ADDING SOME TEC-VARIETY

100+ Activities for Motivating and Retaining Learners Online



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CHAPTER TWO

ONLINE LEARNING ATTRITION AND RETENTION

Theory to Practice

I didn't fail the test, I just found 100 ways to do it wrong.

—Benjamin Franklin

Background

We remember growing up in the 1970s and 1980s when the norm was to try to get into college or university after high school so you could find a good job and eventually attain a productive and well-respected career. Competition to get the best grades was fierce. Many of our friends wanted to attend the most prestigious universities. "Correspondence courses" (as distance learning was called back then) were viewed as the poor cousin to the more traditional campus-based courses. Fueling such attitudes, the correspondence courses offered were often clerical, administrative, or semivocational in nature.

This situation did not deter the millions of correspondence learners brave enough to give it a go, including Bonk, who enrolled in a couple of television and correspondence courses in the mid-1980s prior to entering graduate school. Bonk formed a personal bond with his designated course instructor, Dr. Robert Clasen of the University of Wisconsin, and as a result, he fairly quickly completed each of these courses. A few

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months later, Professor Clasen hired him to help with a new television course on critical thinking shortly after he arrived at the University of Wisconsin for graduate school.

Near the end of that decade, Khoo's good friend, Jamie, took up the challenge of learning through correspondence after she and Khoo had completed high school. Not being academically inclined, Jamie signed up for a clerical course via correspondence. Within a few weeks, she was sent her first few packages of manuals, instructions, and assignments via the postal service. She would complete her assigned tasks, mail them back, and get the next lot of assignments. This went on for about 10 months. Early enthusiasm with the course and materials eventually turned to despair.

Her lament? Jamie felt that she was mostly on her own throughout this course. Unlike Bonk's experience, there was no one to support or help her when she had questions. She received written feedback every couple of months upon submitting her work. In between, she was basically in isolation. And as the material became more difficult, Jamie's anxieties increased. Soon she quit. The process was just too hard. Jamie's story is typical of the early distance learning scenario. Of course, there were many highly visible success stories like Bonk's who, coincidentally, would likely not have authored this book had he not had access to such distance learning courses. Nevertheless, a majority of folks found it too frustrating to sustain the motivation to chug on alone in such courses.

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century. Today's distance educators have a multitude of choices when it comes to selecting from available communicative technological tools to enhance their teaching or training practices and support their students' learning. Unlike Jamie's learning options, technology resources have expanded to include podcasted lectures, mobile flashcards, expert blog posts, wiki-based multimedia course glossaries, YouTube video lectures and expert demonstrations, course announcements and reminders in Twitter, and other vast information networks contributed by people around the planet (e.g., Wikipedia). With these new means to foster learner interaction, collaboration, engagement, and personal study, schools, universities, and corporate training departments worldwide have embraced the culture and fervor surrounding Web-based distance learning. There is now wide recognition and elevated status accorded to online courses and programs in a range of academic disciplines that are either offered entirely online or use different forms of blended learning to supplement current F2F programs.

Consider current statistics. We increasingly hear reports on how the number of students and corporate employees attracted to the potential of open, flexible, and distance learning options continues to accelerate. By 2011, the worldwide expenditures for e-learning services and products amounted to over \$35.6 billion. Equally astounding, it was forecasted to grow at a 7.6 percent five year compound annual growth rate, thereby reaching nearly \$51.5 billion by 2016. Double-digit five year growth forecasts (from 2011 to 2016) for online learning are estimated for the top two fastest growing markets, namely, Asia (at 17.3 percent), and Eastern Europe (at 16.9 percent). The US market alone was expected to hit \$27.2 billion by 2016 (Ambient Insight, 2012).

Online student numbers rose significantly since the start of the century. As of August 2012, there were more than 30 million online higher education students worldwide who took one or more of their classes online. Over half were in the United States (Ambient Insight, 2013). Forty percent of these students view online learning components as essential to their learning experience (Blackboard K–12, 2011). In 2011, over 320,000 primary

and secondary school students in the United States were found to attend a virtual school. The fastest growing sector of online learning, in fact, was the PreK–12 market which has been growing at a rate of nearly 17 percent. In fact, it has been projected that a whopping 17 million K–12 students in the United States will be taking at least one online course by 2015 (Ambient Insight, 2011).

