimed that "without an instructor present to provide pace, order, and focus, students must self-regulate their work and assume greater accountability for the learning process" (p. 314). Considering the current trend toward online instruction, it is imperative that strategies to motivate students are investigated in such environments (Trad, Katt, and Neville Miller, 2014).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION: SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

One way in which to explore motivation in online communication courses is through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to this theory, motivation exists along a continuum. On one end is *amotivation*, in which an individual lacks any intention to act. Following amotivation, there are four forms of extrinsic motivation. They are all considered extrinsic because the goal with each is to achieve a separable outcome; however, they differ in their level of perceived control. The first form of extrinsic motivation, closest to amotivation, is *external regulation*, in which one has the perception of being controlled by extrinsic rewards or punishments (i.e., a student does homework to avoid punishment). Next is *introjection*; the

behaver perceives having little autonomy due to the feeling of pressure to engage in an activity to avoid guilt or anxiety (i.e., a student does homework to avoid disappointing teachers or parents). When an individual feels some sense of autonomy and as a result, identifies with the personal importance of engaging in the behavior, that individual is experiencing *identification* (i.e., a student does homework due to instrumental value—coursework is tied to career goals). When the behaver acts as a result of internalizing the reasons for the action and assimilating them into sense of self, then the actions have become "self-determined" and the behaver has reached *integration* (i.e., a student has internalized the values associated with the practice of homework and engages by choice). Integration is the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation.

On the opposite end of the continuum from amotivation is *intrinsic motivation*. This is a completely autonomous and self-determined form of motivation because the action is done for inherent interest or enjoyment. Although instructors may hope that their students engage with course curriculum because they are intrinsically motivated, that is rarely the case (Collier, 2015). However, as described, there are forms of extrinsic motivation that are more likely to lead to self-determination, in which students come to identify with the associated values, despite the fact that there is still a desire to achieve a separable outcome. Therefore, despite being extrinsic forms of motivation, as instructors, it is best to motivate students at the identification and integration levels; it is at these levels of motivation in which students find learning more meaningful and will therefore be more likely to engage actively (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

BASIC HUMAN NEEDS REQUIRED FOR SELF-DETERMINATION

Ryan and Deci (2000a) claim that the facilitation of self-determined learners (i.e., reaching levels of identification and integration) requires support of three basic human needs: autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness. Each of these needs will be discussed in turn in the following paragraphs.

Autonomy

Autonomy involves the feeling associated with acting of one's own volition (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Autonomy has been supported in the literature as a significant factor in motivating students with the use of various instructional strategies: providing flexible learning options (e.g., Williams, 2005), providing a meaningful rationale for tasks (e.g., Deci, Eghari, Patrick & Leone, 1994; Song & Hill, 2009; Xie, DeBacker, & Ferguson, 2006), conveying choice in instructional language (e.g., Deci et al., 1994; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Xie & Ke, 2011; Xie, 2013), and validating negative feelings students experience in association with engaging in arduous or tedious activities (e.g., Chen & Jang, 2010; Deci et al., 1994; Shroff, Vogel, & Coombes, 2008). For example, in Deci et al.'s (1994) experiment assessing the significance of autonomy in motivating students, participants were given a boring, tedious task. They were then given the option as to whether or not they wished to complete it when the researcher left the room. Forty-eight participants were exposed to three conditions (meaningful rationale, acknowledgement of the task as tedious, and perceived control/choice) in advance of the tedious task; 48 participants were exposed to two conditions; 48 were exposed to one condition; and another 48 were exposed to none. Those participants exposed to two or three of the autonomous conditions were significantly more likely to continue with the boring task, revealing the significance of these instructional strategies in motivating students.

Perceived Competence

Perceived competence involves the knowledge of expectations and the relevant skills needed to succeed (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). There are a number of instructional strategies supported in research that help to boost the perceived competence, and thus motivation, of students: balance between requirements and freedom in online discussions (e.g., Xie, 2013), clear class routines (e.g., Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008; Kuboni & Martin, 2004; Wichadee, 2014), and effective feedback (e.g., Trad et al., 2014; Xie et al., 2006; Xie, 2013). For example, Xie (2013) examined the relationships between motivation, peer feedback, and 57 students' posting and nonposting behaviors in online discussions. He tracked the posting and nonposting behaviors of students at several points in the semester and measured their motivation level with the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory. He found that when instructors motivated students by offering a balance between discussion requirements

and freedom in discussions, students engaged in more posting and nonposting behaviors than when students felt forced to participate in online discussions. Furthermore, when students received more responses from peers, they wrote longer messages and rated more messages, indicating higher levels of motivation. Xie concluded that instructors should construct their classes in such a way that it enhances students' belief in their own competence and therefore promotes their engagement in online classes.

