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Self-Directed Learning: A Key to Online Student Success

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Time and time again, I find that successful online students are those with skills of self-direction, self-regulation, and time-management. Self-directed learners determine their learning needs, set learning goals, locate and access suitable resources for learning, manage their learning activities, monitor and evaluate their performance, and reflect on and reassess their learning strategies. Self-directed learners have skills of self-regulation—this encompasses concentration, self-awareness, self-discipline, time-management, delaying gratification, and self-assessment. However, as Sandie Gravett notes in her blog post, students often feel ill equipped for self-directed learning (<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/09/becoming-a-better-teacher/>). How do we encourage students to assume responsibility for their learning and become self-directed learners?

It takes more than signposts and reminders. For many years, I signaled the importance of these skills by linking to websites such as "What Makes a Successful Online Student" which states: "With the freedom and flexibility of the online environment comes responsibility. The online process takes a real commitment and discipline to keep up with the flow of the process." I also encouraged them at the beginning of the semester to write down all of their deadlines in a scheduler. I would even email them reminders each week. And still, I found some students

fail simply because they fell behind: they prioritized other courses and responsibilities, or they procrastinated and left it until a later time that never came.

Online environments can exacerbate tendencies towards procrastination and distraction. We can find endless rabbit holes online that fuel procrastination and undermine our efforts at self-discipline (as Tim Urban humorously depicts in his popular blog post on procrastinators, <https://waitbutwhy.com/2013/10/why-procrastinators-procrastinate.html>). We are also prone towards continuous partial attention—the process of paying simultaneous attention to numerous sources of information, but at a superficial level. Unlike multitasking, which is driven by a desire to be productive and efficient, continuous partial attention is motivated by the desire to continuously connect and be connected in an effort not to miss anything. As Linda Stone remarks, “It is an always-on, anywhere, anytime, anyplace behavior, and it involves an artificial sense of constant crisis” (<https://lindastone.net/qa/continuous-partial-attention/>). Our students have a fear of missing out (“FOMO”), and their attention is often interrupted by notifications and alerts on their cell phones.

Although we have no control over our students’ behavior and whether they will ultimately succumb to the pull of distraction and procrastination, we can incorporate various activities in our online courses to encourage them to develop skills of self-directed learning. For example, you can facilitate greater self-awareness of their study habits and learning strategies by assigning introspective writing exercises where they answer questions such as: What tasks am I currently procrastinating? Is it because I’m unsure of how to do them, or afraid of doing them poorly? What activities do I gravitate to when I procrastinate? (Nilson 2013, 83)

Here I share a few strategies drawn primarily from Linda Nilson’s *Creating Self-Regulated Learners: Strategies to Strengthen Students’ Self-Awareness and Learning Skills* (Stylus, 2013). Again, self-regulation refers to a sub-skill of self-directed learning: how students approach learning tasks in our online courses.

You can introduce them to self-regulated learning from the outset by assigning a reading such as Robert Leamson’s (2002) article, “Learning (Your First Job)” available through the University of Georgia Center for Teaching and Learning: <http://www.cctl.uga.edu/uploads/main/mainLearningYourFirstJob.pdf>. It begins by emphasizing that learning is “not something that just happens to you, it is something that *you do to yourself*,” and then shares strategies for focusing attention, managing one’s time, studying, and preparing for exams.

You can encourage students to set goals for their learning by having them write a paper at the beginning of the course entitled “How I Earned an A in This Course” (Zander and Zander 2000). This exercise encourages students to envision concrete and attainable goals for their learning, and it also gives you a sense of their hopes for the course. You can have students revisit them at the end of the semester, reflecting on the extent to which they followed their strategic plan, when, how, and why they might have strayed, and how this impacted their actual performance in the course.

You can help them self-test their understanding of the course materials through reflective writing and visual mapping tools. You can do “learning logs” where they identify the main points of each reading, what they found most surprising, what they found most confusing, and why they found it confusing (Bean 2011). Or you could have them write double-column notes on the readings: one column with substantive notes similar to those of “learning logs” but another for their personal reactions (feelings, attitudes, values, beliefs, perspectives, prior knowledge, changes in their way of thinking). (Nilson 2013, 27) You can have them test their understanding through “mind dumps,” where they write down all they can remember about the readings, videos or podcasts, or have them create visual study tools that map out, integrate, and structure what they’ve learned (Nilson 2013, 33).

After you give students feedback on their work, you can have them complete meta-assignments that ask them to explain what they think our feedback means (Nilson 2013, 56), or write a letter to the next class about the paper or project: how to prepare for tackling the assignment, what strategies to take, what missteps to avoid, and the value of the assignment (Nilson 2013, 56).

Finally, you can have students reflect on their learning through course “wrappers”: at the beginning of the course, students write what they think the subject matter or discipline is about, how it’s done, and why it’s important, and then at the end of the course they revisit those questions and compare their answers (Nilson 2013, 87). Another closing activity might be short “Future Uses” papers where they identify the three most important concepts or skills they learned in the course, why they consider them important, and how they might use them in the future (Nilson 2013, 88; Svinicki 2004).

These are just some ways that we might help students develop skills of self-direction, self-regulation, and time-management so that they can be successful in our online courses.

Works Cited

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