

Chapter 4

Setting the Stage for Success in an Online Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

Online learning in higher education has become increasingly popular because of the convenience and flexibility that it provides. Self-regulated learning, which requires students to plan, monitor, and assess their own learning, has been recognized as a key predictor of academic achievement and motivation in student learning. Few students, however, naturally do this. In order to guide students to become self-regulated learners and for these experiences to be successful for both the students and the instructor, instructors should use pedagogical strategies that differ slightly from those they have used in traditional classrooms. The purpose of this chapter is two-fold: to identify some of the challenges presented to students in an online learning environment and to give an overview of some possible solutions that an instructor can implement in order to address those challenges and give students tools to help them to become self-regulated learners.

INTRODUCTION

Self-regulated learning is described as students taking proactive management of their own learning in the areas of cognition and motivation (Cho & Jonassen, 2009). Online learning is generally understood to involve three types of interaction, which are known to have significant impact on student success in online learning: student-to-student, student-to-instructor, and student-to-content (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005). Self-regulation can help strengthen students' study skills as they create better learning habits and apply helpful learning strategies, help students monitor their own performance, and evaluate their academic progress (Wolters, 2011). It is important for instructors in the virtual classroom to be familiar with strategies that can help to identify and promote self-regulated learning (Jarvela & Jarvenoja, 2011).

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The trend of increasing distance education enrollments in the face of declining overall higher education enrollments suggests an important shift in the American higher education landscape, with contemporary learners “leaning in to online options” (Smith, 2016). The real promise of online education, experts say, is providing learning experiences that are more tailored to individual students than is possible in classrooms. Online learning enables more learning by doing, which many students find more engaging and useful.

Until fairly recently, online education amounted to little more than electronic versions of the old-line correspondence courses. With the continued acceptance of online learning as an option for many adult learners, course material for a traditional face-to-face course can no longer simply be reshaped to fit into the online course environment. These methods do not lend themselves to student success. The online learning landscape has changed with the arrival of sophisticated learning and collaboration tools. In addition, most universities have put processes in place to guide online instructors. These institutional-level supports that include powerful learning management systems, technical support, academic support, advising, and readily available resources are quite helpful in supporting student success in an online course environment. Further student support and the promotion of self-regulated learning in an online learning environment falls then to the instructor, and there are several tools and strategies that can be used to support student success.

WHY CHOOSE DISTANCE LEARNING?

Some students begin taking online classes not by choice but by necessity. Perhaps the course they want on campus is not available, so they take the course online. They may live too far away from a campus to take classes, or they have to travel for business and would have to miss too many on-campus classes. Although students new to online courses may not fully understand the differences between online and on-campus classes, there are a variety of reasons for choosing to do part or all of their education online. Convenience, flexibility, balance, and interaction are especially appealing to adult learners with families and job commitments. Students living in rural areas or with transportation challenges find online courses to be a viable option. Many higher education institutions offer online course options that range from 4- to 8-week accelerated formats to the more traditional 15- to 16-week semester schedule.

There are unlimited opportunities for interaction and participation in online classes, at all hours of the day and night, whenever it suits individual schedules. In an online course, everyone has something important to contribute, and online discussions allow students to join in and to contribute at any time.

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING

Lack of Physical Interaction

From a social standpoint, introverts generally enjoy being able to do their coursework without the distractions of other students. Those students who have more social tendencies may feel lonely, missing the personal interactions with peers that make up so much of the conventional college experience. Although nearly all learning management systems in use today have features that allow face-to-face interaction through video conferencing, this likely isn’t a substitute for actual in-person interaction, even if it does allow for live class discussion online.

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