

ONLINE LEARNER READINESS: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

by Jennifer Hall Rivera

Abstract

By understanding students' readiness for learning in a virtual environment, instructors can apply pedagogical strategies that increase satisfaction and thereby reduce attrition rates.

Key words: *online education, self-efficacy, self-regulated learning*

For higher education students who require the flexibility, autonomy, and technological interaction available through multiple media, online education is an attractive option (Cigdem & Yildirim, 2014). In fact, more and more students are choosing online coursework. Enrollment in online educational institutions continues to

experience a yearly increase between 9.3% and 36.5% (Klaus & Changchit, 2014). This increasing need for virtual coursework has caused universities to further develop online degree programs and course offerings in an attempt to attract these students.

While higher education expands its virtual offerings to meet this demand, attention is focused on understanding why so many students fail to complete online courses. Attrition rates for online

coursework are 10% to 50% higher than traditional classroom courses (Kauffman, 2015). Researchers have recognized the importance of examining the type of student that excels in virtual education and the student's individual readiness for online education. Student readiness has been found to be a valid predictor of successful completion of online coursework (Kuo, Walker, Schroder, & Belland, 2014). By understanding the type of learner in the online classroom, educators are able to develop effective strategies to assist the virtual student, thereby increasing overall satisfaction with the experience (Kirmizi, 2015). Student satisfaction with degree programs has been shown to improve attrition rates (Kauffman, 2015). Therefore, examining key factors in the research on

virtual coursework can provide practitioners with effective strategies for online learning.

Characteristics of the Successful Online Student

The average age range for an online student is 25–50 years, and these individuals are typically juggling the demands of education, vocation, and family commitments (Kauffman, 2015). Requiring a flexible schedule with technological interfaces, these students tend to thrive when provided stimulating, self-regulated learning environments (Kirmizi, 2015; Thoms & Eryilmaz, 2014). Successful virtual students have these specific skill sets: self-motivation, self-regulation, and a sense of Internet self-efficacy (Barnard-Brak, Lan, & Paton, 2010; Johnson, 2015).

Those online students who are inherently motivated to meet the demands required in virtual coursework excel at higher-order thinking, synthesis, and evaluation in their academic studies (McCormick, Clark, & Raines, 2015). Additionally, self-regulated online students are intrinsically propelled toward achievement (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Naidu, 2014). Self-regulated online students also establish defined goals for personal or professional achievement through education (Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler, & Stürmer, 2015). Internet self-efficacy is one's ability to successfully interact with the virtual environment and attain the expected results (Kuo et al., 2014). A student's Internet self-efficacy is one of the primary indicators of his or her ability to achieve positive results in the online classroom (Kuo et al., 2014). Based on these notable characteristics in successful online students, online pedagogy requires an

autonomous design with room for self-regulated learning.

Self-Regulated Learning

Self-regulated learning is recognized as the level of autonomy exhibited by students in completing their assignments (Cigdem & Yildirim, 2014). Self-regulation in the online learning environment is both a "skill" and a "will" on the part of the student (Barnard-Bark et al., 2010, p. 62). The student must manifest the ability to self-monitor his or her progress, self-evaluate academic coursework, and respond appropriately to the outcomes (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). Self-regulated learning requires motivation and self-direction, which are necessary components of cognitive learning in the virtual classroom (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). An online student's inability to stay focused and timely in assignments can quickly lead to increased stress levels and a sense of being overwhelmed. Consequently, motivation is correlated with learner control and self-directed learning (Cho & Heron, 2015).

Self-regulated learning is also influenced by personal experiences in previous coursework, daily habits, and goals for educational attainment. Successful self-directed learners excel in managing their time and meeting course expectations, and are willing to seek support when necessary to meet their goals (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010). The ability of students to self-regulate their academic expectations is one of the precursors to online readiness.

Online Learner Readiness

Examining student readiness for online coursework, Kirmizi (2015) described three variables to consider: (a) What

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form of classroom does the student prefer? (b) Does this student exhibit computer efficacy in the technological expectations of coursework? and (c) Is this student capable of succeeding in an autonomous learning environment? Lack of readiness can put pressure on students in this form of learning, so instructors should recognize that not every student is equipped for success in virtual coursework. Ascertaining a student's readiness is important not only for the students' success, but also for the university's attrition rate. Determining student readiness has thus evolved into a key indicator for identifying those students capable of success at a distance (Cigdem & Yildirim, 2014).

Kirmizi (2015) identified five dimensions of learner readiness: computer/Internet self-efficacy, self-directed learning, learner control, motivation for learning, and online communication self-efficacy. Of these, computer/Internet self-efficacy and online communication self-efficacy are closely

Jennifer Hall Rivera is a doctoral candidate at Liberty University with research interests in student self-efficacy and sense of community within traditional and online classrooms. She has more than a decade of experience in the field of education. Email: j1hr7@msn.com

correlated. *Computer self-efficacy* is the ability of a student to regulate his or her online learning environment, exhibit confidence in facilitating online platforms, and achieve the technical ability required to successfully manipulate computer-related coursework and research (Cigdem & Yildirim, 2014). This confidence is nurtured through practice, tactile experience, and mastery of related skills (Taipjutorus, Hansen, & Brown, 2012). To nurture computer self-efficacy, Taipjutorus et al. (2012) recommended embedding sufficient support measures within the online coursework. A developed sense of computer self-efficacy has been found to be a contributor to student academic performance within the online classroom (Hauser, Paul, & Bradley, 2012; Taipjutorus et al., 2012). The online communication aspect of self-efficacy relates to the confidence a student possesses with regard to effective classroom discussion (Kirmizi, 2015).

