

STRATEGIES TO BEING SUCCESSFUL WITH ONLINE EDUCATION

Strategies to Being Successful with Online Education

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## STRATEGIES TO BEING SUCCESSFUL WITH ONLINE EDUCATION

Online education has become an increasingly common avenue for students to access education as post-secondary institutions and other education providers deliver more courses and/or programs online. Online learning offers students greater flexibility and more opportunities for learning compared to traditional face to face classroom environments (Broadbent, J. 2015). At the same time, online learning can be more of a double edged blade than its traditional counterpart. Successful students in online learning environments are often associated with employing self-regulation learning (SRL) strategies, to help them complete online courses (Hu, Haihong 2009; Symeonides, Roberta 2015). This means that students who are ineffective at applying SRL are potentially more likely to face issues with successfully completing their online courses. Another issue with online education is that it takes more time to effectively create and manage a successful online course than a traditional one (Yukselturk, Erman 2007).

As an individual involved in learning online, researching the potential benefits and drawbacks of online learning and strategies to remain successful in completing online courses was of great personal importance. To that end, this paper will address areas that both students and instructors will need to be aware of to ensure that online education is satisfying and successful.

Firstly, the need for students to establish SRL strategies and employ them throughout a course to be successful. Secondly, that student motivation needs to remain high for success in online course completion. Thirdly, that social interaction between peers and instructors needs to be positive and "risk-free". Fourthly, recognizing that all learners are unique and will react differently when exposed to varying instructional models, namely teacher-centered versus student-centered instruction. After determining the barriers and requirements to successful online learning, establishing a list of recommendations for both instructors and students alike to utilize, in order to provide a rich, healthy, and hopefully successful online learning experience.

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Self-regulated learning (SRL) is a term used to describe a student's ability to control, manage, and plan their learning (Broadbent, J. 2015). SRL is a process that can be divided into three categories: self-observation, self-judgment, and self-reaction. Self-observation is monitoring one's actions and is viewed to be the most important category. Self-judgment is evaluation of one's performance and self-reaction is one's response to performance outcomes. Since SRL is a learning strategy and not a fixed trait such as genetics, SRL can therefore be learned (Broadbent, J. 2015). Self-regulated learners can specify clear learning goals, search for relevant information, use effective strategies, monitor their growing understanding and relevance of information encountered, and evaluate their learning (Greene, Jeffrey Alan 2015). A learner that can employ self-regulation learning strategies would obviously have greater chance to succeed in online learning (Hu, Haihong 2009). Of all the strategies as a SRL, which strategies should one focus on to stand the best chance of being successful in an online course? According to Broadbent (2015), the strategies that were significantly associated with academic achievement were metacognition, time management, effort regulation, and critical thinking. In other words students who make

...good use of their time, are conscious of their learning behaviour, are critical in their examination of their content, and persevere in understanding the learning material despite challenges faced are more likely to achieve higher academic grades in online settings (Broadbent, J. 2015 p. 11).

Time management skills have been noted in other studies as one of the factors that affect student success in online courses (Hu, Haihong 2009; Greene, Jeffrey Alan 2015; Yukselturk, Erman 2007). In fact, they noted that poor time management skills would often lead to falling behind in coursework and subsequent de-motivation to complete the course. Students who were actively engaged in their learning were also of interest in other studies that led to student success in online course work. This means that students who actively contribute to discussion forums, completed assignments, and other course work were more likely

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to successfully complete their online courses. To summarize, a Self-Regulated Learner is a key component to completing online courses because of the increased demand on the student for time and work and the increased freedom that online courses provide (Broadbent, J. 2015).

Persevering to the end despite the challenges faced requires a strong will or motivation. Student motivation has been a topic of interest in many academic papers and some sought to explore student motivation and/or engagement in greater detail (Muller, Lin Y. 2005; Britt, M 2015). Motivation is defined as "the will to perform an action". Motivation is then divided into two components: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the willingness to perform an action for internal rewards. An example would be singing music for one's own enjoyment. Extrinsic motivation refers to the willingness to perform an action for external rewards. Following the same example, one would sing not for one's own enjoyment but for money and fame. So student motivation shall be referred to as the student's willingness and perseverance to stay engaged and complete an online course.

