FIVE-STEP STRATEGY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS WITH ONLINE LEARNING

Students that are enthusiastic about online learning cite numerous reasons for preferring the virtual format, yet it's *flexibility* that is extolled most often – the ability to study and learn on '*my time*'. Ironically, it is this convenience factor that can cause some online students to procrastinate, or worse fail to engage in the learning process at all, which often leads to students dropping out or performing poorly.

As discussed in previous posts, a key factor to student success in the online environment is self-direction, *the capability and willingness to direct one's own education*. Online students, more so than traditional students, need to be independent and take responsibility for their learning. Self-directed learning involves a specific skill set: organization, motivation, and a sense of confidence.

The question—can online students 'learn' to be self-directed, or is self-direction innate? Most educators would agree there is an element of both at play. Intrinsic motivation is needed for learners of any age in any situation, though for the most part self-direction competencies can be learned, that is specific behaviours can be practiced and implemented. In this post I write for two sets of readers, first for online students. I've included a five-step strategy that includes a set of behaviours 'real' students have identified as crucial to their success in completing online college courses for credit. For educators, I've included a set of suggestions, actions that support students in becoming self-directed learners, one of which involves giving the responsibility to the learner, a critical component in the instructor-learner relationship.

Five-step Success Strategy for Students
I've customized the following strategy based on three credible sources of 'real' online students: 1) a student body of online learners at a four-year college (my workplace), 2) a group of successful online students from a study 'How Students Develop Online Learning Skills' and, 3) from my experience as an online student.

Step One: Read the syllabus. The syllabus is a critical resource for any course. It is the road map or 'game plan' for the entire course—get to know it well. Print a copy on the first day of class, read through it *twice*. At the same time highlight, then record the due dates for assignments and threaded discussions in your personal calendar. If you need reminders, add those too. Once the course gets going, review assignment instructions, discussion topics, etc. at the beginning *of each week* and consult grading guidelines and check dues dates [again]. You'll be amazed how much easier assignments become once you are [very] familiar with the instructions.

Online Student: *"I had work and family responsibilities when I took online courses – life would get crazy! After the first course when I missed the due dates for assignments one too many times, I was determined not to get behind again. The most effective method for me was to enter the due dates in my calendar. I was then able to get a handle on what was due when."*

A note about due dates: if you know it will be impossible to submit an assignment by the due date because of an urgent life situation (illness, work disaster, etc.), contact your instructor as soon as possible, **before** the assignment is due. You will get far more consideration from the instructor by contacting him or her before rather than after-the-fact.

Step Two: Plan weekly study times. Studying, participating in forums and completing assignments in an online class can be challenging, even more so when juggling multiple responsibilities. Time management is vital for online students. Planning a regular study time, blocking off set times each week is what successful online students do most often. According to the study referenced in this post, 79% of students identified this method of managing their time as critical to their success (Roper, 2007). Plan a schedule and stick to it.

Online Student: *"Setting and staying to specific study days was one factor that worked for me. For example, in the evenings throughout the week, I read the lessons. Weekends were generally reserved for working on assignments. Saturdays were also devoted to online postings and building on what I had submitted.*

Step Three: Log onto the course home a minimum three times per week. Logging onto the course home page consistently each week is associated with higher grades for students according to several studies on online student behavior. Get into the habit of checking in consistently, even daily, to read discussion posts, check for instructor announcements and/or review course materials. While you are logged on, get involved and be an active participant in discussions. Though threaded discussions may appear daunting when you first get started, *everyone* has something of value to contribute. By logging on consistently each week, reading and responding to classmate postings, you will begin to feel part of a community, and enhance your learning experience at the same time.

Online Student: *"The experience was greatly enriched by the relationships and interaction with my fellow students. It amazes me how well we got to know each other even though we were often thousands of miles apart and were only virtual classmates. I learned as much from other students as I did from the instructors*."

Step Four: Ask questions. Instructors want to help, they want students to be successful and expect students to ask questions. When I work with course instructors this is one complaint that is expressed most often about online students, '*why don't they ask*?' The virtual space in online learning can be a barrier, if you let it get in the way. If you have a question about course content, need clarification on a difficult concept – ask. And when you *do* ask a question, make it count. Before you post a question, know *what* you are asking and *why*. Be clear and concise in your communication. You'll be glad you asked!

Step Five: Make connections with fellow students. Connecting with online classmates and building a learning community is easier than you might think given all of the social tools and applications available today. Reach out to one student, send an email to ask a question, or create a Facebook group for your class, and even create a small study group.

If assigned to a group project, try Google Docs, which is a terrific collaborative tool, and while in Google, try Google+ Hangouts, an application that allows you to video chat and discuss in real time, even share documents and Web pages.

To all online students: I encourage you to apply and try-out at least one of the five suggestions outlined here. Though there is no perfect strategy that guarantees online success, trying at least one strategy is better than no strategy. The critical factor in online learning success is your role as the learner – the learning experience is what **you** make of it. Be an active participant, ask questions and enjoy the opportunities that learning provides.

Recommendations for Educators

Educators have a role in students' self-directed learning too, and that is to *give* the learner the responsibility of learning, expect success and be there. Below are a few suggestions:

1. Outline expectations for students thoroughly, By articulating expectations and the role of the student in the course, we 'give' the student the responsibility.

2. Expect questions in the first two weeks of the course. This is the 'syllabus blues' phase. Students require more support during this phase than any other. See my post here that describes this phase in detail.

3. Respond promptly to student questions. The twenty-four hour rule is a good benchmark.

Don't expect students to know *how* to be self-directed, they may need to develop this skill set. Direct students to resources that support students in developing their *self-direction* skills.

Online learning has its rewards for students and instructors, as well as its challenges as we've explored in this article. But with a sound strategy for learning, a strategy for education that is specific to the online environment, students have the opportunity to be successful online students and life-long learners. I very much like this quote that applies to both students and instructors, '*learning is not a spectator sport*'.

Adapted from, *Online Learning Insights*, by Debbie Morrison.
https://onlinelearninginsights.wordpress.com/2012/09/28/five-step-strategy-for-student-success-with-online-learning.