A national survey from the Sloan Consortium on online learning in 2010 indicated that there were 5.6 million college students enrolled in at least one online course in the fall of 2009 (Allen & Seaman, 2010b). This figure increased to over 7 million by 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The 2014 report from Allen and Seaman revealed that more than one-third of all college and university students were taking at least one online course. Perhaps most impressive was the 12.7 percent growth rate for online enrollments from 2008 to 2013 which far exceeded the paltry 3.1 percent enrollment growth rate for higher education overall.

Such news keeps coming. Late in the summer of 2011, a massive open online course (MOOC) offered by two of the world's leading artificial intelligent researchers from Stanford University drew more than 100,000 students (Markoff, 2011). In early 2012, MOOC providers like Coursera, edX, and Udacity sprang forth to offer these new types of online courses. By August of that year, Coursera enrolled more than a million learners from nearly 200 countries. Students in a single MOOC can come from hundreds of countries (Koller, Ng, Do, & Chen, 2013). Such figures signal that the radical growth of online learning is likely to increase dramatically in the coming decades.

Commonly cited reasons for enrolling in Web-based learning include the flexibility of learning across time, distance, and space. Another factor typically mentioned is an opportunity for empowerment and autonomy with the wide array of learning options and choices at one's fingertips. With online learning, students enjoy enhanced personalization and a sense of control or ability to take charge of what they need to learn. Other reasons include a personal desire to explore knowledge and ideas, the ability to network globally with peers and exchange ideas with like-minded others, and a chance to satisfy one's curiosity. At the K–12 level, the reasons range widely from needing remedial courses to wanting to take advanced coursework, to needing classwork while on an extended stay in the hospital, to being homeschooled, whether by choice or because of pregnancy, bullying, or other issues (Bonk, 2009a).

A Chink in the Online Learning Armor

In tandem with the development of new communicative technologies in the distance learning arena come concerns for effective instructional design and pedagogies to ensure that students are effectively learning the content. During the past two decades, online learning researchers and educators around the world have voiced loud concerns about innumerable problems in online pedagogy. In Australia alone, there are dozens of books and research reports from established online learning pioneers like John Hedberg, Gilly Salmon, Jan Herrington, Catherine McLoughlin, and Ron Oliver who are highly critical and cautious about the state of online pedagogy.

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A major concern, not just in Australia but around the planet, is with the lackluster and disconcerting news of low online learner completion rates. We are confronted with headlines screaming, "Online and Incomplete" (Jaschik, 2011), "Online Learning Facing 80% Attrition Rates" (Flood, 2002), "Preventing Online Dropouts: Does Anything Work?" (Parry, 2010), and "100 Pounds of Potatoes in a 25-Pound Sack: Stress, Frustration, and Learning in the Virtual Classroom" (Mello, 2002). Such reports reveal a chink in the online learning armor, echoing the same story of frustrated and bored distance learners living Jamie's experience all over again. Unfortunately, many educators become so enamored by every new wave of learning technology that each is adopted in superficial ways akin to "gift wrapping" old wine in new bottles (Fischer, 2003). A report in early 2014, however, found that four in ten academic leaders in higher education settings in the United States felt that it was more difficult to retain online learning students than F2F students (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Kolowich, 2014).

Such concerns are not without merit. Online learners, in fact, are reported to have higher noncompletion, withdrawal, or drop-out rates (i.e., attrition) compared to their counterparts taking F2F campus-based courses (Park, 2007; Phipps & Merisotis, 2000). A survey by Jaggars and Xu (2010) among two-year community college students found that students enrolled in purely online courses fare worse than their contemporaries enrolled in hybrid and F2F courses on campus. The noncompletion rate for these fully online students was estimated to be 10–15 percent higher than the rate among students in hybrid and F2F contexts (Xu & Jaggars, 2011). Similarly, Cellilo (n.d.) reported dropout figures amounting to 30 percent in online classes compared to the 10–15 percent drop-out rates experienced in traditional classes.

