Creating Environments to Set the Tone for Future Learning of

Self-Regulation in Online Classes

Dana Greiner
University of Phoenix
Wausau, WI 54401
United States
dana.greiner@phoenix.edu

Stephanie McDowell
University of Phoenix
El Paso, TX 79924
United States
sbmcdowell@email.phoenix.edu

Vanessa Paskaitis
University of Phoenix
Harrisburg, PA 17110
United States
vanhaines@email.phoenix.edu

Abstract: Research has demonstrated that self-regulation is necessary to learn effectively. Self-regulation refers to one's ability to monitor one's own behaviors, assess those behaviors based on their own standards, and provide punishments and reinforcements for those behaviors accordingly (Slavin, 2006). Research has also addressed specific strategies and tools to provide for students to help in this process; however, we believe before those skills can even be taught, an environment must be created that will foster the learning of those skills down the line. Thus, this paper will focus solely on creating an environment to foster the eventual learning of self-regulation skills. A classroom environment in which students feel comfortable, clearly understand expectations, and receive timely responses and quality feedback allows students to gain confidence and trust the instructor. This type of environment sets the tone for the instructor then to share, model and shape specific strategies in students leading to improved self-regulation.

Introduction

Research has demonstrated that self-regulation is necessary to learn effectively. Self-regulation refers to one's ability to monitor one's own behaviors, assess those behaviors based on one's own standards, and provide punishments and reinforcements for those behaviors accordingly (Slavin, 2006). Barnard, Lan, To, Paton and Lai (2009) suggest that self-regulation skills play an even more important role in online classes than in

traditional learning environments. In an online learning environment, the likelihood of a negative learning outcome due to lack of self-regulation skills may increase (2009). In our experiences, students increasingly enter online classes lacking essential behaviors necessary for self-regulation and effective learning. Instructors must understand self-regulation and how it affects the learning process, as well as provide students the necessary tools to achieve self-regulation. Research has also addressed specific strategies and tools to provide for students to help in this process; however, we believe before those skills can even be taught, an environment has to be created that will foster the learning of those skills down the line. A classroom environment in which students feel comfortable, clearly understand expectations, and receive timely responses and quality feedback allows students to gain confidence and trust the instructor. Perceptions of confidence and competence can translate into self-determination and intrinsic motivation. This type of environment sets the tone for the instructor then to share, model and shape specific strategies in students leading to improved self-regulation.

Self-Regulation

Social learning theory introduced the crucial concept of self-regulation, which refers to the ability to monitor one's own behavior, judge the behavior based on one's own standards, and institute consequences of reinforcement or punishment (Slavin, 2006). These behaviors, once learned, can be transferred to other situations and practiced until they are habits, resulting in individuals taking responsibility for setting and meeting their own goals and personal standards against which they judge their behaviors (2006). Self-regulated learning stresses autonomy and control, with the individual observing, guiding, and regulating behaviors toward goals that include increasing knowledge and improvement of self (Paris & Paris, 2001).

Self-regulation involves three related behaviors: self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reaction (Kozlowski & Bell, 2006). Self-monitoring refers to cognitively observing one's own thoughts, behaviors, and situations, as well as focusing attention on behaviors that correspond with goals (2006). Self-evaluation refers to assessment or comparison of current performance to a desired standard (2006). Self-reactions are based on self-evaluations and either result in more attention and perseverance to a task or withdrawal from the task (2006). For example, for students, the belief there is progress and that goals will be attained will increase self-efficacy and maintain motivation, which are two additional and important pieces of the self-regulation puzzle (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997).

Self-regulation requires that students are active learners, with the ability to self-motivate, set goals, and understand consequences (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002; Zimmerman, 1996). Self-regulation also requires that students use metacognitive skills, such as strategic planning, monitoring, and adapting (2002; 1996). Many studies show the effectiveness of teaching students the use of self-regulatory processes, including study strategies, setting goals, self-monitoring, and the importance of self-efficacy beliefs, rather than managing them (Perry, 1998; Zimmerman, 1996). Self-monitoring or self-observation leads to the perception of progress and can motivate the students to improve

(Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). The self-evaluation process leads to more competence and higher self-efficacy (1996). Higher self-efficacy influences the choice of tasks, level of effort expended, and degree of persistence (1997). Students with higher self-efficacy tend to select more challenging tasks, expend more effort, persist to overcome the challenges and experience success (1997). These students are also then likely to implement additional self-regulatory strategies, including task concentration, time management, and strategy adjustment as needed (1997).

Self-regulated learners demonstrate greater strategy use and more awareness of which strategies are effective in certain situations (Perry, 1998; Zimmerman, 1996). These students are more successful in school (1996). They understand, value and engage in learning, as well as, approach tasks with creativity, diligently achieve goals, and proactively seek help when they do not have the information needed to meet a goal (1998; 1996). Additionally, they are aware when they comprehend a problem or possess a skill to solve a problem, and they actively find a way to overcome challenges (1998; 1996). Self-regulation substantially empowers students' academic success (1996). When the students are able to see overcoming challenges as part of their own self-regulation, they will begin to demand responsibility for their own learning and potentially have a shift toward intrinsic motivation for the learning process (1996).

