Building Skills for E-Learning Success

Ryan Watkins

For many, the years spent sitting behind desks in both academic and training classrooms have molded their perceptions of what learning is, where learning takes place, and how to be successful. From these perceptions, many of us have actually become quite effective in our skills for interacting, learning, and assessing our progress from behind the desk of the traditional classroom environment. E-learning, however, typically challenges each of these perceptions about learning and, as a result, the transition from the traditional classroom to the online classroom can be difficult for many learners.

Ryan Watkins, Associate Professor,
George Washington University.
Web: www.ryanrwatkins.com

In response, e-learning courses can (and should) offer learners both the opportunities and resources that are necessary to build useful learning strategies, skills, and techniques for adapting to the online classroom. By building on the achievements of "student success" programs (like those offered at more than 800 colleges and universities in the United States), e-learning courses and programs can achieve improvements in both the persistence and achievement of learners. According the Joe Cuseo (n.d.), professor of psychology and Director of First-Year Seminar at Marymount College, student success courses, tutorials, lectures, and activities have been shown to increase student retention, improve academic performance, and raise the number of students progressing toward graduation.

These programs, which typically focus on developing both study habits and lifelong learning skills, can also be adapted for online learners to improve the odds of their retention and achievement. For

online educational programs and corporate training alike, the success of e-learners is central to their goals and objectives, and the persistence of learners toward the completion of online courses is therefore a necessary requirement for success. Online courses cannot, however, always depend on the study skills and learning strategies that learners bring from the traditional classroom to translate into success in online courses.

While technologies have changed many aspects of how learners study and how courses are taught, the metrics of persistence and performance continue to be used by institutional decision-makers in defining success. Consequently, it is both to our benefit and the benefit of the learners to design online courses that include components intended to improve the study skills of e-learners. From course activities that develop time management skills to examples of effective online communication strategies, as instructors we can help learners develop functional e-learning study skills as an integrated part of our curriculum.

For most online learners, the development of effective study skills is critical to their achievement and retention (i.e., their success and our success). After all, "[s]tudents enrolling in an e-learning class must not only master the course's subject matter but also possess the technical skills to participate in the course and study effectively" (Arabasz, Pirani, & Fawcett, 2003). And, while many traditional study habits can be adapted for application in online courses, the development of new high-tech learning skills is also necessary for e-learning success (Watkins, 2004; Watkins & Corry, 2005).

For online instructors, concerns of student readiness for distance education are central to how we plan and deliver online courses. While many learners come with remarkable skills for searching retail Websites and downloading music from the Internet, few have experience or knowledge of how to effectively use online technologies to advance their studies.

In a report prepared for Educause, Morgan (2003) affirmed that, despite the popular myth that students are technologically savvy and converse mainly through instant messaging and e-mail, the study illustrated that faculty members discover that many students are not proficient with technology. As a result, building skills for communicating effectively when using e-mail, synchronous chat rooms, or asynchronous discussion boards, are among the basic study skills that many online learners must adopt to be successful in the high-tech classroom. While formal courses or tutorials on developing e-learning study skills may be a desirable first option, most of us (and our students) can not afford to wait for the development of comprehensive courses or tools.

In lieu of a formal study skills program (e.g., course, tutorials, mentoring), I suggest that we should build into our course lectures, activities, and assignments a number of strategies and techniques to improve the study skills of learners. For example, this can be done by including models of useful note-taking strategies in the course materials or by designing activities to require the application of effective online communication skills for their completion.

For instance, instead of requiring learners to merely submit a paper at the end of an assignment, instructors can require within the assignment the demonstration of effective note-taking skills, appropriate outlining techniques, or the use of peer-review strategies. In another course, learners could contribute to the rules and policies that will be used to structure the course's synchronous or asynchronous online discussions. By involving learners in the development of guidelines related to online etiquette and protocols, e-learners can be given the opportunity to reflect on the other strategies they will be using to

communicate online with their peers and instructors.

For every course there is a variety of techniques that can be used to incorporate the development of effective e-learning study skills. By adding these to the design of our online courses, we can often improve both the retention and performance of our e-learners. As an alternative to more formal and independent study skills courses or tutorials, this is one option we have for improving the capacity of learners to successfully make the transition from the traditional to the online classroom.

References

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