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The correct mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in online learning

What are the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation? How to best combine them with online learning?

To achieve its objectives, e-Learning training must generate interest in the learner, involving him/her in a deep and lasting way.

In the first instance, the involvement of learners can be measured with the rates of access to the course and completion of the training, but let's go deeper and ask ourselves: "Do students appreciate the course and acquire new skills? Is the quality of training such as to justify the learner's effort? If the answer is no, we probably did not give them the motivation they need".

Motivation is the driver of behavior. If we are not motivated to follow a course we do not follow it or, in case we are obliged, we follow it badly.
There are two types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

The first is supported by external reinforcements (prizes, money, benefits, awards, avoidance of unpleasant consequences). "In terms of business learning, students may not appreciate the process of learning new concepts, but the prospect of an increase in salary pushes them to continue".

The second leads to undertaking an intrinsically motivating activity: the individual engages in an activity because he enjoys it, he/she feels challenged, he/she feels fulfilled or understands it satisfies his/her curiosity. In this case, we have a genuine desire to carry on the task, not influenced by prizes or external punishments.
In learning, intrinsic motivation leads to better and longer lasting results. Unfortunately it is not so simple to let our students appreciate our courses, so much so that most online trainers aim to activate only extrinsic motivation, which is less complicated to activate.

In an experiment, the psychologist Edward Deci monitored 24 students engaged in a recreational activity. The students were divided into 2 groups and each group solved 3 puzzles in 3 sessions. During the second session, the test group was paid one dollar for each puzzle solved, while the control group received no financial reward.
The results? Given the opportunity to take a break, the participants in the control group would continue to enjoy playing, for their pure enjoyment. The test group, on the other hand, stopped playing as soon as the monetary reward was missing. Thus, these results show that even if the game were equally engaging, the addition of an extrinsic reward reduces intrinsic motivation.

Extrinsic motivation in online learning

In the last twenty years, training has taken the challenge of student involvement more seriously: this has led to an explosion in innovative solutions by learning technology providers, introducing concepts such as gamification.
Several studies show that game mechanics (such as badges, levels and rankings) have a positive impact on students' commitment to completing a course. However, critical opinions are not lacking: some argue that gamification only creates extrinsic motivation. According to them, students are pushed to complete the task in view of a recognition, not for the satisfaction given by the acquisition of new knowledge and skills and this can not sustain a long-term commitment

Gamification can be a powerful motivator, but only when it is used as part of a solid engagement strategy.

If a gamification initiative fails to give results, it may be due to the lack of consideration of the needs of the organization and of the students: there is not a good connection between extrinsic benefits (rankings) and intrinsic advantage (eg personal satisfaction).
Without meanings gamification is little more than a virtual recognition; to build effective gamification, the student must be immersed in a narration built on the basis of company values, a narrative that involves him/her using the principles of

organizational culture that he/she knows and accepts and that ties him/her to his/her company.
"Meaningful input ensures that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation complement each other and work in harmony to support engagement and encourage behavior change, for example, simple virtual recognition will not push students to share their knowledge. If the learning platform celebrates these behaviors and underlines the impact that an individual's knowledge can have on the whole organization, the students will be involved, they will become the authors of the training program".

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