The numbers are often even worse in the corporate world. In the early years of Webbased instruction, drop-out rates in the online training world ranged dramatically from about 10–20 percent (Frankola, 2001b) to well over 50 percent and perhaps as high as 80 percent (Bonk, 2002; Flood, 2002; Ganzel, 2001).

Fast-forward a decade and the retention news is even more depressing; at least for the latest distance learning phenomena—MOOCs (Kolowich, 2014). Drop-out rates for MOOCs often exceed 90 percent. In fact, MOOC completion rates of a mere 5 percent are not uncommon (Koller et al., 2013). As an example, in a course on bioelectricity at Duke University in the fall of 2012, nearly 13,000 people signed up but only 350 participants, or less than 3 percent, completed it (Rivard, 2013). Although the course introduction video was viewed 8,000 times, most of those enrolled did not watch more than one or two instructor lectures and even fewer took the course quizzes. Such numbers are not atypical.

A key question, then, is how to get those enrolled in MOOCs, or any type of online course, to stay beyond the first week or two. A decade ago, a study at the U.K. Open University (Simpson, 2004) revealed that only the more confident distance students completed assignments at any stage of their study. Such research suggests that it is critical to extensively support novice online learners in the early stages of such a course. As part of that support, MOOC participants, and perhaps all online learners, need to feel connected or part of a learning community where their questions and concerns can be addressed. Hence, there are often local meet-up or study groups that get together or interact in physical or online settings to discuss their course progression. Given the pro-

jected increases in the use of MOOCs in higher education as well as other educational sectors, such types of support groups will increase in the coming years.

Online student retention (the number of students following through a course or program; also called "persisters") is a highly distressing issue for institutions, administrators, and educators all over world. In fact, it has been cited as one of the greatest weaknesses in online education (Berge & Huang, 2004; Herbert, 2006; Jun, 2005). Chief among the factors contributing to attrition is lack of student motivation (Bonk, 2002; Cocea, 2007; Wolcott & Burnham, 1991), conflicts of time (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005), and lack of interaction or support from the instructor (Carr, 2000; Hara & Kling, 2000; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). In addition, the survey by Xu and Jaggars (2011) touched on reasons such as lack of both faculty and peer support and interaction, sense of isolation, time constraints, technical difficulties, and a general lack of structure as common reasons for dropping out of online courses.

Naturally, educational institutions and corporations must justify their investments in online learning programs to their stakeholders. Decisions about the degree to which they utilize the Web for fully online and blended forms of instruction affects wider issues such as organizational planning, training, and assessment (Bonk, 2002; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Never before have considerations about effective approaches to engaging students in online courses been more urgent. Issues such as access to education, learning outcomes, and the perceived value and credibility of online courses, programs, and qualifications all hang precariously on the extent to which institutions and organizations are capable of retaining their students (Cocea, 2007; Tyler-Smith, 2006). We turn now to research in online student attrition and retention to gain an understanding of some of the factors influencing a student's decision to leave or to complete an online course or program.

Understanding Online Student Attrition

In the latter part of the previous century, several popular models of student attrition and retention in formal educational programs were conceived. Vincent Tinto, whom some consider the godfather of student retention issues in higher education, has a model that has been widely cited and used (Tinto, 1975). The results from Tinto's longitudinal study of on-campus student retention rates led him to surmise that the likelihood of a student choosing to persist with or discontinue formal study is based on the degree to which she is able to integrate into the academic system of the institution. The components of such a system include intellectual development as typically exhibited by grade performance and learner portfolios as well as the social interaction system composed of the course lecturers, guest experts, and peers. The combination of academic and social integration factors was revolutionary for that time and became the basis from which later models were designed and adapted.

David Kember (1989) expanded on Tinto's model to consider unique learner characteristics typical in distance education arenas. Such characteristics include the fact the students in these courses are likely to be mature adults studying part-time who are simultaneously juggling family and work responsibilities. Elements of Kember's model

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include Learner characteristics, Learner Goal commitment (intrinsically versus extrinsically motivated), the Academic environment, and the Social/Work environment. Cost/benefit analyses also play a role in retention in his model. Kember pointed out that these elements need to be integrated and often change during the students' academic career. From his perspective, students then weigh together all these factors when making the decision to complete or drop out of a course or program.

