The success of the unprepared student in the distance education classroom in higher education

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Abstract

Is online learning for everyone? The online learner must be more independent and take a more active role in their responsibility as a learner. How will the unprepared student succeed in the online environment? The purpose of this paper is to delve into defining learner characteristics needed to succeed in the distance education classroom. By looking at the learner characteristics of the unprepared student, as compared to the characteristics of a successful online learner, we can explore ways to prepare them for success in the distance education classroom.

Keywords: unprepared student, online learner characteristics, online learner, distance education

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem at hand is to determine if the unprepared student has the learner characteristics necessary to succeed in an online environment. This paper will attempt to identify students who can succeed in online learning and students who do not have the necessary learning qualities to achieve success in a distance education class. In addition to analyzing the learner characteristics of the online learner and comparing them to the unprepared student, this paper will propose a self-checklist of learner qualities that was administered to three groups of students.

For the purpose of this paper, students from Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) were chosen to complete the checklist. The three groups used were: seniors from a senior synthesis online course, freshmen from the computer science department and Northpointe regional campus, and freshmen from the IUP Punxsutawney Campus. The Punxsutawney Campus of Indiana University of Pennsylvania is a First-year Experience Campus and accepted to this campus are identified specifically on their academic records. Students at this regional campus are either marginalized or unprepared students. The checklist was administered in a classroom setting. The results of the three groups were analyzed to identify individuals who need remedial assistance toward the goal of achieving success in the distance education environment.

2. WHO IS THE VIRTUAL LEARNER?

According to Dabbagh (2007), early profiles of most virtual learners were adults with occupational, social, and family commitments. As early as 1926 classic distance education settings were correspondence or home study. The average age was 34 years; 66% male; 25% have a college degree; over 50% have had some college education; and over 75% are married. Home study students were also described as self-motivated, goal-oriented, and disciplined self-starters.

Another study shows that the typical online learner falls into one of the following categories: nontraditional, a full time worker, a parent, someone living in a rural area, a female with children, or a person with a disability. (Baiteneh, 2001 as cited in Fink, 2007)

Dabbagh (2007) also notes that the current profile of the online distance learner can be characterized as emerging, responsive to rapid technological innovations and new learning paradigms, and progressively including a younger age bracket. Generation Xers (born 1960-1980) continue to represent the majority of online distance education learners, generation Nexters (born 1980 – 2000) will soon represent a sizable portion of this population, bringing with them new communication and technological skill sets. Seckel (2007) states that online students are often technically prepared for online courses due to the increased use of the Internet; however, there is more to being successful online learners than use of the technology.

3. PROFILE OF THE UNPREPARED STUDENT

"The number of academically unprepared and at-risk students enrolling in colleges and universities is increasing. In a national survey of college professors conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 44% of college faculty members reported that their students "are ill prepared for the demands of higher education" (Sanoff, 2006 p. I as cited in Gabriel, 2008, p. I) Gabriel (2008) states that the results from the American College Testing Program (ACT) in 2006 support the professors' perception. These results show that 49% of high school graduates do not have the reading skills they need to succeed in college. For those who attend college, about 25% of first-time students at 4-year colleges and universities require at least one year of remedial courses. "Most at-risk students have no idea what it takes to succeed academically at the college level when they first begin." (Gabriel, 2008, p. 17) "It is estimated that approximately 45 percent of beginning students participate in some form of academic support or basic skills courses" (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997 as cited in Engstrom, 2008 p 7)

Gabriel (2008, P. I) also describes the attitude of many of today's colleges' students through the words of Weimer (2002):

> Students now arrive at college less well prepared than they once did. They often lack solid basic skills and now work many hours to pay for college and sometimes a car….Many students lack confidence in themselves as learners and do not make responsible learning decisions…Having little self-confidence and busy lives motivates many students to look for easy educational options, not ones that push them hard…Obviously, these descriptions are not characteristic of all students, but most faculty quickly agree that teaching college students today is far more challenging than it once was (pp. 95-96)

The lack of self-confidence in the unprepared learner is concerning because, as Dabbagh (2007) states, "A student's academic self-concept was also shown to be a key predictor for success in a distance education setting". Based on this research, if student's lack confidence in themselves as learners and do not make responsible learning decisions, they will struggle in the online course. Self-motivation was cited as an important factor of success in the online classroom by Palloff & Pratt (2003) as well as Simonson, et al, (2006 and 2009) Most important for learners to realize is that online learning is most suitable for independent learners who communicate well through writing and have self-discipline.

