SELF-DISCIPLINE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

By Dr. Bruce Johnson

Self-discipline is a skill. If you don't have it now, you can develop it (and should develop it as an online student). Developing this skill may not only make you successful in college, but perhaps in life, as well.

If you look for a definition of self-discipline through a search engine you're likely to find a description that includes self-control and willpower. From the perspective of an online student, what are the components of self-discipline that relate to your classroom performance and academic success? Based upon my experience as an online instructor, I believe it is an overall academic approach that consists of the following components:

1.   Your method of addressing challenges.
As an example, when you start a new online class there is a lot of information to review, from the course syllabus to course materials, your instructor's expectations, school policies and procedures, etc. Have you developed the discipline necessary to make time to review all of this information and do you have a method of organizing it so you can readily access it when needed?

2.   Your approach to classroom interactions.
You will have discussions with an instructor and classmates who are not visible and may not be online at the same time you are and yet, you are expected to maintain an active presence in the class. Your instructor will not likely provide reminders that you have not posted enough messages or provided enough substance in your responses – until after the class week has concluded. Are you disciplined enough to take the initiative and make the time necessary to post meaningful messages on a frequent basis?

3.   Your self-management.
This involves how you make choices about the use of your time and establish a sense of order for your life, including how you manage stress and avoid procrastination. You can either be disciplined and maintain control through conscious choices that support your goals or follow uncontrolled desires and whims that create distractions to what you want to accomplish.

4.   Your ability to develop persistence.

I've found that many students have a high degree of self-motivation at the beginning of the class term and then by midway point that motivation begins to wane as the reality of a demanding academic schedule sets in. The online classroom environment contributes to this issue because your instructor is not able to coach you in person. You must rely upon your own internalized sense of determination. If you can persist with a positive attitude and disciplined approach to your studies, you will likely overcome doubts and fear of failure.

Self-Discipline and Work

As I considered this subject, a question came to mind: doesn't going to work teach us these qualities? Whether you are employed or self-employed, your job is a responsibility and there is an expectation you will produce a work product or service. So does this responsibility develop self-discipline? I believe that it does to a certain degree; however, at work we tend to think about our motivating reasons for being there rather than how we consider our self-management. For example, many adults are motivated to work because of compensation and benefits. It is an input, output mode or frame of reference. When the same adult enters a classroom, school work does not produce the same results. The payoff is typically in the future (grades, career development, etc.), which leaves the work or tasks in the present without an immediate reward. This is why I encourage students to periodically visualize their goals as a means of staying motivated and maintaining a disciplined approach.

One career that teaches self-discipline is the military. Michael Anthony, author of Mass Casualties: A Young Medic's True Story of Death, Destruction, and Dishonor in Iraq, shared his perspective in What the Military Teaches About Self-Discipline. Anthony states that when someone enters the military, "discipline must be ground into him. He has to gain physical strength, endurance, knowledge, and spirit quickly. Day by day, morning and night, he is pushed to do more than he thinks he can. He is forced to stand tall and look sharp. He must run everywhere and never give an excuse for failure." What is the result of learning this level of self-discipline? Anthony is writing from his own perspective and concluded that "now he is a confident individual, ready to tackle the projects that those around him fear are impossible." The military is one example of work that develops employee self-discipline.

If you take a similar approach to your school work by working on projects or assignments that may seem too difficult at first, you will likely find this self-discipline not only helps you complete your assignments on time – it also allows you to experience your personal best in the classroom.

Tools for Development of Self-Discipline

1.   Create a schedule.

You need to establish a schedule every week to plan your class activities. It can be easy to think "I'll wait until the weekend to complete my school work;" however, an online class usually has requirements that must be met during the week – including discussion question responses and participation posts. In addition, most assignments require time to conduct a search for information, along with the time necessary to produce a well-written paper.

2.   Manage your time.

B. Jean Mandernach, Emily Donnelli, and Amber Dailey-Hebert of Park University conducted a study, Learner Attribute Research Juxtaposed with Online Instructor Experience: Predictors of Success in the Accelerated, Online Classroom. The participants were "experienced online educators" who "were surveyed to identify practical skills, strategies or factors most likely to lead to success for students enrolled in online courses." The results of the study found that the "key to online learner success is partitioning the necessary time available to devote to the online class and the time-management skills to utilize this time effectively. While time-on-task is always a relevant factor in educational success, the importance of time is intensified in the self-directed, fast-paced nature of the online classroom."

This study reminds students that allocating time is just the first step to effective self-discipline. You must also utilize that time wisely and this means avoiding distractions, minimizing interruptions, addressing any potential competing goals and priorities, and creating a work space or environment that is conducive to working productively.

3.   Develop effective habits.

Developing self-discipline requires a specific way of thinking or approach to how you will perform and interact. Many students need to develop new habits or patterns of thoughts and actions that help them stay focused. In The New York Times article Can You Become a Creature of New Habits?, the following is noted about habits: "comfort is the realm of existing habit. Stress occurs when a challenge is so far beyond current experience as to be overwhelming. It's that stretch zone in the middle — activities that feel a bit awkward and unfamiliar — where true change occurs." If you believe right now that circumstances control you, and you are not completing your assignments to the best of your abilities, consider changing your routine and developing new habits that are supportive of a disciplined approach.

As an online student you are responsible for your performance in class, which is a reflection of the goals you want to complete and results in an outcome that is indicated by your grades and knowledge acquired. Learn the art of self-discipline by managing your thoughts, your time, and your attitude about learning. The more you create productive habits, the more likely you will experience academic success.