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Adding Some TEC-VARIETY to Online Teaching and Learning

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- [January 9, 2013](#)
- Posted in: [Engagement and Motivation](#), [Student Engagement](#)



Guest Contributor [Curtis J. Bonk](#), [Indiana University](#).

Seeking ideas for engaging learners in your online course? Today, [Engage 2013 conference](#) presenter [Curtis J. Bonk](#) shares his series of ten motivational principles, organized according to a helpful mnemonic device: “TEC-VARIETY.”

What challenges have you faced, and resolved, in motivating online learners? Post your ideas, questions, or below, or send them to us at thinktank@cengage.com.

With my “TravelinEdMan” moniker attached to my blog and Twitter feeds, friends and colleagues often ask me where in the world I am. Well, from late 2004 to early 2007, I was often found in the UK. During one such trip in March 2005, my good friend, Professor John Stephenson at Middlesex University, asked me to speak at his university on the north side of London. I asked him what on and he replied, “perhaps something related to interactive and motivational strategies for online learning.” While I had given hundreds of e-learning and blended learning talks before, it was the first time that I had a specific request related to online motivation. But soon I had another and then another and still another from all over the UK.

I had so many such requests that after my session at Middlesex, I had to hop on a train the next day and give that same talk on online motivational strategies at Coventry University in the Midlands which my colleagues Andy Syson and Jim Hensman had arranged. The following day, I boarded another train and headed up to lovely Edinburgh, Scotland where, a few minutes after arriving, I had a stunning view of the city and port from a beautiful old administration building in the Craighouse Campus of Napier University. There, too, I demonstrated dozens of online motivation examples to their faculty and instructional support staff. While I wanted to have an extended stay in Edinburgh, I soon found myself back in a train and traveling further north to the “Silver City” where spoke at the University of Aberdeen. When done, I explored several stunning buildings on the Aberdeen campus that dated back to the Middle Ages.

At each stop, I asked people like John, Andy, and Jim why was there all this interest in online motivation. Many reasons, they responded. First of all, universities in the UK were being rated, in part, for their course completion rates. Once ranked, it made a difference in government funding. High student attrition rates resulted in lower government support. Keep in mind, however, that these were still the early days for online and blended learning, not only in the UK but around the planet.

Fast forward nearly eight years. Since 2005, online learning has been embraced here in North America by educational leaders like Arnie Duncan, technology philanthropists like Bill Gates, talk show hosts like Oprah Winfrey, sports celebrities like Shaquille O’Neal, career politicians like Jeb Bush and Al Gore, and former military leaders like Colin Powell. Small wonder there are now many millions of online learners in higher education in the United States alone. Adding to the media hype machine is the sudden emergence of massive open online courses (MOOCs) with tens or even hundreds of thousands of learners in a single course. Unfortunately, it is rare for more than 10 or 20 percent of those enrolled in such courses to complete them. Retention and motivation seems to be the issue of the day not just in the UK, but right here in the USA!

Might MOOC pioneers and other online and blended learning instructors need ideas and examples for motivating their online learners? I think so. Since that first online motivation talk in London in 2005, I have been working on a framework for motivation and retention online called “TEC-VARIETY.” Keep in mind that when I was at Middlesex, Coventry, Napier, and Aberdeen, I rattled off a barrage of motivational problems and possible learning technology solutions. Unfortunately, I doubt that few of my ideas stuck with the audience once they left the session. I gave them no guidelines or caveats. And there was no mnemonic or framework to support them.

In response to this issue, each letter of TEC-VARIETY stands for one or more motivational principles. Each principle is based on decades of research from dozens of the foremost psychologists and scholars in the field. Suffice to say, I have given countless talks on this model during the past few years and it seems to resonate with every audience, be they college instructors, instructional designers, technology administrators, corporate or military trainers, K-12 educators, or graduate students. In fact, the feedback has been so positive that I decided to write a book on it, which I plan to give away as a free PDF document sometime during 2013 and sell cheaply in hardcover as well as for the Kindle using Amazon's CreateSpace. I am nearly done with the book project and promise to make a few of the chapters available to those who attend my talk at the [SXSWedu Conference](#) in Austin on March 6th (see [Engage 2013](#) for details).

When completed, the book will have 100+ activities or 10 for each motivation principle. The degree of risk, time, and cost as well as caveats and guidelines will be detailed for each strategy mentioned in the book. Listed below are the motivational principles addressed by TEC-VARIETY.

1. **Tone/Climate:** Psych Safety, Comfort, Belonging
2. **Encouragement:** Feedback, Responsive, Supports
3. **Curiosity:** Fun, Fantasy, Control
4. **Variety:** Novelty, Intrigue, Unknowns
5. **Autonomy:** Choice, Flexibility, Opportunities
6. **Relevance:** Meaningful, Authentic, Interesting
7. **Interactive:** Collaborative, Team-Based, Community
8. **Engagement:** Effort, Involvement, Excitement
9. **Tension:** Challenge, Dissonance, Controversy
10. **Yields:** Goal Driven, Products, Success, Ownership

I should point out that the TEC-VARIETY framework represents more than two decades of my research, teaching, and general exploration into Web-based learning environments. It is my hope that the model can enhance the quality of online learning while elevating learner motivation to new heights. See what you think. And if you stop by my session in Austin, be sure to say hello and ask for some TEC-VARIETY.

Curt Bonk is Professor of [Instructional Systems Technology](#) in the [School of Education](#) at Indiana University and adjunct in the [School of Informatics](#). His most recent book, [The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education](#), was published by Jossey-Bass/Wiley. He blogs at [TravelinEdMan](#).

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