Another aspect to consider with the unprepared student is that they may be technologically unprepared. For many people, access to the opportunities and knowledge computers and the Internet offer is impossible. The discrepancy between the "haves" and "have-nots" concerning computer technology is commonly referred to as the *digital divide*. (Evans & Martin & Poatsy, 2009 p 25)

Seckel (2007) suggests that when a student enrolls in online courses without these skills, they often struggle. The profile of the unprepared student does not seem to fit the profile of a successful online learner. That

does not mean, however, that no unprepared, at-risk students should take an online course.

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SUCCESSFUL ONLINE LEARNER

"The distance learner can be of any age, have attained any educational level, and have a variety of education needs. One pervasive characteristic of the distance learner is an increased commitment to learning. For the most part, these learners are self-starters, and appear to be highly motivated." (Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., Zvacek, 2009, p. 162)

Some qualities of a successful learner in the online classroom are that the student should: (those qualities underlined are the most important for the at-risk student, as these are qualities upon which they need to develop)

1. Be comfortable with learning and interacting with others through technology
2. Be willing to interact effectively with peers and engage in group processes
3. *Have the ability to communicate effectively through writing*
4. Have the presence of mind to think ideas through before responding
5. *Be self-motivated and self-disciplined, and able to structure and manage time effectively*
6. *Be goal-oriented*
7. Have the ability to conduct self-study as necessary and construct knowledge to fill in informational gaps that may occur in an online lesson.
8. Have the ability to commit the amount of time the course requires
9. Be open-minded about sharing life, work, and educational experiences as part of the learning process.
10. Be willing to take risks and be creative
11. Be willing to "speak up" if problems arise
12. *Have the ability to focus and ignore distraction in one's own learning environment*
13. Have a commitment to the belief that high-quality learning can take

place in the absence of a traditional classroom
14. Be sufficiently flexible to accept teaching and learning in a different context and have the ability to adapt to learning successfully in an online environment. (Simonson, M., & Smaldino, S. & Albright, M. & Zvacek, 2006, p 235)

Dabbagh (2007) summarizes the following characteristics and skills perceived as critical to the success of the online learner:

1. *Having a strong academic self-concept*
2. *Exhibiting fluency in the use of online learning technologies*
3. *Possessing interpersonal and communication skills*
4. Understanding and valuing interaction and collaborative learning
5. Possessing an internal locus of control
6. *Exhibiting self-directed learning skills*
7. Exhibiting a need for affiliating

5. EXISTING PREPARATORY PROGRAMS

Several existing programs recognize the need for preparing the online learner. Penn State's World Campus has a video on online learning, accessed at http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/orientation.shtml. Boise State University has a 'boot camp' orientation, which is an asynchronous online training program that teaches students the technical and asynchronous learning skills, details available at http://www.sloan-c.org/node/310. To prepare its students for their online course experience, Berkeley College has included an orientation site for its online degree students, a required online preparatory courses that prepares online students to understand the particulars of online learning and navigate the course management system, an online library orientation, a special one-stop shopping center online degree site with messages from advisors and students services, an online tutoring site that is always available to help students with course material and writing assistance, and ongoing faculty and technical support. The University of Baltimore has a readiness assessment

survey, available at http://ubonline.edu/readiness.html. The survey helps the student assess their readiness to take an online course. It helps them determine if online learning would fit their lifestyle and academic needs by asking questions like 'why are you taking an online course', and 'do you schedule your work time and follow through with deadlines', 'are you comfortable with computers?'. Although these orientations, surveys, etc may be proactive in helping the student become aware of what it is like to be an online student, there is no direct interaction with the student. This would not address the needs of the unprepared student. The question remains, how can the unprepared, at-risk student be successful learning from a distance? It starts with asking the perspective online student the question, is online learning right for you?" More importantly, 'what do you have to do to make online learning right for you'? How does the unprepared student change their behavior, change their perspective toward learning?

