Online Learning Insights

A place for learning about online education

Five-step Strategy for Student Success with Online Learning

Posted on **September 28, 2012**

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 eduction*. 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!

—   'Google Hangouts' image credit 9to5google.com

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, 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:

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

- 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. Many higher education institutions provide excellent resources for online students. Find out if your school offers these resources, and inform your students about them. If not, consider including a list of resources in your syllabus for students. Below are a few excellent examples:

Tips for Success in Online Learning, Boise State University
Online Study Skills Workshop, Cook Counseling Center, Virginia Tech
Quick Start Guide for Online Students, Sidneyeve Matrix, Queen's Univerity
Student Tips for Online Learning Success, North Hennepin, Community College

Online learning has its rewards for both 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*'.

Update: Most recent post on student success strategies from Online Learning Insights—Are you Ready to Learn Online? Five Must-Have-Skills for Online Students

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Resources for Faculty
Helping Students with Basic Skills, 4Faculty.org

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tagged **Instructional Design**, **Online learning**, **online pedagogy**, **Online students**, **Self
Directed Learning**, **Study Skils Online** by **Debbie Morrison**. Bookmark the **permalink
[https://onlinelearninginsights.wordpress.com/2012/09/28/five-step-strategy-for-student-
success-with-online-learning/]** .

42 THOUGHTS ON "FIVE-STEP STRATEGY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS WITH ONLINE LEARNING"

teflondub
on **September 16, 2015 at 2:18 am** said:

Reblogged this on TeflonDub in the New World.

Pingback: Today on the bus tour – Politico | eegbusiness

Rebecca Ryan
on **September 14, 2015 at 4:23 am** said:

I have taken several classes online. I did well in each class. However, I must admit
that if I had taken this course first my other classes would not have been a struggle. I
have been introduced to new strategies that I never applied in my other classes. Had
I known then what I know now, the classes would have been much easier and I
would have actually had time for myself!

Debbie Morrison
on **September 14, 2015 at 5:20 pm** said:

Hi Rebecca. Glad to hear you have determined how to manage learning
online effectively — it is a significant challenge. Good job. Thanks for sharing
your experience with us.

Joanna

on **September 6, 2015 at 5:45 pm** said:

Hello, I really enjoyed reading the articles. I will definitely use the suggestions in my studies. It's been a while since my last school experience and I have lots to adjust to, but with so my help and support I know I can be successful.
Thank you very much for all the good tips

Jodie Smith

on **September 2, 2015 at 8:09 pm** said:

I will be using these steps everyday. Life can get very busy and hectic. but being organized and writing things down helps me keep focused on my goals. I realize that online learning may be a challenge and be hard at times, but I'm ready. I'm 37 years old an wiser and know what I need to do to succeed in my field. Thank you for this blog it does keep things in perspective.

Debbie Morrison
on **September 2, 2015 at 10:57 pm** said:

Jodie — with your positive and can-do attitude you are on the path to being successful with your studies! Best to you with your studies!

Luis Rosello
on **August 28, 2015 at 7:22 pm** said:

I will put these strategies in action right away! Being a transfer student, and not having been in school for over a decade, getting started is overwhelming, these strategies are a great way to get setup for success!

Pingback: New school year set to begin as students move-in at area colleges – Citizens Voice | Sport First Aid

Tomie Witt

on **August 19, 2015 at 12:48 am** said:

This was very informative, and I truely enjoyed reading this material. I feel that I have learned new strategies and techniques. I was sure to take notes so I will be able to look back and reflect on what I have learned. I look forward to getting involved and making new 'online' friends. I hope to be able to find a group and join it soon !! This material was great. I feel confident and excited to learning and participating online!

Pingback: #LTTO- Module 3- Planning Online Learning | Hannah Tyreman

Robert Cincotta

on **July 19, 2015 at 12:13 pm** said:

This article has been very informative. I have struggled with staying connected to classmates when taking online courses. I will be mindful of this and help my students be more comfortable with connecting to classmates.

