

ONLINE LEARNING: STUDENT ROLE AND READINESS

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Abstract

Successful online learning requires a reconstruction of the roles, responsibilities, and practices of online instructors and their online students. It is essential to understand the dynamics of a range of online learning environments, the perceptions and pre-conceptions that exist, and how best to utilize the potential of current technology to overcome barriers to successful learning. Promoting student readiness is essential for successful learning experiences. Students need to be prepared for changing demands related to online learning with respect to technology, learning management, pedagogical practice and social roles. The purpose of this article is to examine and discuss student roles and responsibilities for learning online and strategies to promote student readiness.

Introduction

Online learning¹ is impacting current university practices and policies and quickly changing the fabric of higher education (Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1998). In the USA, the rapid and expanding use of online education (also called distance learning) in K-12 education, 2-year college and 4-year university courses has been documented by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003). The convergence of technological, instructional, and pedagogical developments (Bonk & King, 1998) has helped define a new paradigm of online teaching and learning. Successful learning by online students requires a pedagogy in which active and dynamic learning opportunities for student engagement can be facilitated and supported. Computer technologies allow many possibilities for interactive, distributive and collaborative learning (“The Report,” 1999). Understanding the pedagogical potential of technology tools for active learning is an important step in successfully implementing online learning.

Educators, researchers, and instructional designers are faced with the dual challenges of understanding the potential of the technology tools and designing instructional strategies for teaching and learning online. What leads to successful online teaching and learning? What are the experiences of students and instructors in this type of an environment? How do students learn? How do we prepare students for successful online learning? These are among the questions being discussed in the area. It is essential to understand the dynamics of the online learning environments, the perceptions and pre-conceptions that exist, and how best to utilize the potential of the technology to overcome barriers to successful learning. Students need to be prepared for changing demands related to online learning with respect to technology, learning management, pedagogical practice and social roles. The purpose of this article is to examine and discuss student roles and responsibilities for learning online and strategies to promote student readiness.

Student Readiness for Online Learning

Online learners need to understand the dynamics in an online setting, how online learning works; interactions, relations, perceptions, role of learners and instructors. Learners should have an understanding of the instructor’s role as a facilitator or a guide. Learners may have expectations of ‘instruction’, and they may feel that the instructor is not teaching when in fact teaching is in the form of facilitating, guiding, scaffolding learning. A student, when reflecting on her online learning experiences, noted:

I think that I am not going to understand what I am doing if someone doesn’t tell me. Or I just got lazy over the years. Oh, just tell me how to do it! I don’t want to read it [directions of how to perform the task].

For this student, this was her first online course. She feared she would not understand the course content if someone did not tell her what to do. She emphasized “This is a new type of learning for me.” For many students, classroom success was made possible by caring teachers who provided emotional and intellectual support – inadvertently making their students teacher dependent. When these students move into an online environment where the

¹ Online learning for the purposes of this paper is defined as any of several web-based formats used to provide instruction at a distance. The range includes courses where the students and the instructor never meet face-to-face to courses where approximately 30% of the learning interactions take place within the online environment.

requirement for self-directed and self-managed learning is far greater, they often may experience anxiety.

Interactions and relationships between instructor-student, student-to-student, and student-content are different than traditional face-to-face classrooms. Learners may adopt new personas and may not feel obligated or pressured to participate in online communications when they do not see each other (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). A learner who for a variety of social, linguistic or cultural reasons is less likely to talk, discuss, or ask questions in a face-to-face classroom, may become very articulate in an online setting. On the other hand, the absence or low level of social cues and emotions such as body language, tone and pitch may influence student learning and interaction. This aspect can set the stage for more uninhibited behavior on the part of students than would occur in face-to-face conversations as well as misunderstandings and misinterpretations (Berge, 1997).

The benefits of active learning versus passive learning are well documented (APA, 1993, 1997; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Creating active learning environments can be challenging in a face-to-face classroom and it may be equally challenging in an online classroom. There is a need for much more research on the pedagogy of online teaching and the utilization of tools afforded by the online environment to provide dynamic and active learning environments for students. Creating active, successful learning environment requires both the learner and the faculty to take active roles.

Concerning student learning, self-regulation appears as a recurring theme in the literature. McLoughlin and Marshall (2000) note that “effective learning requires a number of skills and cognitive abilities that are not merely intuitive, nor can they be assumed in novice university students or those unfamiliar with learning online.” (p.1). They further note that the skills needed by students include; articulation, self-regulation, self-evaluation skills, and a repertoire of learning strategies. Articulation means being an aware learner and being aware of one’s own thinking. Self-regulation is being able to plan and adjust learning strategies in order to achieve a goal or complete a task. Self-evaluation is being able to monitor understanding and having the capacity to seek help when needed².

Grabinger and Dunlap (2000), state that online learning environments afford greater opportunities for individualization and flexibility, thereby creating an increased demand for self-directed learning. They note also that students in an online learning environment require a set of “well-developed lifelong learning skills and strategies, such as goal-setting, action planning, learning-strategy selection and assessment, resource selection and evaluation, reflective learning and time management.” (p. 37). Savery (1998) describes these elements as components in the development of student ownership for learning. Wolfe (2000) states that there are greater demands placed on the learner in the online environment than in traditional learning environments. Lastly, Draves (1999), notes that self-direction and initiative are required for the learner to define learning and systematically explore the online context to meet personal goals.

Jung (2001) found in his literature analysis of web-based instruction that learners have autonomy in making decisions regarding their own learning. He states “learners engaged in Web-based instruction use certain cognitive strategies or knowledge to exercise their learning autonomy which maximizes learning and the construction of new knowledge” (p. 531). Jung’s (2001) analysis of fifty-eight articles showed that online learning requires that learners be collaborative as well as autonomous. He notes, “Both learner collaboration ... and learner autonomy seem to have emerged in web-based learning environments. Of course, web-based instruction can differ in the degree to which it accommodates these two elements.” (p. 532).