6. PREPARING THE UNPREPARED STUDENT FOR LEARNING AT A DISTANCE

How do students know if they can learn at a distance? This can be accomplished by having students complete a self-assessment checklist. This would determine their ability to succeed as a learner at a distance. This checklist incorporates the attributes needed to be successful as a learner in a distance education class as cited by the studies in this paper. The checklist used was created by Palloff & Pratt, 2003. Following is that checklist with the results of the three groups completing the checklist. The complete result list is in the appendices.

Self-Assessment Checklist

1. I have access to a computer or the equipment required for an online class. **Results: Not surprising, all three groups had an over-whelmingly YES answer.**
2. I am not intimidated by using technology for learning. **Results: The seniors and regular freshmen had a YES of 89% and 92% respectively. However, the unprepared student had a 68% YES.**

3. I feel comfortable using the computer for basic word processing, e-mail, and to access the Internet. **Results: Again no surprise that all three groups had an over-whelming YES answer for this question.**
4. I am a good time manager, can meet deadlines, and can keep track of assignments **Results: The seniors had a 100% YES for this question but both groups of freshmen seem to need assistance with time management.**
5. I am an independent learner. **Results: Twenty-two percent of the unprepared group felt they were not independent learners.**
6. I am self-disciplined. **Results: All groups thought they were self-disciplined.**
7. I can express my ideas, comments, questions, and emotions in writing. **Results: Ninety-five percent of the seniors answered YES for this category, the others were not as conclusive they could write to express their ideas, etc.**
8. I am generally flexible and can adjust to changing schedules. **Results: All three groups have students that could use assistance with this area.**
9. I have some time available to go to campus, if required, for exams and meetings. **Results: All three groups were matched, with YES answers in the 80% area.**
10. I am a self-starter. **Results: Only the seniors were self-starters. The freshmen groups need assistance in this area.**
11. I easily understand what I read. **Results: The regular freshmen had a 100% in this category with the regional campus freshmen at a 38% NO and the seniors at an 11% NO.**
12. I am goal-directed and often achieve my goals. **Results: All three groups feel they are goal-oriented.**
13. I am realistic and confident about my academic ability. **Results: The unprepared freshmen had the lowest percentage in this category.**

14. I am persistent and obstacles don't stop me. **Results: The unprepared had the lowest in this category as well.**
15. I believe in taking responsibility for my own learning. **Results: The unprepared student had the lowest in this category.**
16. I am open to trying something new. **Results: All three groups had overwhelming YES answers for this.**
17. I am open to working in an unstructured setting. **Results: The unprepared student had the lowest YES answer in this category.**
18. I enjoy working in teams, doing collaborative projects, etc. **Results: The seniors had the lowest YES vote in this area. That is understandable as they probably have three years of experience in co-operative education.**

The more "yes" answers a student has to these questions, the higher likelihood of success in an online course. (Palloff & Pratt, 2003 p. 164) It is suggested that the unprepared, at-risk student work through this checklist under the supervision of a mentor to assure that the student understands the qualities needed to learn at a distance, and to determine if they indeed do have those qualities. The unprepared student then becomes aware of how to take responsibility for his or her own learning, an essential quality in distance learning. Careful attention should be given to the student, monitoring progress throughout the online course to reinforce the attributes needed to succeed in an online course. By giving the unprepared student constant feedback as to their progress will also work toward the goal of a successful online learner. Once at-risk students discover that they can be successful, they can make tremendous improvements and become excellent (or very good) students. (Gabriel, 2008 p 14)