Pingback: The Morning Sports Briefing – The Irish Times – Irish Times | Sport First Aid

Pingback: 6 Study Tips to Help Online Students Succeed | Communicate Careers

[mildredburgos](#)
on **June 5, 2015 at 10:15 pm** said:

All the above are valuable strategies that you may apply when learning using the internet. I have been applying myself then on a frequent basis. I have recently found a very interesting article about this topic. I really recommend you to check it out. Here is the link: http://inspower.co/free-online-learning/

[tete3984](#)
on **May 12, 2015 at 9:15 pm** said:

Reblogged this on Teresita Casahonda Culebro and commented:
Excellent blog. Great ideas for individuals interested in or already enrolled in online learning.

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Pingback: WILL TO REBUILD – Long Beach Union | eegbusiness

[studentservicesaipe](#)
on **March 2, 2015 at 4:59 am** said:

Reblogged this on The grAIPEvine.

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Pingback: Are You Ready to Learn Online? Five Need-to-Have Skills for Online Students | online learning insights

Michal Sobotka
on **August 28, 2014 at 2:45 pm** said:

Great advice! I look forward to trying my first online course.

johnnylookingatthestars
on **January 5, 2015 at 9:28 pm** said:

Are you a student or a teacher?

Dianna Hopkins
on **August 27, 2014 at 10:10 am** said:

Thanks for the wonderful post.The stratergies of online schooling is too good and I prefer online learning. It is interesting,useful and effective.

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Pingback: Saline resident completes semester-long wilderness expedition | Sport First Aid

Meg
on **June 4, 2014 at 2:05 am** said:

Hi Debbie, I was very interested in accessing the online learning resources you posted from Boise State and Nevada universities but the links appear broken. Do you perhaps have updated URLs for these? I am very keen to view additional resources that help students learn online. Regards, meg

Debbie Morrison
on **June 4, 2014 at 5:58 am** said:

Hi Meg, Thanks so much for giving me the heads up about the links. Much appreciated. I updated the page, though here's the links for your convenience: Boise: http://ecampus.boisestate.edu/students/support/tips-for-success/ and I replaced the U of Nevada resource with this one from North Hennepin, Community College http://www.nhcc.edu/student-resources/online-learning-d2l/tips-for-online-learning-success.

Meg
on **June 4, 2014 at 6:06 am** said:

Much appreciated, Debbie! Thank you!

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Pingback: School term was full of high and lows – Seacoastonline.com | eegbusiness

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Pingback: Online Learning Insights Blog: 2013 in Review | online learning insights

Andrew Beaty
on **October 25, 2012 at 10:05 pm** said:

Hi Debbie,

Thanks again for another excellent blog that I was able to share with the new online profs I'm working with at our college! Your suggestions for the students will be a great help to many of these instructors who are just starting to teach in the online format. Thanks too for providing the "expert" position to back up what we try to teach them   .

I strongly encourage our profs to follow your blog…and I hope many more will do so.

Andrew Beaty
Moody Bible Institute

onlinelearninginsights
on **October 25, 2012 at 10:49 pm** said:

Hi Andrew,
Nice to hear from you again! So glad you found the post helpful. My goal is to support instructors, and provide a virtual meeting place for instructors and educators where we can learn, share and discuss. Thanks for sharing and commenting.

Venky Sharma
on **October 7, 2012 at 7:11 am** said:

The only issue I find with online learning is when the student starts falling behind due to lack of comprehension, there is little help available to him to get that insight into the course. That is the time one feels the need for a live tutor who can understand the weaknesses and gaps in knowledge of the student and guide him on.

onlinelearninginsights
on **October 7, 2012 at 3:48 pm** said:

Hi Venky. Yes falling behind due to lack of comprehension is not uncommon for online students – and the student needs help and support   . One-on-one help is an excellent way for the student to catch-up, though I do think this can be accomplished with a 'live' tutor as you say, but could also be accomplished through online help as well, whether in the form of a study group through http://openstudy.com/ which is an excellent platform to find help or through a study group created through https://piazza.com/. Thanks for your comment!   . What you mention is also important for course instructors to note – implement plans to help students who might be falling behind.