Relatedness

Relatedness refers to students' sense of belongingness and connectedness in class. It also refers to the expression of care and respect for students by both the instructor and other students (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Strategies shown in research to support the significance of relatedness in motivating students include: collaborative activities (e.g., Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003; Kim, Glassman, & Williams, 2015), effective feedback (e.g., Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012; Trad et al., 2014; Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011), and immediacy (e.g., Christophel, 1990; Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007; Houser, Cowan & West, 2007; King & Witt, 2009). For example, Houser et al. (2007) assessed motivation levels of 329 undergraduates in a basic communication course based upon the use of nonverbal immediacy of instructors in face-to-face versus CD-ROM recorded lectures. They found that 38% of the variance in student levels of state motivation was accounted for by instructor use of nonverbal immediacy in the noninteractive CD-ROM textbook. The authors interpreted this to mean that engaging, "natural" instructors were motivating regardless of the context for delivery of lecture material.

Research Questions

Considering the strength of support for instructional strategies that foster autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness in motivating students, it is expected that such strategies will surface when students and instructors are asked about motivational factors present and desired in online courses. The purpose of this study was to examine motivational strategies reported by students and instructors in further assessing the utility of Self-Determination Theory as a pedagogical framework in teaching online courses. Therefore, the study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What strategies will faculty participants report as important in motivating students in online courses?

RQ2: What strategies will students report help to motivate them in online courses?

Because of the interest in assessing SDT as a pedagogical framework in understanding motivation in online courses, the data were coded for instances of intrinsic motivation and external regulation and for motivational strategies that fostered autonomy, perceived control, and relatedness. The methods and results will therefore be discussed in that framework.

METHODS

Participants

Upon securing institutional review board approval, students were recruited from communication classes at a medium sized Midwestern university and offered a $10 gift card in exchange for their participation. A recruitment script was read by the instructor of the class, and students listed their names and email addresses if they wished to be contacted to participate in the study. Faculty were recruited with convenience sampling. Because the IRB did not allow employees to receive gifts, faculty were not offered any incentives for participation.

All students had participated in at least one online course, and all instructors had taught at least one online course. The undergraduate participants had taken between one and 16 online courses, while the majority of them had taken four online courses (n = 7). Graduate students had taken between one and 12 online courses. Two of the instructors had taught online for one year; the remaining eight instructors had taught online for six to ten years. The majority of participants were female: 72% of the undergraduate participants, 71% of graduate participants, and 70% of instructors. Undergraduate participants ranged in age from 18 to 24, with the majority of participants aged 21 or 22 (n = 10). Graduate participants ranged in age from 22 to 31. The majority of participants were Caucasian: 67% of the undergraduates, 57% of graduate participants, and 70% of faculty. The remaining participants reported that they were African-American (17% of

undergraduates, 14% of graduate students, and 10% of faculty) or Asian (17% of undergraduates, 29% graduate participants, and 10% of faculty).

Data Collection and Analysis

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty members regarding their experiences with motivation in online courses. Due to the larger sample size of undergraduates ($n = 18$), five focus groups were conducted; groups had an average of three to four students in them. Seven graduate students were interviewed individually or in pairs. Ten faculty participants were interviewed individually.

The focus groups and interviews were conducted in a quiet, secure space to ensure comfort (e.g., an office or conference room with a closed door). Students and instructors were asked about motivation in various aspects of online courses. More specifically, students were asked about what motivates them in an online context (1) to participate in online discussions, (2) to listen intently to online lectures, and (3) to contact the instructor, study for tests, read course content, etc. They were also asked more general questions about what it is that motivates them to succeed in online courses and what instructors could do to help motivate them to engage actively. Instructors were asked the same questions from the perspective of one who is developing and teaching such courses—i.e., what sorts of things they do and could do to motivate students in the various aspects of online courses.

All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author and a research assistant. As suggested by Kvale (1996), the analysis occurred throughout the interview process—from the interviews themselves, through transcription, and into the phases of coding. Thus, the interviewer consistently searched for salient terms and experiences of participants and probed to explore them further. During transcription, the interviewer and research assistant listened for common themes and again, salient terms and experiences.

In order to explore motivation in the framework of SDT, a directed approach to content analysis was used. This approach involves a deductive use of theory and requires the use of theory to develop the coding scheme (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). According to Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, developing the coding scheme from theory involves two tasks:

1. Deduce from the theory the most important manifest characteristics; and

2. Inform coders on how to make inferences of patterns from the appearance of specific sets of manifest elements (pp. 266–267).

The coding scheme was developed with these instructions in mind, relying upon the most important variables involved in SDT (i.e., intrinsic motivation, external regulation, autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness) and the motivational strategies conveyed in research which support autonomy (i.e., flexible learning opportunities, meaningful rationale, conveying choice in instructional language, and validate negative feelings), perceived control (i.e., balance of freedom and requirements in discussions, clear classroom routines, and effective feedback), and relatedness (i.e., collaborative activities, effective feedback, and immediacy). Such variables were defined, and examples from transcripts were given when training the graduate student assistant in coding. After coding the first two transcripts, the author and assistant met to discuss disagreements or ambiguities. Although there were no disagreements in the way in which the author and assistant coded, both of them found it somewhat difficult to place any participant responses that were coded "effective feedback" with the appropriate corresponding theoretical construct. Effective feedback was an instructional strategy shown in the literature to support both perceived control and relatedness. When participants discussed the significance of effective feedback as a motivational strategy, it was not always clear whether that was due to the perception of control or due to the opportunity to build relatedness between instructor and student; this will be addressed later in the results.

