

Book Review

Motivating and Retaining Online Students: Research-Based Strategies That Work

Peggy Ann Everett¹

Citation: Lehman, R. M., & Conceição, S. O. (2014). *Motivating and retaining online students: research-based strategies that work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley brand. ISBN: 978-1-118-53170-9

Publisher's Description: Finally, the first research-based book of sound strategies and best practices to help instructors motivate students to complete their online courses.

Although studies support the effectiveness of learning online, students often fail to complete online courses. Some studies have found that as many as 50–70% drop out of their online courses or programs. Retention is not only a growing expectation and imperative, but it is also an opportunity for faculty members to take the lead in innovating, researching, and implementing new strategies while demonstrating their effectiveness.

Designed for instructors and instructional designers, *Motivating and Retaining Online Students* is filled with empirical research from the authors' study of motivation and retention strategies that can reduce online learner dropout. Focusing on the most important issues instructors face, such as course design; student engagement and motivation; and institutional, instructional, and informal student support strategies, the book provides effective online strategies that help minimize student dropout, increase student retention, and support student learning.

While helping to improve the overall retention rates for educational institutions, the strategies outlined in the book also allow for student diversity and individual learner differences. Lehman and Conceição's proven model gives instructors an effective approach to help students persist in online courses and succeed as learners.

The demand for online education keeps growing. It was once seen as a lesser form of education, but there are some who want to offer online classes that are on par with face-to-face classes. Just how to do that well is the question. Teaching online courses frustrates many facilitators whether just beginning or seasoned veterans of the field. Communicating dialogue and taking students through learning exercise in the virtual world leaves something left to be desired for many.

Lehman and Conceição gathered extensive data to compile their third book together. Between the two, the authors have decades of experience in the field and offer what comes across as genuinely helpful, well researched explanations and suggestions in taking a student-centered approach to teaching online courses. They detail why students are successful (or not so

¹ Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666

successful) in online learning. The first of five chapters explain why online education is a growing field and gives new ways of looking at learning as well as the changing characteristics of the typical student. They clarify that many online students are nontraditional and have other obligations like work and family (Lehman & Conceição, 2014, p. 2). Many students do not do well, or feel like they will not do well, in an online learning environment. The authors explain this tendency towards self-fulfilling prophesy, concerns for student retention in an online setting, and reasons students leave classes as well. Juxtaposing these ideas, the authors then explain why some students succeed in online classes and what characteristics these students exhibit. The second chapter offers strategies for designing courses. This chapter focuses on motivation and finding out about learner needs. When the facilitator builds motivating learning activities into the course, students are able to reward themselves in completing one activity, and inertia propels them to subsequent learning activities. Chapter three examines motivating students. It focuses on self-motivation. One particular point the authors make in this chapter stood out to me. They explain that self-efficacy is a key to student success in online learning environments and offer ways in which instructors may incorporate the strategies into their course designs. The authors suggest a scavenger hunt during orientation to familiarize students with the online experience as well as the learning management system (Lehman & Conceição, 2014, pp. 40-41). This is something that can be easily incorporated into courses regardless of the course content. The fourth chapter details supporting students through Human Resources, institutional support, and self-care. The fifth chapter is more of a summary chapter and attempts to pull all the strategies given together.

In addition to the Glossary, the book includes two appendices. The first supplemental text is a survey for students while the second is for the instructor. The student survey is overtly lengthy and students, especially undergraduate students, may be intimidated by the length. This could cause some students anxiety, or instructors may receive partial data. If a learning needs and resource assessment is to be given in a class, instructors should probably tailor it to the class rather than relying heavily on the one included in this text. The second supplemental text, the instructor's survey, is much shorter and probably more helpful. This reinforces the implementation of the strategies given in the text into the course design.

Lehman and Conceição take a straightforward approach. The text is written in accessible language, the charts are clearly explained, and the suggestions in course design are helpful. They explain the problem, how we should address that problem, and give solid evidence on how their approaches work. The research is well-founded, and the strategies are sound. In a second edition, Lehman and Conceição may want to consider addressing issues or strategies concerning cheating or plagiarism in online courses. This seems to be a constant concern for online instructors. They could include information on the accessibility of internet/computers to students, especially low socioeconomic status students who may not have access to either in the home or within a reasonable distance. Some students may take an online course expecting to complete it on a smart phone, commuting to campus, or going to a public library for resources. This may lead to concerns about deadlines or even basic course information. Lastly, an additional supplemental text, like a basic timeline, outline, or calendar for six-, eight-, and sixteen-week courses may help students and instructors immensely. Organization remains key to doing well in online learning. Overall, the text contains useful suggestions for improvement in the field of online learning. The last thing busy instructors need is a long, drawn out text. Nothing in this book is superfluous, and it can be read in a relatively short timeframe, a good investment for a busy profession.