Creating the Environment

For students to learn to self-regulate and become intrinsically motivated to learn, the classroom environment must create opportunities for students to capitalize on what they desire to do inherently (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Individuals are naturally curious and self-motivated (2000). They are inspired, strive to learn, push themselves to master new skills and enjoy applying their talents and strengths (2000). Environments that support competence and confidence lead to greater internalization and integration of learning (2000).

Students need to believe they are competent (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When students experience success, their levels of self-efficacy are increased, resulting in beliefs that they have the abilities needed to perform the same tasks successfully in the future (Ormrod, 2004). They are more likely to perform a task or see value in the task, rather than feeling forced to perform a task (2004). Additionally, students are more likely to think and behave creatively in relation to the tasks, to enjoy the tasks, and experience successful outcomes (2004).

So, how do we create this type of online learning environment in which students begin to experience the confidence and competence to eventually learn self-regulation? There are several components that we believe are necessary.

> 1) Creating this environment begins in the first contact with students. Rogers (1969) proposed the instructor sets the tone, mood, and climate of the classroom. Instructors should post individual welcome messages to all students that convey a positive, warm and friendly tone, suggesting an environment in which students

can be comfortable and feel cared for. If students respond to the messages, we find it imperative that the instructor engage the students and get to know them. A study by Costello and Welch (2014) found that students need to feel that they are personally cared for in the classroom. When students feel cared for and comfortable, they are more likely to feel more confident in the class.

2) Sheridan and Kelly (2010) suggest, based on their study findings, that students value timely communication quite highly. This is especially important in an online setting. When instructors respond to the questions and concerns of students within 24 hours or less, students perceive that the instructor truly is there for them. Within these responses to questions, instructors can also begin providing information for students about where to find information on their own. When students are able to locate information to answer their own questions, this increases confidence and competence. As part of instructor presence in the classroom, students want to know that the instructor is there to meet their needs (Sheridan and Kelly, 2010). Timely responsiveness is also necessary for feedback. Students want to know how they did on an assignment. Providing this information in a timely manner allows them the opportunity to use the feedback on their next assignment. When students receive prompt responses to questions and timely feedback, they feel supported, which can lead to increased confidence and competence in the learning process.

3) Rogers (1969) also noted it is up to the instructor to clarify the goals of the individual and the class. Students can only reach goals and take responsibility for them if they understand the goals (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). From the beginning of a class, instructors must provide clear and concise explanations of expectations. For example, we believe students should have a good understanding of the focus of an assignment and how it will be graded. Understanding this goal helps the students be more confident that they can complete the assignment successfully, in turn increasing self-esteem and feelings of competence.

4) Instructor feedback plays a significant role, as well. Students essentially learn the behaviors to evaluate their own work based on feedback from their instructors (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In a study by Sheridan and Kelly (2010), students desire feedback, especially feedback that specifically indicates what they did well and where/how they can improve. Costello and Welch (2014) found that students are more engaged with instructors who are positive, prompt, and consistent. Feedback should guide students toward higher order learning goals, contain a balance of praise and constructive criticism, and be timely (2006). Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) take this a step further to suggest feedback should be ongoing. They propose students will learn more effectively with the opportunity for resubmission or two-stage assignments, in which instructors provide feedback and the students can immediately apply the feedback prior to a final submission (2006). In this feedback model, stakes are lower, increasing the motivation and self-esteem necessary for self-regulation (2006). Essentially, feedback should "help students troubleshoot their own performance and self-correct" (2006).

All of the above lead to the building of rapport, a "mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond" between students and instructors, which also has been found to create rapport between students and other students in the class (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Students enter a class wanting to be liked by the instructor and other students. When this rapport is built and connectedness is achieved, competence and confidence are increased. Additionally, learning goals are positively affected (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Students are then ready to learn self-regulation strategies and tools.

Conclusion

Self-regulation involves being reflective and metacognitive during learning (Paris & Paris, 2001). Motivation is crucial to this process. Students must be motivated to give effort, to persevere during difficulty, to set goals that are within reach, and to feel self-efficacy about their achievements (2001). Self-regulation, as such, bears great importance in terms of overall student success. It is imperative to create an environment that will foster this learning.

A class environment that sets the tone for this learning is one in which students feel cared for, feel valued and feel confident that the instructor is there for them. This relationship begins with the first "Hello! Welcome to class" message, is followed by clear and concise explanations of goals, timely responses, quality feedback and builds from there. It is at this point that students are now confident and feel competent to begin learning specific strategies for self-regulation.

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