Following the coding meeting, the next eight transcripts were then coded by the author and assistant. Due to extenuating circumstances, the graduate assistant was unable to code the remaining nine transcripts. However, because there was a high degree of reproducibility in coding the first ten transcripts, there was little concern with the level of reliability. Furthermore, although reproducibility is a strong test of reliability, accuracy is the strongest test of reliability in a content analysis (Potter &

Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

Accuracy is difficult to obtain because it relies upon experts to set a standard. However, Potter and Levine-Donnerstein believe that it is possible for experts to set a useful standard because they are "usually in a position to exercise a superior perspective on the content" (p. 271). Extensive reading upon SDT helped to ensure the author's familiarity with the theory. Along with the clear nature of the manifest characteristics chosen from the theory, such familiarity helped in developing a clear coding scheme. Ultimately, both helped to ensure accuracy in coding, and therefore, reliability and validity. However, Potter and Levine-Donnerstein claim that with pattern content, there is a tradeoff between reliability and validity. A researcher must either choose reductionism "where the phenomenon of interest is reduced to a set of micro rules that coders can all apply systematically and deliver high reliability" or freedom to coders, who are allowed to apply a significant degree of judgment in capturing the essence of pattern content, allowing for greater validity but reducing reliability (p. 272). This poses a potential limitation with coding. In this study, reliability was chosen in the tradeoff defined by Potter and Levine-Donnerstein. A set of micro rules was developed such that coders could apply codes systematically and clearly to achieve high reliability. This reduced the freedom of coders to capture their interpretation of the patterns in the content, which potentially affects validity. However, again, the goal in this study was to achieve reliability and validity through extensive reading upon SDT, the development of clear codes, and reproducibility of the coded transcripts between the trained graduate assistant and the author.

RESULTS

The following section reports the results. Again, data were coded for instances of intrinsic motivation and external regulation and for motivational strategies that fostered autonomy, perceived control, and relatedness. See Table 1 for the SDT constructs and corresponding motivational strategies, along with representative participant statements that illustrate the constructs.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

There was very little mention of intrinsic motivation by student or faculty participants in this study. However, grades (i.e., extrinsic motivator) were discussed as a significant motivator by both students and faculty, especially in the context of online discussions.

Intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation was not mentioned often in response to questions about what motivates students to engage in online courses. For example, in response to the question about what motivates students to succeed, no students and only two faculty members mentioned interest in the course as a potential motivator.

In the context of online discussions, intrinsic motivation was mentioned slightly more by students. Four undergraduates and one graduate student claimed interest in the specific discussion topic as a motivator. This is consistent with the small number of faculty who mentioned intrinsic motivation. Just three faculty participants discussed piquing students' interest level in order to motivate them. For example, one participant discussed choosing "meaningful topics that will encourage them to participate."

In response to the question about what motivates students to read the textbook, just one undergraduate student and four graduate students claimed being motivated to read the text if they found it interesting. Faculty did not discuss choosing interesting texts as a motivating factor.

Extrinsic motivation (external regulation).

Considering grades are used widely as the major form of motivation in compulsory education, it is not surprising that grades were discussed widely as a motivator in this study. They were mentioned most often in the context of online discussions. The grade was mentioned as a significant extrinsic motivator for both undergraduate and graduate student participation. Perhaps, due to the reinforcement of grades throughout their school careers, undergraduates accepted this as a normal part of the process and appreciated it as an "easy" way to earn points. For example, one undergraduate student claimed, "I wanted to get the best grade possible so if I could do this and get it done quick and easy, then I'm going to try to get as many points as possible."

Graduate students agree that grades are an important motivator, but interestingly, they seemed disgruntled with the use of grades as such. For example, one student claimed that "it is unfortunate that the grade is the big motivator that