Of the three groups taking the checklist, the unprepared student scored more NO answers in eight of the eighteen questions. They felt they 'were' intimidated by using technology for learning; they have a problem with time management; they are not independent learners nor do they easily understand what they read. They are not realistic or confident about their academic ability and are not persistent and obstacles will stop their learning process. The unprepared learners do not take responsibility for their own learning and are not open to working in an unstructured setting. According to this checklist, the unprepared student group would need counsel in these areas to be able to be successful in learning at a distance.

This corresponds with what Simonson (2006 p 234) mentions that not all students have the characteristics to succeed in a completely online academic environment. Online distance education programs must help ensure that the students who are attracted to these offerings have the proper readiness to be successful, in addition to the hardware, software, and connectivity that meet the minimum technical requirements. Fortunately, online learning does not require extensive computer skills, although familiarity with computers and software (especially web browsers) does help to reduce the intimidation factor. (Ryan, 2001) By looking at the successful characteristics of the online learner, and extracting those characteristics that are lacking in the unprepared student, we have a plan of how to prepare the unprepared student for the online classroom. Of all three studies of online learner characteristics, from 2003 to 2007, several attributes overlap. For example, all three studies indicate self-motivation and self-discipline as necessary attributes for learning at a distance. Motivation, according to Weimer (2002) is something that the students need to find for themselves, and take responsibility for their own learning. Motivation is not something a teacher can force or require, but research has shown that certain kinds of learning climates foster it p. 90. He further mentions that learner-centered teaching environments affect learner outcomes positively. Weimer (2002) also mentions that an environment where there is opportunity for instructor-student interaction creates a condition that is conducive to learning. It makes learning more likely to result P. 101. Given what Weimer has researched, the online environment is conducive towards motivating the at-risk student because it involves learner-centered instruction. For at-risk and unprepared students, taking courses taught by professors who are learner-centered teachers will give them a genuine and greater chance for success. (Gabriel, 2008, p. 85)

Time management activities would instill self-discipline in an unprepared student. It is recommended that the unprepared student be directed to this website http://de.lbcc.edu/resources_tools/time_mg mt.html#. This site is called 'Resources and Tools for Distance Learning Students'. Through the following categories, the site assists the students in managing their time: Time Management Tools, Time Monitor/Journal, Monthly planner, Time Management Schedule, a Daily to do list and Outstanding Assignments. The third characteristic of a successful online learner that appeared in all studies is working collaboratively. Long Beach City College has a .5 credit course entitled 'Distance Learning Success Strategies' that covers a)learning skills for distance learning, b)computer basics, c)Internet skills for success, d)Word processing basics, e)online communication tools, and e)Identifying the requirements of Distance Education courses. The topics taught in this class would benefit the unprepared student. The section on 'online communication tools' would help develop their 'working collaboratively' characteristic, which is the third of the above mentioned skills for success in online learning. For the student who does not have the computer technology knowledge to take an online class, the computer basics section would be helpful. These are the topics necessary to assist the unprepared student to learn at a distance. By being made aware of the proper characteristics needed to take an online class, the unprepared student then becomes aware of how to take responsibility for his or her own learning, an essential quality in distance learning. Careful attention should be given to the student, monitoring progress throughout the online course to reinforce the attributes needed to succeed in an online course. By giving the unprepared student constant feedback as to their progress will also work toward the goal of a successful online learner. "Once at-risk students discover that they can be successful, they can make tremendous improvements and become excellent (or very good) students." (Gabriel, 2008 p 14)

7. CONCLUSION

The number of students attending colleges and universities has increased over 25 percent in the past twenty years. As overall enrollments have grown, so have the number of economically disadvantaged students who attend college. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005 as cited in Engstrom, 2008 p. 5). Online enrollments have continued to grow at rates far in excess of the total higher education student population, with the most recent data demonstrating no signs of slowing.