Building on these ideas, recent models of online student attrition attempt to construct a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing a student's decision to drop out of online courses. Alfred Rovai (2003), for instance, proposed a composite model to explain student drop-out containing two distinct stages. In the first stage, he considers two factors that are apparent prior to admission: (1) learner characteristics including age and gender; and (2) learner skills such as computer literacy and reading and writing ability. In the second stage, Rovai includes two after-admission factors, namely: (1) external factors such as finances, time constraints, and work commitments; and (2) internal factors such as academic integration, social integration, and self-esteem. Noteworthy in Rovai's model is that the two-stage process helps administrators, educators, and even learners themselves unpack, identify, and act upon factors likely to hinder their progress through the adoption of appropriate intervention strategies. As apparent in Table 2.1, we employ his dual-stage idea in our synthesis of the common strategies applied in mitigating student attrition.

Based on Rovai's work, Berge and Huang (2004) developed a dynamic and context-sensitive model to illustrate the importance of individual and institutional perspectives in the online attrition process. They incorporated three variables: (1) personal variables (e.g., demographic and prior educational experience), (2) institutional variables (i.e., bureaucratic variables, academic variables, and social variables), and (3) circumstantial variables (i.e., social interaction) in their model. The model from Berge and Huang is advantageous in its flexibility in allowing different weightings to be allocated to each of the key variables as priorities for planning and implementing changes for the different stakeholders involved (e.g., students, educators, and administrators). This model, therefore, allows for timely interventions to be quickly put in place to enhance retention.

Building on the need to concretize the range of individual, institutional, and circumstantial (external) factors affecting a student's decision to persist with online learning, Jun (2005) conceptualized a holistic model of five general areas accounting for most of the causes of online student attrition. These five areas are (1) individual background, (2) motivation, (3) academic integration, (4) social integration, and (5) technological issues.

It is clear that these models highlight a range of individual, institutional, and circumstantial factors that have an impact on a student's decision to persist in online distance education contexts. Given the complex nature of online retention, we decided to survey a wide body of literature with the intention to identify the varied reasons and explanations offered for learner attrition. These factors are synthesized and illustrated in Table 2.1. They are categorized into three factors: (1) Individual, (2) Course-Related, and (3) Technological. As can be seen in Table 2.1, the bulk of the factors affecting retention in online courses are related to individual factors involving learners' assumptions, motivation, skills, background experiences, and personal circumstances that impede their participation in online courses. Next, we combed the literature looking for strategies

TABLE 2.1: A SURVEY OF FACTORS AFFECTING ONLINE LEARNER ATTRITION.

Individual Factors

(Learner circumstances, learning skills, coping skills)

- 1. Lack of self-management skills.
- Underprepared for challenges in distance learning or perceive distance learning courses to be easy.
- 3. First year online students are especially affected by:
 - lack of self-directed learning strategies.
 - poor time management skills.
 - poor independent learning skills.
- 4. Lack of time or time conflicts between family or work commitments.
- 5. Financial strain.
- 6. Low language literacy ability (reading and writing).
- 7. Learning difficulty.
- 8. Impact of previous educational encounters.
- Low level of motivation (insufficient self-motivation, inadequate self-directed learning skill).
- 10. Low commitment to study.
- 11. Poor incentives to learn.
- 12. Lack of social/family support.
- Low computer literacy skills (slow typing skills, difficulty using the Course Management System, or CMS).
- 14. Lack of confidence with using computers (lack of computer literacy).

Course-Related Factors

(Course design and communication factors, faculty responsiveness, peer interaction, learning preference)

- 1. Lack of course structure.
- 2. Incompetent instructor.
- Availability of academic support; approachability of staff.
 Access and friendliness of administrative system and staff.
 General lack of support.
- 4. Ease of content.
- Lack of interaction between students and between students and instructor.
- Isolation, lack of sense of belonging in an academic community.
- 7. Lack of learner choice/learning preference.
- 8. Lack of personal and immediate feedback on coursework.

Technological Factors

(Course-related technical issues, systems, and design)

- 1. Limited training available; no help or support systems.
- 2. Technical difficulties, including access, slowness, password problems, navigational issues, etc.
- 3. Poorly designed courses (i.e., suitability of program design, content, delivery, assessment strategies).
- 4. Must download software client to run.
- System favors those with technology backgrounds or programming (i.e., HTML) skills.
- 6. Using complex, unfamiliar, or new technology.