Table 1. Motivational Strategies and Representative Faculty and Student Examples

Motivational Strategy	Faculty Examples	Student Examples
Intrinsic Motivation	"I try to give them readings that will grab their attention so they are more eager to participate online."	"Some topics are really interesting, and I actually want to engage and talk about it."
External Regulation	"The point system is the primary mode of motivation."	"The grade aspect is a huge motivator because discussions are worth 35% of your grade so if you don't do it, you're going to fail."
Autonomy		
Flexible learning options	"If you want to motivate people, give them that sense that they are the ultimate arbitrators of how this is going to turn out and how they're going to learn and how they're going to apply it."	"I can plan how it works for me and balance my schedule that way. The flexibility has been really nice and something that I didn't expect."
Meaningful rationale	"They [students] have to watch the video in order to understand and write the paper . . . I would talk about what to do with the paper somewhere in the middle so they had to watch it."	"I am motivated to listen because I'm trying to get a career."
Choice in language	Not referenced	Not referenced
Validate negative feelings	Not referenced	Not referenced
Perceived Competence		
Balance in discussions	Faculty had explicit guidelines but also allowed space for voice in online discussions: "I think there's a freedom for them [students] to try out ideas that I might redirect and shut down in a face-to-face environment."	Students viewed online discussions as a safe haven from judgment: "If you say something that people think is stupid in class, you can see them react to that. If you post it online, you don't see those negative or positive reactions unless someone actually writes something."
Clear class routines	"I tell them, 'Here's the structure; here's the repetition. Once you figure it out the first time, it's always going to be the same.' . . . one of the students said 'Oh my god, I can see the whole course all at once. I can see how it's all laid out. I can see what's coming up. This is really nice'."	"If it's all online, make it easily accessible, and also there has to be a structure for every week . . . structure and organization, 100% need that."
Effective feedback	"I make sure that every student gets a direct response from me."	"They [instructors] have to have ways for us to submit stuff for us to get feedback, and the feedback needs to be timely."
Relatedness		
Collaborative activities	With synchronous activity, "it is possible to develop the same kind of intimacy that you have in a face-to-face classroom setting . . . it's just more of a family to them."	"What motivates me is how I can interact with other students even though I haven't met them . . . we are always interacting, asking questions, and replying. We are getting to know one another."
Effective feedback	A round robin discussion pattern "motivates them to participate because someone will respond to them."	"When you can't reach them [instructors], that's really stressful. But when you can have that contact with them, I find that really helpful."
Immediacy	"If [students] can see you as an engaged human being, then they're much more likely to listen to you."	"I think that anonymity is important for the students. I really think that personality is important for the instructor."

keeps you on top of it where in person, I'm just a naturally conversational person so I'm not thinking about the grade." Another graduate student said:

> If I were not being graded, I would probably very rarely ever post. I just really dislike discussions. They become a very grueling process. Every time you would respond to someone it would just be "I agree" and restate everything they said.

Clearly, graduate students found this frustrating and felt they had to do "busy work" in order to achieve a high grade, and for a graduate student who is more invested in learning the material due to its instrumental value, that felt somewhat demeaning.

Overwhelmingly, faculty in this study recognized grades as a significant motivator to participate in online discussions. This may explain why faculty assigned anywhere from 15% to 40% of the final grade to discussion points. Grades were perceived as a necessary evil considering the "nature of the medium" as one participant stated. In the words of another faculty member, "you can lead them to drink, but you actually have to force them into the water sometimes because if you don't, they won't do it." Another instructor seemed as disgruntled with the system as the graduate students did: "Grades are a kind of negative reinforcement and a negative motivation."

Autonomy, Perceived Competence, and Relatedness

Autonomy.

Two instructional strategies promoting student autonomy in research (i.e., providing flexible learning options and providing a meaningful rationale) were discussed as motivating factors by students and faculty in this study. Two other strategies pertinent to promoting autonomy (i.e., conveying choice in instructional language and validating negative feelings associated with arduous or tedious tasks) were not discussed by participants in this study.

Providing flexible learning options. The online format of the course itself was perceived as a flexible learning option by both instructors and students, and they discussed it as such. For example, in response to the question about what motivates students to view online lectures, convenience was mentioned by more than half of the undergraduate and graduate students. They talked about being able to view them when and where they wished and of the convenience of multitasking while watching lectures. In addition to the convenience of time and place of viewings, students liked the ability to pause, rewind, and review lectures. For example, one student said: "In a live lecture, you don't have the ability to pause . . . I have the ability to pause in an online lecture, and I can just go back if I wasn't paying attention." One faculty participant recognized the significance of capitalizing on the convenience aspect of online lectures, stating:

> The cool thing about online learning is that the students have the power and the control over how they're going to learn . . . if you want to motivate people, give them that sense that they are the ultimate arbitrators of how this is going to turn out and how they're going to learn and how they're going to apply it.

According to this instructor, the flexibility of online learning gave students the sense of autonomy needed to be invested in their learning.

Students also recognized online courses as a flexible learning option because such courses allowed them to work on their own time and at their own pace, which accommodated their busy schedules. In fact, the vast majority of students *take* online courses because they are convenient. All undergraduate participants and five graduate participants claimed convenience as a major motivator in enrolling in online courses. As a specific example, online courses save students from commute times. "Online is fast and convenient," said one undergraduate, "especially if we live in the Cities, we don't have to drive all the way down here." In addition, students are able to maintain their jobs while taking online courses. This too makes online courses a convenient, flexible option for students. For example, one undergraduate student said, "I work a lot so any time I can just hop on and do class . . . the convenience is definitely a thing." Students in general lead busy lives and appreciated the flexibility and the fact that they did not have to meet as a class at a specific time. One graduate student claimed: "I can plan how it works for me and balance my schedule that way. The flexibility has been really nice and something that I didn't expect." Finally, an undergraduate commented upon the ability to work in such a way that fit her learning style: "In class [face-to-face] you really

can't do things ahead of time, and online you can get things done early." As a flexible learning option, instructors might consider adaptation to learning style most important.