- Over 3.9 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2007 term; a 12 percent increase over the number reported the previous year.
- The 12.9 percent growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 1.2 percent growth of the overall higher education student population.
- Over twenty percent of all U.S. higher education students were taking at least one online course in the fall of 2007.

Who are these 3.9 million students? The overwhelmingly majority (over 80 percent) are studying at the undergraduate level with only 14 percent taking graduate level courses and the remainder in some other for-credit course. Using survey results and figures from the most recent federal data (Digest of Education Statistics: 2007, National Center for Education Statistics) to compare enrollment patterns shows only slight variations in the proportions of students by education type. The proportion of undergraduates in online education (83.9 percent) is slightly below that of the total population of higher education students (85.6 percent). (Allen & Seaman, 2008) Since the number of academically unprepared and at-risk students enrolling in colleges and universities is increasing, it cannot be discounted that several of these students are enrolling in distance education. Programs should be developed, sought after, refined, and implemented that "open the doors to capable but unprepared students" in such a way that basic skills and student skills can be effectively improved. (Robinson, 2006) This statement referred to the traditional classroom environment, however, on average, undergraduate students achieved similarly, whether they learned in DE courses or in the traditional classrooms (Simonson, et al 2009 p 66). Therefore, to

assist the unprepared, at-risk student to learn at a distance, extra attention is needed to assure these students understand the attributes of the online learner, and most importantly, whether they have those attributes. This can be accomplished with the assistance of their academic advisor. In this way, the student takes more responsibility for their learning, and that is the first step that will lead to success in a distance education classroom in higher education.

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Checklist Results

	QUESTION	Seniors		Regular Freshmen		Regional Campus Freshmen	
1	I have access to a computer or the equipment required for an online class	YES NO	100%	YES NO	94% 6%	YES NO	99% 1%
2	I am not intimidated by using technology for learning	YES NO	89% 11%	YES NO	92% 8%	YES NO	68% 32%
3	I feel comfortable using the computer for basic word processing, e-mail, and to access the Internet	YES NO	100%	YES NO	98% 2%	YES NO	99% 1%
4	I am a good time manager, can meet deadlines, and can keep track of assignments	YES NO	100%	YES NO	90% 10%	YES NO	86% 14%
5	I am an independent learner	YES NO	100%	YES NO	90% 10%	YES NO	78% 22%
6	I am self-disciplined	YES NO	100%	YES NO	100%	YES NO	92% 8%
7	I can express my ideas, comments, questions, and emotions in writing	YES NO	95% 5%	YES NO	80% 20%	YES NO	86% 14%
8	I am generally flexible and can adjust to changing schedules	YES NO	89% 11	YES NO	82% 18%	YES NO	83% 17%
9	I have some time available to go to campus, if required, for exams and meetings	YES NO	84% 16%	YES NO	88% 12%	YES NO	89% 11%
10	I am a self-starter	YES NO	100%	YES NO	71% 29%	YES NO	73% 27%
11	I easily understand what I read	YES NO	89% 11%	YES NO	100%	YES NO	62% 38%
12	I am goal-directed and often achieve my goals	YES NO	95% 5%	YES NO	94% 6%	YES NO	92% 8%
13	I am realistic and confident about my academic ability	YES NO	100%	YES NO	94% 6%	YES NO	88% 12%
14	I am persistent and obstacles don't stop me	YES NO	95% 5%	YES NO	100%	YES NO	89% 11%
15	I believe in taking responsibility for my own learning	YES NO	100%	YES NO	98% 2%	YES NO	88% 12%
16	I am open to trying something new	YES NO	95% 5%	YES NO	98% 2%	YES NO	96% 4%
17	I am open to working in an un-structured setting	YES NO	100%	YES NO	86% 14%	YES NO	76% 24%
18	I enjoy working in teams, doing collaborative projects, etc	YES NO	68% 32%	YES NO	92% 8%	YES NO	86% 14%