TABLE 2.2: A SURVEY OF STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE ONLINE LEARNER ATTRITION.

	Prior to Admission	After Admission (during period of study)
Institutional	 Providing learner orientation to distance learning (induction into online course/precourse training or online tutorial/preenrollment advice). 	1. Assign "learning guides" especially for first-time online learners as liaison between students and other available resources.
	2. Implement policies in support of ongoing high-quality online courses and programs; develop a culture that says online learning is as important as classroom learning.	2. Provide online access to a variety of student support (e.g., academic advisement, social, personal, technical) services (where possible, available on a 24/7 basis and not just limited to normal working hours).
	3. Offer short courses rather than long ones.	3. Hold managers accountable for corporate trainee access to and completion of online training courses.
	4. Select qualified online instructors.	4. Provide formal rewards and recognitions for trainee completion of online courses.
	5. Provide training for those who support online learners (general staff).	5. Keep online class size small.
	Provide pedagogical and instructor training prior to teaching first online course.	6. Provide faculty support services.
	7. Provide student advice about the choices they have to make in their programs of study and future career goals (to establish expectations about distance learning and to provide a road map to completion and achievement of personal goals).	
	8. Post all course syllabi, coursework, assignments, and learning outcomes on the Web for prospective students to gauge the workload prior to signing up for a course.	
Instructional (Pedagogical)	Train instructional designers and lecturers in the pedagogy of online teaching.	1. Adjust the suitability and level of content to learner needs; include graded activities that start learners with simpler tasks to gain confidence from early course success, then lead them to more challenging endeavors.
	2. Improve online tutoring/academic services.	2. Simplify or limit course content navigation options to prevent cognitive overload; make graphics easy and simple to understand.
	3. Personalize learning content by referring to learner profiles.	3. Use active learning and learner-centered strategies.
	4. Put in place supplemental tutoring services.	4. Improve the learning process to include more interactions and foster collegiality; emphasize the importance of teacher presence in the class.

	Prior to Admission	After Admission (during period of study)
	5. Initiate contact with students via phone calls.	5. Have proactive contact; pace and prompt learners; track learner performance to ensure they do not fall by the wayside.
		6. Begin courses with icebreakers.
		7. Set high expectations for student success.
		Post your own introduction and encourage student introductory posts as well.
		9. Assign online students peer mentors.
		10. Set clear course expectations.
		11. Make classes fun, interesting, and rewarding.
		12. Make classes relevant for learners— "What's in it for me?"
		13. Provide timely feedback and encourage feedback from learners.
		14. Incorporate a variety of synchronous and asynchronous instruction to reinforce the learning of new material or assignments.
		15. Give encouragement and praise; applaud when students do well.
		16. Provide flexible, convenient scheduling, and frequent instructor contact.
		17. Have additional activities and extra-credit assignments for fun and creative touches.
		18. Require learner commitment and participation in the course.
		19. Provide timely intervention for learners.
		20. Facilitate informal online chats to build relationships.
		21. Align pedagogical goals with teaching activities and appropriate assessment strategies so that students understand the big picture in the course.
		22. Provide prompt and reliable responses to student queries.
		23. Use group-based projects to develop a learning community.
		24. Build in activities that empower students to become lifelong learners.
Technological	1. Improve technical infrastructure and design; ensure technology is robust and working.	
	2. Enhance online support services (technical support) for instructors and students.	
	3. Embed personalized support or help systems.	

recommended by students, educators, practitioners, and corporate trainers for addressing learner attrition.

Table 2.2 showcases the strategies commonly cited. The table is divided into two broad sections to illustrate strategies that can be adopted (1) prior to enrollment in an online course or program, and (2) once a student has been admitted into an online study program. Under these two headings, the strategies are further organized according to those undertaken at the Institutional, Instructor (i.e., Pedagogical), and Technological levels.