Nine of ten faculty also recognized online classes as a flexible learning option for students. They cited the same reasons articulated by students: the ability to take online courses from a distance, maintain jobs, and accommodate schedules. One faculty participant stated: "Our students are busy . . . they are not rich by any means; they're usually supporting themselves . . . they're really juggling a lot of things: classes, work, school, and activities. They find online classes easier to fit into their lives." Another instructor pointed out how online courses allow students to accommodate to their busy schedules and be independent: "They like the independence that comes from being an online student. They like the fact that they can go to it whenever they want to." Overall, faculty discussed online courses as a flexible learning option in the same way students did, claiming that the vast majority of those that choose online do so because it fits their lifestyle.

Providing meaningful rationale. Providing a meaningful rationale for tasks is another instructional strategy that has been shown to boost motivation of students, and that was confirmed by participants in this study. For example, in response to the question about what instructors can do to motivate students in online courses, a few faculty mentioned the importance of emphasizing relevance and/or instrumental value of tasks to students. One instructor encouraged students to "post links to videos or news or web sites that maybe they believe connect to the course content" with the hope that students understand that they are "contributing to the body of knowledge." Another instructor suggested that perhaps she "could do more posting about the importance of the course and how it could help them in their career." A large majority of the faculty participants also required writing assignments pertinent to the textbook and/or pointed out the utility of the information in order to motivate students to read; this gave students meaningful rationale as a necessary incentive to do the work required.

In response to the question about what motivates students to succeed in online courses, reaching goals was mentioned by a few of the undergraduates, indicating the significance of a meaningful rationale for engaging in coursework. These students talked about being motivated to engage in their online courses in order to meet a specific graduation deadline. Although none of the graduate students claimed being motivated by such goals, four faculty participants recognized such goals as motivating factors for students. They claimed students were motivated to engage in their online courses to obtain the job or promotion they wanted, meet graduation deadlines, and avoid further tuition debt.

Relevant content (i.e., useful in succeeding on assignments and exams) was mentioned as a motivator largely in the context of online lectures—by eight faculty, eight undergraduates, and five graduate students. In fact, students often did not feel motivated to watch online lectures unless they needed to do so to obtain information to succeed on their assignments and exams. For example, one undergraduate said, "If information is going to pertain to something else, then you're going to want to know what it's about." One graduate student even admitted to not watching the online lectures due to not being held accountable for the information within them. This further points to the significance of including relevant content in lectures, because doing so provides the meaningful rationale that students need to feel motivated to view online lectures. Faculty seemed aware of this perception by students. They used relevant content in lectures, including references to assignments and exams, in order to motivate students to watch. One instructor talked about burying assignment instructions in the middle of her lectures so that students had to watch to get the instructions. Another instructor discussed the expectation that students "integrate" what they learn from lectures in their reflection papers. Other faculty discussed the direct link between what is covered in the lectures and the quizzes.

Conveying choice in instructional language. Although one instructor discussed offering alternative exams in her online course, none of the instructors discussed conveying choice in instructional language in how they frame assignment guidelines. Although one cannot conclude that the faculty participants do not convey choice in the instructional language that they *use*, the fact that it was not mentioned as a motivator has interesting implications. It may indicate that

faculty participants do not perceive a connection between choice in instructional language and motivation. Incorporating the perception of choice in their instructional language may help to motivate students at higher levels of identification and integration.

Validating negative feelings. Along with conveying choice in instructional language, validating negative feelings associated with arduous or tedious tasks was not mentioned as a motivator by participants in this study. However, the faculty participants in this study were experienced instructors who seemed to care genuinely about students and about teaching so this likely does not speak to negligence on their part but rather to the lack of recognition by both faculty and students of the validation of negative feelings as a motivational strategy.

Perceived competence.

Three instructional strategies that boost students' perceived competence (i.e., balance of requirements and freedom in discussions, clear class routines, and effective feedback) were mentioned as motivators by students and faculty in this study.

Balance of requirements and freedom in discussions. As defined in the literature, striking a balance between requirements and freedom in discussion posts is important in boosting the perceived competence of students. In other words, students appreciate clear guidelines for posting, but they also desire a platform to freely express their thoughts. In this study, faculty talked extensively about requirements, and it was apparent that they had explicit guidelines for discussions. They talked about the structure of postings, posting length, quality versus quantity, and so forth. Beyond requirements, three of the faculty participants also recognized the significance of student voice as a motivator to participate in online discussions; however, voice was discussed differently by faculty than it was amongst students. Faculty discussed the need to allow students the freedom to express their opinions; they were careful about how much they interjected in discussions so as to not silence students with their own comments. One instructor said, "I do not get in their discussions whatsoever until the end. I don't because I don't want to silence their voices." Another stated: "I think there's a freedom for them to try out ideas that I might redirect and shut down in a face-to-face environment." An additional faculty participant said, "As much as possible for online discussions, I step back. I found out the hard way early on that the more I stepped in, the more they didn't because they were waiting for what I was going to say."