Student motivation can be affected by two factors: student engagement and student perceptions. Student engagement with an online course could determine the likelihood of a student's motivation to complete the course. Since online courses naturally provide fewer instances for students to be engaged with their institution and likely, their instructor, it is even more critical for institutions to focus on finding ways to increase engagement. It is also noted that online students often need to spend more time on a course than their traditional counterparts (Britt, Margaret 2015). In addition, it was found that instructors would need to have a strong instructional methodology and provide opportunities for peer to peer and instructor interactions if their online course were to be as effective as a traditional course in regards to student engagement. There needs to be cooperation and collaboration between student and instructor and an effective instructor presence to have strong student engagement (Britt, Margaret 2015). In other words, part of the student motivation to complete a course online requires both student and instructor to

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make efforts to connect and establish a working relationship for a student to feel motivated to complete the online course.

In a related matter, student perceptions can block student engagement and thus motivation to complete an online course. Simply put, the way a student perceives their online learning can either place many barriers or only a few barriers to completing an online course (Muilenburg, Lin Y. 2005). One of these potential barriers to online learning is student enjoyment. Muilenburg (2005) found that learners who enjoyed learning online over traditional learning had fewer barriers to success while the opposite was true for those who didn't enjoy learning online. Interestingly, the same findings were found when examining online learning effectiveness. Students that felt learning online was better than in a traditional environment had fewer barriers than those who felt the opposite. Social interaction was the key ingredient to increasing the likelihood of lowering the barriers to online learning by possibly increasing student enjoyment and perceived learning effectiveness (Muilenburg, Lin Y. 2005). While the findings are far from concrete and there are limitations to this conclusion, increasing social interaction between instructor and student would naturally seem to aid in a student's perception of their instructor and subsequently the course itself. This reinforces the previous argument for increasing student engagement by building strong student-instructor relationships.

This leads into the third theme for successful online course completion—that students need to be able to interact with peers and instructors in a perceived safe learning environment. Early on, the need for instructor-student communication to assist students to successfully complete an online course was established. However, peer-peer communication and perceptions of self-worth may also be attributed to a student's unsuccessful attempt to complete an online course. Discussion forums provide the social environment for students to communicate, collaborate and provide a sense of inclusion (Symeonides, Roberta 2015). However, simply measuring the frequency of interaction cannot fully ascertain the experience of interacting and importance of this for the learning experience (Symeonides, Roberta 2015).

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Discussion forums or even text-based communication provide a user with only words to express oneself and this can lead to a loss of the human element in interactions (Symeonides, Roberta 2015). This could lead to feelings of frustration and a lack of communication by students.

Another potential issue with online interactions is the comparison between peers. Users may feel that they are inferior to their peers and possibly doubt their own abilities and self-worth (Symeonides, Roberta 2015). While most users may not feel this way about discussion forums, or other means of text-based communication, some users will feel that this form of communication would be a barrier to establishing relationships (Symeonides, Roberta 2015). Finally, it can be concluded that students could feel vulnerable and have fears of appearing inept when posting online. It is suggested that establishing that human connection is a good way to help alleviate fears and build trust to allow students to perceive a safe environment (Symeonides, Roberta 2015).

Students, whether online or traditional learners, are unique and learn in equally unique ways. Students are also creatures of habit and adjusting those habits can be, for some, a challenge. Just like students, instructors develop and instruct their courses in equally unique ways. As teacher is secondary, public education, I have observed three different teachers teaching the same subjects to the same grade level and while there are similarities in the content taught, the instructional methodology varied greatly between them. As such, I have often overheard stories told about performance levels of students and comparing their success or lack thereof with the other teachers who taught them. At times, I found that the teachers become shocked that a student could be successful with one teacher, while remaining unsuccessful with another. This idea that varying instructional methods can lead to students being unsuccessful can be confirmed as noted with interviews with professors at the post-secondary level (Yukselturk, Erman 2007). Instructional methodology is far from the only reason for a student to be unsuccessful with other reasons being motivation, underestimating time and effort required, and life situations. However, putting all of that aside, the way a course is delivered and the content provided

