

Chapter 24

Strategies for Efficient, Meaningful, and Inclusive Online Learning Environments: It's About Time

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ABSTRACT

Students and faculty rely on clear and unambiguous time targets to exchange information and pace their intersecting lives. Most students juggle work, family, and commuting demands, and increasing numbers also struggle with language needs and disabilities, requiring additional and flexible time to grasp the scope of assignments, read and gather information, process concepts into written products, and finally make sense of the experience. It all takes time. In this chapter, practical strategies for structuring time expectations are introduced in the context of a commitment to empower self-regulation and lifelong learning with particular attention to accessibility. The time dimension of each component of the syllabus, assignments, and gradebook are described with examples from a successful online course, with reference to theory and research on student engagement and satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

A search through most professors' e-mail for words such as *sorry* or *late* will yield an impressive collection of student pathos. There is no end to the reasons why their work is delayed: personal tragedies, technological glitches, and admitted shortcomings of managing busy lives. Instructors, too, fall victim to inefficiency and distraction. This tendency is even more common in online learning environments. An online course is particularly challenging to a student with weak time-management skills, yet provides a rich opportunity to cultivate that very competence. In this chapter, we consider the time-sensitive aspects of postsecondary education in an online environment, based on a review of pertinent literature and informed by successful online undergraduate courses at a regional comprehensive university in the

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United States. Beginning with a framework for understanding students' patterns and perspectives, ways to infuse growth-oriented perspectives and self-monitoring techniques are demonstrated with practical strategies for cultivating students' engagement and time management, with specific attention to troubleshooting vulnerability in an online context

In short, it's about time because it takes time to learn and it takes time to teach. It's about teachers and students both making the most of the time they have, but more importantly, making it worth their time.

BACKGROUND

Student-Centered Instruction

This article is written from a student-centered, or constructivist, perspective, with a concern for multiple dimensions of student success (conceptual understanding, personal proficiency, and practical application) in the context of postsecondary education. Decades of research (e.g. Beichner, 2008; Hake, 2008; Hattie, 2012; Hsiao, Mikolaj, & Shih, 2017; Oliver-Hoyo, 2011; Schreiber, 2017) confirm the effectiveness of strategic interaction between instructor and students, as well as among students, combined with metacognition and real world application, which are key components of student-centered pedagogy.

Universities are no longer – if they ever were – simple 'knowledge boxes' with students hungry for knowledge, sitting at the feet of gurus. Instead, campuses are complex self-supporting institutions with a keen interest in student retention and satisfaction, both resulting in tuition-based income for sustaining the institution. Whether a faculty member is motivated more by a sense of the university's business or by social justice, student success will be a primary goal.

Time management is widely recognized as a factor in student success in terms of both user experience and achievement. In France, Fernex, Lima, and de Vries (2015) explored time allocation for academic activities, noting, "At the heart of this exercise is the question of the time students dedicate to academic activities in competition with a whole range of other activities" (p. 399). They concluded that students' choices were influenced more by their past and current experiences than by their goals for the future. This confirms the current psychosocial constructivist model (Phillips et al., 2000) of facilitating student metacognition of experience and reflection on its meaning. Internal constraints and tendencies toward counterproductive behaviors are recognized in this chapter as vulnerabilities, with troubleshooting strategies offered to strengthen both students and instructors' capacities to manage the demands of learning and teaching.

The first vulnerability, then, is one of identity and purpose: both instructor and student are weaker if the instructor is in a traditional role of being the 'sage on the stage' focused only on transmitting knowledge and the student is in a passive role of absorbing information. The more progressive relationship of an instructor who is a 'guide on the side' facilitating the students' active engagement leads to a better use of time because the learning process and the student experience is realistically anticipated and monitored. It is therefore helpful for instructors to consider the reality of current students' lives. There are several individual vulnerability factors in the amount of time students have which in turn affects how they use it.

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