Students talked differently about their freedom in the online discussion space. Faculty members seemed to want to offer a space for students to share their opinions with confidence, while students appeared more concerned with not being judged. The online discussion board offers a space for shy students and those less comfortable speaking up in class, and this was prevalent as a strong motivator for undergraduate participants as half of them commented on the sense of anonymity, while only one out of seven graduate students mentioned it. Undergraduates appreciated the freedom to post their opinions in a space in which they felt they would not be judged. One student said, "Sometimes I might recognize a name that I have in class, but most of the time, they don't know me so they can't judge me, you know?" Another expressed a similar sentiment: "If you say something that people think is stupid in class, you can see them react to that. If you post it online, you don't see those negative or positive reactions unless someone actually writes something." Another stated, "I feel more comfortable, and I feel like I can write more than I can say just because when you're in class and you can keep talking, people will be like, 'oh, that person's talking again'." One graduate student said something very similar:

> *I don't particularly know these people, and I don't see their reactions when I write something. In class, your ideas may shock someone and that might shut you down from communicating. So being able to say what you want to say. It just allows people who are shy in a classroom to break those barriers and communicate.*

It is concerning that students did not appear to see the online context as an opportunity to assert their opinions with confidence but rather viewed it as a safe haven from judgment.

Clear class routines. Clear class routines in online courses are also discussed in the literature as a strategy to boost students' perceived competence and thus to motivate them, and this is consistent

with the findings in this study. Clear structure was recognized by undergraduate participants, graduate participants, and faculty in the discussion pertaining to what instructors can do to motivate students in online courses.

The undergraduates supportive of clear structure were quite adamant about the importance of it in maintaining perceived competence. One student stated, "There's nothing that stresses me out more than if there's not a structure . . . if it's just a mess, my grades are going to fall." Other students focused on the importance of clear and consistent due dates: "There has to be that consistency of when things are due. Nothing is more frustrating than thinking something is due at a certain time and it's not." Other students also spoke of the importance of laying things out clearly from the start. For example, one student talked about wanting "the material very thoroughly laid out so [she could] see exactly what [they were] doing in the class."

Graduate students stressed a clear structure as well. One student talked about how unmotivating it was to try to engage in a course without a clear structure: "There were times that I had a class that the professor would just post everything on the page and there was no way of knowing what was really important so I became unmotivated."

Faculty also reflected on the need for structure to help students feel confident in navigating the course. For example, one instructor claimed to be "striving to identify how to streamline and find a logical path that people will be able to recognize." Another faculty participant discussed the need to "try to organize things clearly . . . so it becomes more of a predictable pattern each week."

Effective feedback. Although feedback was discussed as a motivator for students, the reason that effective feedback worked well as a motivator was not clarified. For example, in response to the question about what instructors can do to motivate, one student mentioned a professor who talked with her by phone for twenty minutes when she was confused on a course concept: "That was great that she let me personally call her over the phone. Contact is key because they don't see you in person." It is not clear if this student found this effective because the instructor helped increase the student's understanding of the concept and by default, perceived competence, or if it was because the personal act of a phone call enhanced conveyed relatedness. In any case, effective feedback was mentioned by three undergraduates and six of the seven graduate students in response to what instructors can do to motivate. But again, the reason students found that motivating was not entirely clear.

Interestingly, feedback was not discussed by any undergraduate or graduate student participants as a motivating factor for discussion participation; however, six faculty members brought it up as a way to motivate students. Most of them discussed the ability to give private feedback to students upon their discussion contributions as unique to online learning and therefore motivating to students. For example, one faculty member said:

> *I kind of look at them like mini lectures because I am giving them individual feedback on a concept that they talked about that's related to the course . . . I get really good feedback on that, like they love it. They tell me that it is worthwhile for them and they really listen to it.*

While this instructor approached giving feedback as a way to teach students in the framework of "mini lectures," another instructor clarified the significance of explaining a student's grade:

> *In my feedback, I'm very explicit as to why I took points off. So I hope that that gives them some motivation or helps them see "oh yeah, I need to go back to the syllabus and make sure I'm doing everything right."*

Again, the reason faculty perceived feedback to be motivating was not explicitly stated; however, their words suggest a desire to help students improve. In this sense, faculty perceive feedback as motivating to students because it offers guidance toward producing more quality work, which ultimately may help to boost their level of perceived competence.

Relatedness

Three instructional strategies that promote relatedness were supported as important in motivating students in this study (i.e., collaborative activities, effective feedback, and immediacy).

Collaborative activities. As aforementioned, collaboration is a strategy that instructors can use to support relatedness in motivating students, and although not discussed extensively, the findings of

this study support collaboration as a strategy as well. For example, in response to what instructors can do to motivate students, three faculty mentioned the possibility of incorporating synchronous activity. Two of them claimed it would allow for interactivity, and the remaining instructor reflected on the opportunity to build "that connection and that ground."

In the context of online discussions, two of the graduate students brought up the ability to interact with other students as a motivator for participating. One stated, "What motivates me is how I can interact with other students even though I haven't met them . . . we are always interacting, asking questions, and replying. We are getting to know one another." The other said that "being able to communicate with each other in a way we wouldn't be able to do in a classroom" was motivating. Three of the faculty participants mentioned creating small groups in their online classes in order to give students the opportunity to develop relationships and interact in a more comfortable space. One of them developed interest-based groups; another created groups based on when they entered the discussion board. The remaining faculty member created a small group in a synchronous environment because "it is possible to develop the same kind of intimacy that you have in a face-to-face classroom setting . . . it's just more of a family to them."