Successful online learners need to be self-regulated or in the process of learning how to become self-regulated learners. Self-regulated learners use opportunities to make decisions about several aspects of their own learning. They make decisions in the goal setting, planning, monitoring and assessment phases of the learning process. Self-regulated learners know how to learn, how they learn, how to reflect on their learning, how to initiate learning and how to use time management skills efficiently. Mastery of these skills enable online learners to make efficient use of their time and the available online resources.

² Collectively these phenomena are more commonly referred to as metacognition. (Flavell, 1972; Paris, & Winograd, 1990)

Instructor Readiness for Teaching Online

Concerning instructors, teaching online learning requires a reconstruction of their roles, responsibilities, and practices. Often, in the context of distance learning, the concept of transactional distance is discussed. Transactional distance (Moore & Kearsley, 1996) refers to a communications gap that may be created due to physical distance between participants and effect the development of shared understandings and perceptions. Simply telling a student to be more active in their own learning is insufficient. The instructor must create an environment that requires active interaction among the participants in the learning setting. Interactions and collaboration should be integrated to provide meaningful learning for students in online learning. More importantly a web of learning interactions will develop when instructors and learners work together collaboratively to construct knowledge (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Interaction among students and between students and instructors is critical to support effective learning and collaboration (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Furthermore, the intrinsic motivation to learn is fostered when interactions occur between learners (Wagner, 1997).

Instructors need to model for their students how to communicate effectively and properly using asynchronous and synchronous communication tools. This is important specifically because of the lack of physical presence and lack of body language in online environments. Proper behavior and an understanding of netiquette are essential skills for effective communication and although students are entering online environments with increasingly sophisticated skills and novices will learn through trial and error, having the instructor set the standard is a more effective strategy. Learners need to be aware of what, when and how to ask questions. If students email their instructor every time they have trouble with content or technology, they will be replicating their teacher-dependent behavior and may not be giving themselves a chance to explore and find answers to their questions on their own. Learner success in online environments can be improved when students are able to use the tools afforded by the environment. In combination with critical thinking, these tools can assist the learner in filtering through the tremendous amount of information they will encounter when searching online resources to obtain useful knowledge.

Online instructors need to understand the importance of building a supportive online learning community. Several researchers (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Schwier, 1999) have examined the phenomena of online communities and strategies for building communities of learners. Shaffer and Anderson (as cited in Palloff & Pratt, 1999) define community as “a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people share common practices; are interdependent, make decisions jointly, identify themselves with something larger than the sum of their relationships, make long-term commitment to well-being.” (p. 11). Palloff and Pratt (1999) emphasize that attention needs to be paid to developing a sense of community within the group participants in distance learning. Online learners need to be aware of the dynamics and importance of a learning community and collaborate and cooperate to share and construct knowledge and experience. Motivating other learners, acknowledging and appreciating and encouraging other members of the learning community can foster learning and provide motivation.

Some suggestions

Instructors need to understand how to use the currently available online tools to realize the pedagogical potential of online learning. For example, instructors should contact students via email prior to the start of the course. Instructors could provide students with a technology skills and needs assessment survey to obtain valuable background information on the current skills with online technologies of this group of learners. Instructors could also provide an orientation for the learners and access to the online course. Clear expectations, guidelines and code of conduct as well as special needs of learners could to be discussed and addressed. The structure of the course and organization of the materials could to be provided and discussed for user-friendly access. Peer support can be structured into the course and a frequently asked questions area provided to help students with questions as well as institutional support.

Learners need to be aware of self-regulation and self-regulation strategies. A learning styles questionnaire may help instructors as well as learners by allowing students become more aware if how they learn and what they might need to do to gain or enhance their skills in particular areas such as self-regulation. Instructors can integrate activities such as reflective online journaling, problem-based learning, authentic activities and authentic assessment, case studies in addition to multiple sources or ways for learners with different learning styles and strategies. The widely used Minute Paper format can be used within a reflective online journal to allow instructors to check for learning and progress. Support systems that include online discussions, peer to peer tasks, collaborative buddies, mentors,

self and peer assessment, social coffehouse/cybercafe with games, anonymous feedback forum can enable pedagogical and social preparation and development.

Learners need to understand group processes and effectively play individual roles in group learning. Thus, in the online environment, community building and communication are essential so that group learning can be enhanced and strengthened. Learners should show presence and trust to the community, initiate dialogue, and mediate communication if required. Instructors may need to orient students for collaboration and for group processes, and structure collaboration and dialogue into the course. Learner may have roles such as editor, summarizer, task leader, group discussion leader, mentor, expert, moderator, peer reviewer.

Conclusion

Faculty who teach online need to be aware that traditional courses do not necessarily prepare students for the level of interdependence and independent learning required in an online course (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). The online instructor must provide an active learning environment in which learners take ownership for their learning. Traditional and face-to-face learning and online learning need to encourage and support active and self-regulated learning. Instructors need to understand student behavior and students need to understand online learning and how people may behave in online settings. Understanding student characteristics is important to prepare students for online learning.

Students need to learn to become active learners and seek active learning strategies in their learning. Learner autonomy as well as collaborative strategies needs to be negotiated for the effectiveness of learning. Group processes and how collaboration can be facilitated need to be taught to students during their education. Instructors need to know the group processes and dynamics as well as strategies of how to engage students in effective communication and learning. Recognition of a student's capabilities and limitations, an understanding of student expectations and motivations, and the personas they may take during online learning can help encourage active learning.

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