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should be considered when developing and delivering an online course. Students prefer content that they can apply to their daily lives in a meaningful way over learning abstract concepts that would be difficult to implement (Yukselturk, Erman 2007). In addition, instructors noted that students may be used to the teacher-centered method of instruction rather than the student-centered method. The teacher-centered method is what is commonly used throughout most of a student's educational life—where the teacher provides the content, leads discussion, etc. with students more or less receiving information in a consumer-based fashion. Student-centered instruction is quite the opposite with a large focus on students generating knowledge and meanings by themselves (Yukselturk, Erman 2007), which has students playing the role of producer and consumer of information. Course delivery and instructional methodology do play a role that can affect the likelihood of student success in an online course.

As stated previously, being successful in online learning requires that many barriers be overcome and the development of specific skills be learned by both student and instructor. To ensure that students be successful in online education a variety of recommendations were put forward.

- Students should be directed to become Self-Regulated Learners (Yukselturk, Erman 2007) and focus on the SRL strategies of time management, metacognition, critical thinking, and effort regulation (Broadbent, J. 2015 p. 13).
- That peer learning (Broadbent, J. 2015) and collaboration (Britt, Margaret 2015) activities be prioritized so that "...students can work together, share information and opinions, analyze data, and solve problems..." (Yukselturk, Erman 2007 p. 80) both asynchronously and synchronously.
- That tutors be utilized and make efforts to appear as "human" as possible with their role of providing support to learners in interacting online to avoid feelings of trepidations and personal risk of embarrassment (Symeonides, Roberta 2015).

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- That instructors clearly communicate deadlines and due dates and provide guidelines for help seeking for the course and/or provide a discussion forum to assist in providing help (Hu, Haihong 2009).
- Students "...should be guided to adapt to different environments and learning methods (i.e., the student-centered methods)" (Yukselturk, Erman 2007 p. 80).
- Learners should be encouraged to keep their motivation at a high level through the help of instructional activities during the online course;
- Learners' performance should be monitored, and individual and timely feedback should be provided during the online course;
- Course contents should be of immediate real-life value for the students. Also, course content should consist of rich materials (i.e. interactive examples, multimedia applications, reference books) that are updated regularly to reflect the students' needs and new technologies. (Yukselturk, Erman 2007 p. 80).

Implementing this concise, although perhaps not complete, list of recommendations, should provide an enriched and successful learning environment for students working to complete an online course.

Online learning has become more prevalent as students seek to attain their higher education through distance delivery models (Broadbent, J. 2015). With online learning comes increased demands on students to be strong Self-Regulated Learners, to maintain high motivation and to be actively engaged throughout the course (Symeonides, Roberta 2015). Students need to manage their time well, communicate with their peers and instructors regularly, actively reflect on their learning, and keep on-top of their coursework. Instructors need to ensure that their students perceive their course to be a safe environment to learn and communicate in and to provide tools and support to assist students in adapting to their instructional methodology and/or provide adaptations to allow students the best opportunity to successfully complete their course (Yukselturk, Erman 2007; Symeonides, Roberta 2015; Hu, Haihong

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2009). For any student considering online education, and any instructor looking to deliver an online course, it is strongly recommended to research the positives and the drawbacks to online environments and consider the list of recommendations provided here.

It should be noted that simply following the recommendations listed will not guarantee either instructor or student a successful experience online. Nor does the author suggest that online education is for everyone. There has been significant research into Self-Regulated Learning, student motivation, and engagement, however, little research has focussed on student perceptions of online learning with varying course content and instructional methodology. The author believes that further research into how student perceptions of their self-efficacy in regards to online learning and the way they perceive themselves in regard to their online courses should be considered to further our understanding of and subsequent improvements to online education.

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