Effective feedback. As mentioned before, although feedback was discussed as a motivator for students, the reason that effective feedback worked well as a motivator was not clarified. One faculty member discussed using peer feedback as a motivator. She set up a round-robin discussion on her discussion board and said she believes "that motivates them to participate because someone will respond to them." Again, it is not clear if that speaks to perceived competence, relatedness, both, or neither.

Immediacy. Three faculty participants mentioned the significance of connecting with students and using immediacy to motivate them. One of them suggested the use of virtual or in-person office hours specifically devoted to a particular online course. Another mentioned the importance of reaching out to students who seemed unmotivated. The third participant discussed having a presence—through pictures posted and through clear communication and feedback to students. Two of the faculty members also discussed immediacy in the context of online lectures. One mentioned "personalizing lectures to make sure I connect with those immediacy cues." Another suggested that "if [students] can see you as an engaged human being, then they're much more likely to listen to you." Five faculty members also discussed using presence in the discussion board as a form of motivation. "I don't want my online class to be radically different from my face-to-face class where students can see me twice a week," said one instructor, "I want my online students to 'see' me too, whether it's through a video or a discussion board." Another participant shared how she participated in the class discussions in order to motivate her students to continue the conversation: "I will give them positive reinforcement or I'll challenge them . . . just participate in that discussion myself."

Six graduate student participants commented upon immediacy as an important motivating factor. Two of them suggested immediacy behaviors help instructors and students to connect and build relationships. For example, one student said, "I think putting the face with the context is awesome to do—so you can reach out and feel like you can reach out." Another student suggested posting videos "where I can get a feel that I am actually having a kind of face-to-face conversation and she is actually there." The other graduate students discussed immediacy behaviors only in the context of feedback. In some cases, due to bad experiences, such students had strong convictions regarding the delivery of feedback; they felt it crucial that feedback be delivered in a respectful and constructive manner. Students recognized the difficulty of this in an online course in which nonverbal communication was absent. For example, one student said, "You don't have nonverbals so it's really easy to feel like a professor is being condescending or disrespectful when you don't have that face-to-face interaction." Students in such situations were adamant that the "respect element is definitely important."

In response to what instructors can do to motivate students, twelve of the eighteen undergraduate students mentioned immediacy factors to build relationships. Some participants desired opportunities to "see" their professors and classmates and to interact with them. Students made suggestions to help in building those relationships:

face-to-face meetings, Skype opportunities, an interactive presence by the professor, and study groups with classmates. For example, one student said: "My Gender Studies professor almost participated in the class with us, and it was great. She was there." Yet, students did not always feel that a two-way relationship was necessary. They wanted to know their professors well, but they did not always feel as if they wanted to be known. One student said, "I think that anonymity is important for the students. I really think that personality is important for the instructor." Part of the attractive nature of online courses is the fact that students can remain somewhat anonymous; however, it is clear that they do not want their instructors to be anonymous.

DISCUSSION

As discussed in the Results, this study reveals the utility of Self-Determination Theory in aiding contemporary scholars in understanding the particular needs of online learners and the distinct challenges for today's teachers. Not surprisingly, there was little emphasis upon intrinsic motivation and a fairly significant emphasis by participants in this study on external regulation in the form of grades. However, there were also strategies mentioned by participants that albeit extrinsic, were forms that motivate students at integration and identification levels. For example, two instructional strategies promoting student autonomy in research (i.e., providing flexible learning options and providing a meaningful rationale) were discussed as motivating factors by students and faculty in this study. Both students and faculty perceived online classes as able to fit into students' busy lifestyles and potentially their learning styles; in this way, online classes provided flexible learning options. Students and faculty in this study also emphasized the significance of relevant content and instrumental value (i.e., important in meeting graduation or career goals) in promoting autonomy and ultimately motivating students in online settings.

In addition to strategies that support student autonomy, three instructional strategies that boost students' perceived competence (i.e., balance of requirements and freedom in discussions, clear class routines, and effective feedback) were also perceived to be motivators by students and faculty in this study. For example, faculty talked extensively of length and quality requirements for online discussion posts, but they were also concerned about allowing students to express their opinions freely during discussions. This balance helped to boost students' perceived competence. Additionally, both faculty and students emphasized the importance of a clearly designed course site because it helped students to feel confident as they navigated through the course. Furthermore, effective feedback was mentioned as an important motivator, especially by students. However, it was not clear whether this was due to perceived competence or to relatedness.

