Solving Self-Regulated Learner Issues

Students in online, distance education courses need the right skills and abilities to be able to learn in a self-regulatory kind of environment, and professors can help.

This article elaborates on the January 2007 Academic Corner article by Anwar Y. Salimi, "The Promise and Challenges for Distance Education in Accounting." Although distance education shows promise from an enrollment numbers perspective, the teaching challenges can be enormous and are still placing barriers on instructors and students alike.

The quote by Gregory Harrington, past president of Lehigh University, that concludes Salimi's article leads into our discussion: "The real challenge and opportunity is not to duplicate existing instructional methods, but to use the power of the new information tools to design even more effective methods of learning."

Accordingly, student learning issues must be put in the forefront of distance education. Retention in online class sections in accounting is abysmal compared to traditional campus courses. Only about 40% (up to a high of 60% in a few courses) of undergraduate students enrolling in upper-division accounting courses complete those courses with grades of C or better. The same courses offered in a traditional on-campus mode report retention rates more than 50% greater. When compared to students in the traditional courses, twice as many online, distance students fail their courses. Conversely, twice as many students earn A's in traditional courses.

What are some of the causes of the retention problems? First, it appears the wrong type of student is enrolling in the distance education courses. A study of Computer Information Systems (CIS) courses by Kathryn Marold and Wayne Haga, "The Emerging Profile of the On-line Learner: Relating Course Performance with Pre-test, GPA, and other Measures of Achievement," concluded that lower-achieving students dominated online class sections when compared to traditional class sections. A similar study by Ann Murphy, *et al.*, "A Comparison of Student Grades

in Online and Ground Accounting Courses," found that statistically significant differences exist in the distribution of final grades and in the overall GPA between all online and on-ground courses. That is, in all cases the online grades are lower than on-ground grades. Therefore, better screening, student advising, and pedagogical approaches are needed to get the students through the distance-delivered courses.

Approaches that focus on certain groups of students can enhance the whole online distance experience. A common characteristic of students in distance education courses is low self-regulation, which means that many of those students who don't succeed in online courses lack strategies for learning, not motivation. They don't know how to self-regulate, meaning that they don't know how to manage their studying. Several studies suggest that many underprepared college students are just as motivated as other students. Accordingly, a focus on the low-self-regulated students can enhance the overall effectiveness of online, distance education courses.

Low-self-regulated learners waste time on ineffective learning
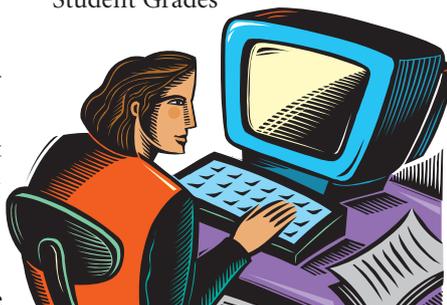
strategies and don't spend enough time on effective ones. They continually ask where to find information about how to complete assignments and when assignments are due, and they don't know why they make lower scores/grades. Because of these characteristics, their achievement is low, and they take a disproportionate amount of instructor time to attempt to answer questions. These students aren't low achievers intellectually—they just lack self-regulation.

Therefore, instructors should concentrate on embedding self-regulation into distance course design. We don't mean teaching students how to study, although that's one possible intervention. We merely suggest embedding elements of study strategies into course designs. Generally, faculty don't have the time or resources to actually teach study strategies, so those aspects of course design usually aren't part of traditional campus-based courses. But they should become basic elements of distance courses as they can benefit low-self-regulated learners and possibly high-self-regulated learners as well.

Kathryn Ley and Dawn Young describe strategic self-regulation skills in their article, "Instructional Principles for Self Regulation." Keys to the principles include self-efficacy for self-regulation and for learning the content. Multiple strategic activities associated with higher learning outcomes need to be addressed. For example, instructors should offer (1) guides for students on how to prepare an environment for proper learning and for attending to the learning

process, (2) approaches for organizing material for studying, (3) methods for monitoring learning progress, and (4) ways to evaluate learning outcomes and effectiveness. The authors call their principles POME, for **preparing** a learning environment, **organizing** study materials, **monitoring** progress, and **evaluating** outcomes.

To help students create a proper learning environment, give them a checklist of study environments and strategies to cope with distractions, such as feeding the dog, preparing snacks for children after school, or telephones ringing. The study location should be the same for every study activity and should be dedicated to a learning environment.

To help students organize for studying, give them a partial outline of content, and require them to complete it. Demonstrate that chunking material into manageable proportions with key points identified will aid learning. You may need to actually highlight those key points and provide some notes. Also, demonstrate steps or appropriate order to completing their assignments using the topic outlines. Provide approximations of time required for the various assignment activities. That is, provide a schedule for students to follow, and have them submit it to you.

Include an assignment table with complete due dates, titles, descriptions, readings, specific locations of readings, and submission requirements. Lists should be in multiple locations within an online platform. Don't presuppose that low-self-regulated learners

can find your instructions in a single location.

Monitor student activities by collecting study environment checklists and the study time schedule. Give self-test questions to assist reading proficiency. Provide grades online continually, and announce when scores/grades have been posted. Provide an assignment calendar with details. Identify scores needed for students to achieve grades levels of A, B, C, etc.

Provide collective feedback after evaluating the quality of completed work and test results. Explain to students why the submitted work meets the established criteria or why it doesn't. Compare effort to learning.

If instructors in the booming area of online, distance education can design their courses so that students who are good self-regulators and those who need help in this area can learn, then they will have created a beneficial learning environment that succeeds. **SF**

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