Unlocking Academic Success: How The JD-R Model Can Help Overcome Perceived Challenges of Online Learning

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The pandemic continues to reshape traditional learning environments with 189 out of the world's top 200 universities moving a portion of their teaching online at the height of the pandemic, which has become the 'new norm'. While once a reactionary necessity, both academics and students alike have discovered the benefits of engaging in purpose-built, pedagogically sound and well-supported online courses. It also became quickly apparent that online learning cannot simply be a carbon copy of face-to-face lectures as it requires an intentional skillset, a supportive infrastructure with integrated technologies, as well as an understanding of the psychological factors that optimise online learning and learner engagement.

While online learning offers the advantage of convenience and accessibility to working professionals, it can present unique challenges for individuals, such as online distractions, learner isolation, and a perceived lack of social support, which may impact on the learner's overall experience. Fortunately, in the business environment, the Job Demand-Resource (JD-R) model provides a valuable framework for understanding how job demands and resources affect individual's well-being and job performance outcomes, which we propose can also be applied to the context of online learning.

At the heart of the JD-R model lies a fundamental idea: the workload *demands* (which can come in the form of physical and/or psychological stressors) and available *resources* (i.e., autonomy, social support and opportunities for moving outside ones comfort zone) that individuals balance on a daily basis can make or break a learner's level of motivation and engagement. In other words, identify factors that may negatively impact the learner experience (these are the *demands*) and integrate positive opportunities to negate those potential negative impacts (known as the *resources*). Thus, in this article, we will tease out how the JD-R model can help learners overcome three perceived challenges associated with online learning – social isolation, self-motivation, and technological distractions - and unlock greater academic success.

Creating opportunities for learner interaction

One of the perceived challenges of online learning is the risk of a lack social support and opportunities to build rapport with faculty and students, who typically provide access to a wealth of industry knowledge, as well as a diversity in perspective. This perceived lack of social support can be a significant source of stress, as they experience a sense of isolation, and can impact a learner's well-being and academic performance. This can be especially challenging for learners who thrive in a social learning environment.

A way to mitigate the risk of isolation is by providing learners with access to supportive online communities, which can aid in their wellbeing and academic success – both formally and informally. Formally, this might include ease of access to learner support services, as well as academic skills services, online forum hubs, communities of practice, *interactive* webinars, and tapping into online events (e.g., industry presentations); while informally, this might include student-led WhatsApp groups (or similar) - all of which must be cultured by a psychologically safe environment. Building communities, through multiple avenues, offers learners the opportunities to engage with a like-minded audience that helps to foster a sense of belonging, which, in turn, enhances learner engagement and academic success.

Unlocking learner motivation and self-regulation

Another perceived challenge of online learning is the need for self-motivation and self-regulation. Online learners should generally be self-directed and take responsibility for their learning, which can be challenging for some individuals. To address this challenge, faculty can provide students with opportunities for autonomy and self-directed learning, such as allowing them to choose which type of interactive activity would more greatly enhance their understanding of the content and/or providing opportunities for personalised learning. At a minimum, providing learners with timely feedback and pragmatic support can help to keep them motivated and engaged in their learning journey.

"How do I look?"

As the use of videoconferencing platforms have become ubiquitous tools for online education; these platforms also introduce new challenges, including the, often overlooked, impact of self-evaluation increasing the learner's cognitive load. Let us explain....

Remember the viral video of Professor Robert Kelly's live TV political interview that was gate-crashed by his family? While it is relatively easy to remain anonymous within the context of in-person classes, online learners may feel pressured to be visible – by turning their cameras on. While having increased visibility immediately improves communication (especially through non-verbal cues) and collaboration, it also means that learners are more aware of how they appear on camera. By looking into a virtual mirror, many of us start to adjust our posture, become mindful of our facial expressions and are conscious of whether the audience will recognise we are actually multi-tasking! This increased visibility can lead to self-consciousness and a heightened awareness of one's performance, which in turn, can lead to cognitive overload impacting a learners attention span.

Cognitive load theory is a theoretical framework in psychology that describes how the limited capacity of working memory affects the processing of new information and influences learning. Put simply, individuals tend to self-evaluate when watching themselves on screen because they can see themselves from an external perspective. Additionally, watching oneself on screen may trigger feelings of self-undermining behaviour or anxiety, leading to increased self-evaluation and impacting their overall cognitive load. Even the design of videoconferencing tools themselves can also contribute to cognitive overload.

Using screen sharing, chats, and virtual backgrounds can be helpful during online learning, however shifting the learner's attention between these tools can be overwhelming. Learners are constantly

engaged, both consciously and subconsciously, which can lead to cognitive overload. To combat this, learners can reflect on their progress, set goals, take ownership of their learning experience, and celebrate their progress along the way. These strategies can help replenish their energy and keep them motivated throughout their online learning journey.

Conclusion

Online learning has become increasingly prevalent, and the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend. The shift to online learning has brought about numerous challenges for learners, including isolation, a perceived lack of social support and virtual distractions. However, the JD-R theory provides a novel perspective for the way in which education providers can pre-empt the potential negative impacts of online learning and integrate positive opportunities to buffer against these negative impacts to dramatically increase learner engagement, motivation and, ultimately unlock greater academic success.
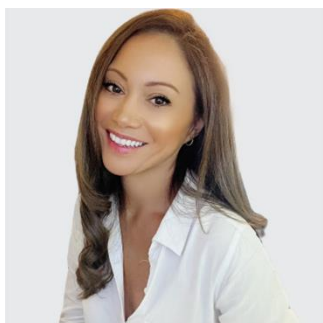
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