Finally, three instructional strategies that promote relatedness were believed to motivate students (i.e., collaborative activities, effective feedback, and immediacy). Although not discussed as a motivational strategy used often, faculty and students discussed collaborations such as synchronous activity, interaction with classmates, and small groups as motivating because they helped to build a classroom community. Again, effective feedback was discussed as well, but it was not clear whether this motivated students because it boosted their perceived competence or helped to promote relatedness, or both. Immediacy was also discussed as a motivator; faculty and students mentioned the utility of virtual or in-person office hours, instructor presence through pictures, synchronous opportunities, and/or video posts, and personalized lectures in helping instructors to connect with their students. Together, all of these findings show that it is useful for instructors to be intentional about using SDT as a framework for motivating students in online communication courses.

Despite the support for SDT as a theoretical framework, it is somewhat disconcerting that there was very little discussion of intrinsic motivation by participants in this study. Perhaps the lack of mention speaks to the impact of the traditional school structure upon students. Young children are naturally curious; they ask questions and explore for the sake of the pure joy in learning. However, once children enter the traditional school system, the intrinsic value of learning seems to diminish. Students are asked to complete worksheets and take tests and to cater to specific parameters in their learning journey. The focus shifts to grades (external motivator), and students experience a lack

of freedom in exploring their own pursuits. In other words, the intrinsic value of learning is replaced with external regulation, and again, it is not surprising that intrinsic motivation was mentioned very little by students or faculty in this study.

The student and instructor focus upon grades in this study, especially in the context of online discussions, is consistent with previous research. For example, An, Shin, and Lim (2009) found that when peer interaction was not a requirement in an online environment, voluntary interactions among students rarely occurred. Rovai (2003, 2007) also assessed the benefits of graded discussions on learning outcomes and found a significant increase in the number of student messages per week in courses in which discussions accounted for at least 10% of the course grade (compared to courses with ungraded discussions). Along with the results of the present study, these findings suggest that students are motivated to participate if their grade depends upon it; therefore, external regulation works as a motivator. However, for students to be truly engaged and motivated at levels of identification and integration, instructors must use the strategies that foster autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness, as suggested in SDT, and there were a number of strategies discussed by participants in this study that fostered all three. It is also interesting to note that there are strategies found in research that foster these basic human needs that were *not* mentioned by participants in this study.

There are two strategies pertinent to promoting autonomy in the extant literature (i.e., conveying choice in instructional language and validating negative feelings associated with arduous or tedious tasks) that were not discussed by participants in this study. This poses a challenge for instructors. It begs the question, in what ways are instructors communicating in order to motivate students to engage at identification and integration levels in online courses? For example, it would be prudent to consider whether assignment instructions are framed in such a way that choice is conveyed and a meaningful rationale is provided. In other words, one might examine whether one's instructions are stated as "X is *required*" or as "X will give students the *opportunity to achieve* Y, to *build skills* in Y, or to help them *better understand* Y." One might also consider other pedagogical approaches to conveying choice and providing meaning for students. Beyond clarifying for students how the material will help them to reach career goals, instructors could allow students to come to such conclusions on their own. One might consider the Freirean notion of problem-posing for example, in which a teacher poses thought-provoking, open-ended problems, and students and teachers analyze the problem together (Shor, 1992). This may only be truly useful in a synchronous online discussion, but problem-posing sends the message to students that their participation is expected and needed (Shor, 1987).

Furthermore, instructors of online courses must consider the extent to which they acknowledge students' negative feelings associated with arduous and tedious tasks and the ways in which they deliver feedback to students. There are tools in online courses that are particularly conducive to offering empathy to students—individual messages, video messages to the class, or synchronous meetings, for example.

It would also be prudent to explore how communication can be used most effectively to boost the perceived competence of students and to build relatedness in online courses. To do so, instructors might consider the language they are using to build democratic classrooms and to give students the desire to express their voices, especially considering the surprising finding in this study pertaining to students' reticence and fear of being judged in traditional classroom discussions. The results of this study suggest that instructors should also continue to practice verbal restraint, allowing students time and space to engage in discussion without instructor interruption (Shor, 1987; Shor, 1992).

Finally, it seems especially pertinent that scholars continue to explore how to use immediacy most effectively in the online environment to build relatedness. Research shows the need for such an exploration. For example, in assessing perceptions of social presence (which is conceptually similar to relatedness) Mathieson and Leafman (2014) found that students perceived messages in the learning management system to be more impersonal than instructors perceived them and that students were less comfortable interacting with other course participants. Building relatedness is a challenge for online instructors. However, with advancements in technology, instructors may be more immediate. For

example, Drouin, Hile, Vartanian, and Webb (2013) found that students preferred richer online lecture formats (i.e., audio and video with slides versus lecture notes or just slides). Others have vouched for the utility of asynchronous videos (Griffiths & Graham, 2010) and social media tools outside of the learning management system (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007) for building immediacy. Further exploration is warranted.

In the end, it is reassuring to know that instructors have skills and expertise that may help to motivate students at the highest possible levels of extrinsic motivation according to Self-Determination Theory—integration and identification. The communication skills of instructors provide them with the opportunity to construct their online courses in such a way so as to maximize student motivation; this was evident in the recognition of instructional strategies associated with SDT by faculty and student participants in this study. In addition, further exploration by scholars regarding instructional strategies which promote autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness may ultimately benefit students and instructors across many disciplines.

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