



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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LEARNER CONTROL: THE UPSIDE AND THE DOWNSIDE OF ONLINE LEARNING

The online revolution has begun in earnest, and we all have much to be excited about as it spreads to higher education and industrial training. However, we cannot let our euphoria over this new instructional medium and the exciting educational possibilities it offers cloud our perceptions of the challenges inherent in online instruction from a student's perspective. Online learning offers tremendous control to the learner of both the instructional resources and the technical tools provided in these learning environments. In the hands of students or trainees prepared to take responsibility for using these tools to enhance their learning, they can indeed be powerful tools. But in the hands of students who have difficulty with self-regulation, such as problems with managing time, meeting commitments, and maintaining motivation, online learning can offer many challenges.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation focuses on the executive control or management function in the dynamic interplay among a number of factors necessary for successful learning. Learners are unique individuals who bring a critical set of variables to each learning situation, including personality, prior knowledge, and school achievement history. Around this core are four broad components focusing on factors that, in interaction, can influence tremendously the degree to which students set and reach learning and achievement goals. These four components are referred to as skill (e.g., learning strategies and prior knowledge and skills), will (e.g., motivation and positive affect toward learning), self-regulation (e.g., metacognitive comprehension monitoring and time management), and academic environment (e.g., available resources and social support).

Self-regulation includes a number of elements, each of which will help students approach and successfully

complete academic tasks. For example, self-regulation includes managing time and dealing with procrastination. It also includes being able to focus attention and maintain concentration over time. Self-regulation helps one deal with anxiety about learning and taking tests, and generate and regulate the motivation needed to reach academic goals. It also involves using a systematic approach to studying.

What Instructors Can Do to Help Their Students Succeed in Online Lessons and Courses

All of us involved in online instruction have a responsibility to help students develop the self-regulation, knowledge, and skills they need to thrive in online learning lessons and courses. The low success rates in these courses have been chronicled by many journals, newsletters, conferences, and higher education institutions. While portions of this problem may be attributable to poorly designed materials, novelty, or computer phobias, it is also becoming apparent that many students simply do not know how to learn and, perhaps even more important, how to manage their learning in online instructional settings. With the rapid and exponentially expanding growth of online courses, it is imperative that faculty help students develop the self-regulation needed to exercise learner control intelligently. The following suggestions are derived from research and applied literature examining these issues.

1. Teach students about the special instructional features of the program, such as glossaries, self-tests, multimedia material, and supplementary information.
2. Teach them how to USE the special instructional features of the program.
3. Teach students about the special technical tools available, such as chat rooms, contacting the instructor, and getting help.
4. Teach them how to USE the special technical tools, such as chat rooms, contacting the instructor, and getting help.
5. Provide instruction in critical self-regulation areas,



including:

- Time management
 - Flexibility of time and location—a distinguishing characteristic between online courses and traditional classroom-based courses. While traditional courses have a regular class time and classroom, online learning allows for flexibility in both study times and places. Online learners can schedule their study times at their convenience and can log on anywhere computer and Internet access are available. This flexibility gives online learners much more choice and autonomy than traditional classroom learners; however, if they have problems with time management, they are much more likely to put off their work and fall behind in their studies.
 - Generating and maintaining motivation
Online learners have a greater responsibility for generating and maintaining their motivation over time. The absence of teacher and peer pressure, and a study environment often full of competing tasks—such as spending more time with family or at work, often make it difficult for students to commit to completing their coursework.
 - Self-testing
In online courses, it is critical that students monitor their own understanding and progress through the material. In traditional classrooms, this function is often carried out by the instructor; however, in online learning contexts, students must know how to use the feedback they are getting on their progress and self-testing to monitor their understanding on an on-going basis.
 - Managing anxiety
If learners in online courses are uncertain about what they are supposed to do in a course or experience an unexpected problem, they may feel frustrated about online learning. In addition, learners with insufficient computer skills often feel anxious about online learning. Finally, the text-based nature of online communication requires students to communicate through writing, potentially distressing for those students who do not have the ability to express themselves effectively in writing.
6. Help students create a management plan for successfully completing an online lesson or course, check it frequently, and revise when necessary. Critical steps in the plan include:
- setting one or more goals,

- reflecting on the personal resources students will need to reach each goal,
- brainstorming and creating a plan of attack to reach each goal,
- selecting the methods they will use to accomplish their plan,
- implementing their plan,
- monitoring (on an on-going basis) the success and timeliness of their plan,
- formatively evaluating their progress,
- modifying, if necessary, their methods or their goals, and
- summatively evaluating the outcomes to see if they want to use this plan again in the future, or if they need to modify or discard it.

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