Self-directed learning, as discussed earlier, is the ability of a student to perform as an agent in the design and implementation of his or her educational career. Self-regulation in education allows for flexibility while providing a sense of control in the online student. In research conducted by Kirmizi (2015), 69.1% of online students professed the ability to complete study plans, 67.9% manifested high expectations for their academic performance, and 55.9% exercised time management strategies. These distinct skills and strategies are all contributors to successful self-directed learning. Skill development within the virtual classroom is attributed to a cyclical process occurring among “personal, behavioral, and environmental” factors (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010, p. 62). This process is driven by student initiative and

requires high levels of metacognition and motivation (Kirmizi, 2015).

Strategies for Online Success

Considering the autonomous nature of the online student, specific strategies have been shown to result in positive academic outcomes, online learner readiness, and self-efficacy. One strategy found to be effective is building a sense of familiarity between the student and the online learning platform. This is achieved through repetitive, or rehearsal, practices (Northcote & Gosselin, 2016). Aspects of online curriculum that require students to engage in repetitive practices subsequently strengthen their self-efficacy (Northcote & Gosselin, 2016). Because online student success is correlated with individual habit, adequate instructional media and opportunities to practice platform manipulation need to be provided to scaffold between practice and understanding (Northcote & Gosselin, 2016). Through continual practice, habits become a comfortable routine within the virtual classroom. Strategies may include the use of online access to e-learning and multimedia resources that foster habit-forming practices (Cigdem & Yildirim, 2014).

Another important strategy that positively influences online student performance is the development of presence within the virtual environment. Establishing a “human connection” is essential for online students’ sense of connectedness to instructors and the educational institution (Mason, Helton, & Dziegielewski, 2010, p. 246). Therefore, it is important that students recognize the instructor is present in the classroom, monitoring continual progress and providing motivation (Miller,

2015). Instructor presence is constructed of three dimensions: persona, social, and instructional (Kelly, 2014). Persona encompasses the instructor’s “personality, teaching style, and interests”—all of which influence the students’ perception of the teacher (Kelly, 2014, para. 2). Persona can be further developed through the Voki tool, which the instructor can use to create an avatar that serves as a virtual assistant (Moke & Wright, 2017). The social dimension involves the development of connectedness and community in the online classroom (Kelly, 2014). Instructional dimensions are the scaffolding and guidance provided for students by the instructor. These may include online tutorials that review the procedures for manipulating the online classroom platform. Instructional tutorials on a variety of topics aid the students in developing confidence in their ability to locate needed resources, submit assignments, and engage in constructive communication with peers and instructors (Kelly, 2014).

An additional strategy is frequent interaction among the online students (Thoms & Eryilmaz, 2014). The more collaboration and interaction occurring, the greater the sense of connectedness students feel toward the environment and their online peers (Jain, Jain, & Jain, 2011). Collaboration is often in the form of virtual group projects, the creation of student communities (Wikispaces, Google+, Twitter, and Skype), or communication through chat forums (Moke & Wright, 2017). Other tools for building connectedness include videoconferencing, teleconferencing, and providing prerecorded lectures and tutorials created with Audacity or Screencast-O-Matic (Klaus & Changchit, 2014; Moke & Wright, 2017).



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In conjunction with instructional videos and meaningful communication, instructors must provide clear expectations and guidelines for course assignments (Klaus & Changchit, 2014). The inability of the virtual student to ask the instructors immediate questions in a face-to-face encounter puts responsibility on the teacher to provide support mechanisms to alleviate student anxiety. By outlining detailed instructions and rubrics, educators reinforce online students with the self-efficacy and confidence in their assigned coursework. Additionally, instructors need to provide access to resources that develop time management strategies and assignment scheduling, because efficacy in these two areas is essential for success in the virtual classroom. Aligning pedagogical expectations with technological capability is imperative for online course success.

Closing Thoughts

The increasing demand for online coursework and degree programs has sparked interest in the effectiveness of online education in the realms of instructional pedagogy, student satisfaction and happiness, self-efficacy, and sense of community in the virtual classroom. Research has found that only 51% of college administrators believe learning gains within the online classroom to be comparable to the traditional, face-to-face classroom (Kauffman, 2015). Therefore, it is necessary to engage in further research into authentic

learning gains in the online classroom. Recommendations include studying methods to evaluate new online students for readiness and computer self-efficacy, in addition to online instructor training in supporting virtual students. The use of social media to effectively communicate with virtual students has demonstrated success in improving online student satisfaction, and further research is required to determine the scope of its potential (Moke & Wright, 2017).

Consensus exists among online educators and researchers that an effective virtual learner needs mentoring in time management, understanding of online course requirements, and practice using the learning management system. This form of support has the potential to improve online learner self-efficacy and is best administered through the instructor (Moke & Wright, 2017). Further, fostering communication is essential within the classroom community and is made available through frequent discussions and peer support (Cigdem & Yildirim, 2014). Providing online students with sound instructional pedagogy and clear expectations will strengthen the quality of virtual education and encourage the development of additional degree programs. Further research is needed in determining additional strategies that will enhance the online classroom and further scaffold a sense of connection when learning at a distance. ■

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