A Case Study: Student Perspective on Distance Education

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I.   Introduction

Distance education provides "a valuable learning experience to students who might not otherwise have access to learning" (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2011, p. 219). At the heart of distance education are the learners.   According to Simonson et al. (2011), the learner is "the crucial member of the distance learning system" (p. 218). The Tracey Nirldon case study provides an account of a student, who is preparing to take her first online course and needs some guidance as to what to expect, and what to do to make her transition into a distance learning environment easier (Simonson et al., 2011, p. 240). Based on the case study, this paper will present a student's perspective on understanding distance education, including characteristics of distance learners, learner responsibilities and factors influencing learner success, recommendations for instructors, and my personal reflections.

II.   Characteristics of Distance Learners

One aspect of distance education which Tracey Nirldon needs to be aware of is the characteristics of distance learners. In a research study conducted by Wang, Peng, Huang, Hou, & Wang (2008), the authors use adapted self-assessment questionnaires to examine the relationships between learning motivation, learning strategies, self-efficacy, attribution and learning results of 135 distance learners. According to research reviewed by Wang et al. (2008), the main psychological characteristics of distance learners are: learning motivation, self-efficacy, attributions, and the learning strategy. In general, distance learners are self-motivated, self-disciplined and able to work independently (Illinois Online Network, n.d.; Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 2007). Knowing these characteristics will assist Tracey in understanding the demands of online learning, and set her expectations prior to the start of the course.

III. Learner Responsibilities

In order for Tracey to make it easier on herself to get started in her online course, she needs to know the responsibilities of an online learner, so that she can be better prepared for learning in an online environment. According to Simonson et al. (2011), online learners must "focus on their own learning and be able to judge whether they need additional assistance and how to proceed to request it" (p. 233). As a distance learner, students need to be able to manage their class time and balance their personal time. Tracey would need to develop a time management strategy to effectively manage her coursework (Roper, 2007). She would need to manage such tasks as logging in to get course assignments, participating in discussions, and completing assignments on a regular basis. Because online programs do not have a pre-defined day and time for class, students have to establish a regular study/learning schedule (Shirley, n.d.). Shirley (n.d.) suggests, keeping a calendar or journal with important dates clearly marked and looking at it daily, determining a time that is best to study, and having a dedicated study place.

Another important responsibility of a distance learner is, making sure that they have access to or obtain appropriate technology (such as a computer or mobile device, the internet etc.), and understanding how to use the virtual classroom technology. Distance education students can communicate with their instructors and peers either synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous communication is two-way communication that occurs in real-time or similar to traditional face-to-face interaction, via audio conference or web-based video conferencing technology (Simonson et al., 2011). On the other hand, asynchronous communication is communication that is not real-time, giving the learner the flexibility of not having to be in a specific place at a specific day and time. Tracey will have to make it her responsibility to learn how to use the course management tool(s) (e.g. Blackboard or WebCT) and other technologies

that are used in her distance education course. She can use several approaches to acclimating herself to the technology. Simonson et al. (2011) suggests that students get "early exposure to the technology being used (e.g., during student personal introductions) and modeling by the instructor can reduce anxiety and alleviate problems later on" (p. 228). Mensch (2009) proposes an online orientation class "to acclimate the student with the technology involved in an online class and the faculty expectations" (p. 2). Mensch (2009) also mentions that an online orientation class would "insure that students are aware of the new educational technology and pedagogy that may be used in the course" (p. 2). Tracey may also contact the instructor directly prior to the beginning of the course and ask for information on the course technology and instructions on its use. Additionally, she can be proactive and use internet search resources to find information on using some of the distance education technologies.

IV.   Factors Influencing Learner Success

For Tracey to be successful in her online class, she should start out by setting goals for herself (PACE University, n.d.; Shirley, n.d.). If Tracey sets goals for herself she will be able to establish a routine which will help her keep up with the coursework and assignments. Other factors that can help to influence Tracey's success include: asking questions, participating in discussions, knowing her learning style, communicating immediately with the instructor if issues arise, and making sure that she has dedicated access to a computer and internet service (Illinois Online Network, n.d.; PACE University, n.d.; Shirley, n.d.). Ultimately, as mentioned previously, "the student must assume responsibility for learning" (Simonson et al., 2011, p. 225).

V.   Recommendations for Instructors

Although a lot of responsibility for learning rests with the student, the instructor can provide assistance to help students get started. The instructor can start off by getting to know the students in the class. Simonson et al. (2011) suggests that getting to know the students "provides the instructor with an understanding of how to best approach instruction to ensure an optimal learning experience for all" (p. 219). Additionally, an instructor can provide a syllabus to clearly communicate to students such things as class expectations, online etiquette, information on how to operate some of the class technology or where to find technical help, instructions for completing assignments, details on grading structure (e.g. rubric), and instructor contact information (Simonson et al., 2011). These are just some of the ways in which Tracey's instructor can provide assistance to help her get started.

VI.   Personal Reflections and Conclusion

As a graduate student and working part-time, distance education gives me the flexibility to set my own schedule. In my experience, the best way to succeed in an online class is to put forth the effort, and be proactive in your learning. I have found that taking the time to carefully read assignments, along with module/unit information is very helpful (it works like a blueprint or map to finding what you need). In addition, printing the syllabus and course materials is helpful in keeping me on track with time management, assignment due dates and knowing the specific grading requirements for the assignment. I also believe that devoting a sufficient number of hours weekly (i.e. versus waiting for the weekend) towards studying can alleviate some of the pressures of completing coursework and assignments. Consequently, I believe that quality learning experiences can come from distance education but it is "largely determined by the efforts and preparation of the distant learner" (Simonson et al., 2011, p. 239).

VII.   References

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