The message from the recommendations highlighted in the preceding table is clear. The bulk of the strategies emphasize what most good instructors already know across any effective teaching-learning or training context—that is, high interaction levels and support from educators (and peers), timely feedback, meaningful learning experiences, and active learning strategies all enhance learner engagement and, ultimately, retention. As J. Olin Campbell (1997) from Brigham Young University aptly put it, "it's not the delivery method that makes the difference—it's the learning strategies employed with the delivery method, and the implementation of those strategies, that matter most" (p. 3).

Such guidelines raise the urgency for educators to understand the learner and the learning process, including the factors that facilitate students' motivation and internal drive to excel and those that inhibit, or worse, debilitate it. These strategies are not merely random ideas pulled out of a hat. For more than a century, psychologists interested in human learning, cognition, and motivation have referred to many of these very principles. They are, in fact, grounded in a well-established body of theory and conceptual understanding of how people learn.

Retention Wrap-Up

In this chapter, we detailed the explosive trends and demands for online learning courses and services. There is little doubt that online learning will have an impact on all of us in significant ways in the future no matter our age levels, occupations, or interests. We also discussed how different institutions and organizations are grappling with the realities of high online learner attrition. In response, we surveyed a wide array of guidelines and report recommendations intended to enhance online learner retention. Many of these retention-related suggestions are summarized in the two tables included in this chapter. Those who implement some of them as part of a long-range strategic plan or vision for online learning should see a positive effect in terms of reduced course attrition and withdrawal rates. Naturally, that is a big ticket item for many institutions and organizations.

We now turn to Chapter Three, which outlines four key perspectives on human learning and then considers how each, in turn, explains the role of motivation in learning online. We also discuss the rationale for adopting different motivational strategies, including a few of those mentioned in this chapter, and their placement in our TEC-VARIETY framework which we will further detail in the 10 chapters that follow after that. The overall intention is to help educators, trainers, and instructional designers to create more motivationally effective and engaging learning environments.

We want to note that although many ideas in this chapter pertain to what school, university, and corporate administrators might put in place to increase retention in online courses, the majority of the ideas in the remaining chapters are directly focused on motivational strategies and activities at the course or instructor level, especially Chapters Four through Thirteen. Administrators and decision makers seeking content pertinent to their needs might read the next chapter on online motivation. They might also scan through Chapter Fourteen on how to motivate and support novice online instructors as well as those who might be deemed more hesitant or even resistant to the idea; in particular, they might review the 10 specific online instructor support ideas listed near the end. Finally, the table reviewing the 100+ activities in Chapter Fifteen should prove valuable no matter your role or responsibilities in online learning.

Praise for Adding Some TEC-VARIETY

"There are books on theory and books on practice, however this is the best volume ever written for using learning theory to inform effective practice. This book is a tour de force for creating an environment where students not only succeed in online learning, but they achieve excellence as well."

—**Charles (Chuck) Dziuban**, Director, Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness (RITE), Professor Emeritus and Inaugural Pegasus Professor, University of Central Florida, and Sloan-C Fellow

"An excellent book from world leaders in the field that will be of great value for educators and designers. Presents concrete examples grounded in solid 'practical' theory."

—**Charalambos Vrasidas**, Executive Director of the Center for the Advancement of Research & Development in Educational Technology (CARDET), Associate Dean for elearning, University of Nicosia, Cyprus, and author of several information technology and distance learning books

Based on 10 theoretically driven and proven motivational principles, *Adding Some TEC-VARIETY* offers 100 practical yet innovative ideas to motivate online learners and increase learner retention.

What motivates?

- 1. Tone/Climate: Psychological Safety, Comfort, Sense of Belonging
- 2. **Encouragement:** Feedback, Responsiveness, Praise, Supports
- 3. Curiosity: Surprise, Intrigue, Unknowns
- 4. Variety: Novelty, Fun, Fantasy
- 5. Autonomy: Choice, Control, Flexibility, Opportunities
- 6. Relevance: Meaningful, Authentic, Interesting
- 7. Interactivity: Collaborative, Team-Based, Community
- 8. Engagement: Effort, Involvement, Investment
- 9. Tension: Challenge, Dissonance, Controversy
- 10. Yielding Products: Goal Driven, Purposeful Vision, Ownership

This is the book you need to grow your online teaching repertoire in innovative ways that will grab your students' attention and imagination. Additional book resources as well as a free e-book are available for download at http://tec-variety.com.

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