As online education enrollment increases, (Allen & Seaman, 2011), innovative practices are needed to improve quality instruction. One area that needs further exploration is that of promoting online students’ self-efficacy. In this article we examine the concept of self-efficacy, as it pertains to the online classroom, and offer practical suggestions for online instructors.

In Albert Bandura’s (1997) thorough examination of self-efficacy, he defined the concept as a person’s beliefs about his/her abilities to complete specific actions. Thus, self-efficacy is a major factor in how a person approaches a particular task or challenge, especially one that is new. For the nontraditional student, beginning an online course can be a daunting challenge that can possibly lower their sense of self-efficacy, as this modality can trigger different responses in students compared to the traditional face-to-face environment (Hauser, Paul, & Bradley, 2012). With that in mind, it is important to examine the factors that influence an individual’s sense of self-efficacy and apply these concepts directly to online educational practices.

Of Bandura’s four factors that affect an individual’s self-efficacy, the first is that of experience of mastery. Because initial success promotes self-efficacy, having clear tasks for students to complete on the first few days of class is essential. For example, having students post personal introductions to the class for credit would help them to see how to correctly use the particular learning management system. When instructors provide a positive response to each student’s initial post in the discussion forum, this creates an initial feeling of success. By focusing on what the student has done correctly prior to giving any critical feedback, the student’s sense of self-efficacy can be increased.

The second factor, vicarious experience, can be difficult to promote in the online classroom since students do not physically see each other and thus, may struggle to identify those that they perceive are like them being successful in task completion. When online instructors provide positive feedback to students in the public discussion forums and invite other students to read the student’s response, this can promote a vicarious experience for learners. Another strategy for instructors would be to collect positive comments from students at the end of one class and post some of these in a
confidential manner at the beginning of future courses. For example, by posting a student’s comment that states, “When I first started this class I was really confused. However, I quickly felt like a pro!” could help students to see that others have had similar initial feelings of doubt, but were able to be successful.

The third factor, social persuasion, is connected directly to the need for online courses to build a sense of community. As Nagel, Blignaut, & Cronje’s (2009) research indicated, when online students are actively involved in the discussion forum by reading posts from fellow students and by writing quality responses, a sense of community is established. To help ensure that this occurs, an online instructor should post behavioral norms and grading expectations for online communication. The instructor should model this behavior by publically commenting to students with focused praise and ask questions that encourage higher order thinking and real world applications of the concepts being learned. Another way to achieve social persuasion is through the instructor’s use of evaluative feedback (Dinther, Dochy & Segers, 2011) and personal and positive communication via phone calls, text messages, and e-mails.

Finally, Bandura’s explained how physiological factors influence self-efficacy. In a traditional classroom experience, an instructor can view signs of nervousness or confusion and provide extra encouragement and support. In the online classroom environment, it can be impossible to know if a student is experiencing any signs of emotional distress when he or she is attempting to complete a specific task. One way for an instructor to focus on this area is to take a very proactive approach in decreasing student stress and anxiety. By calling a student at the start of a course, an instructor can create a sense of rapport, lower the levels of anxiety, and gauge where the student’s comfort level is with the course material. Providing clear instructions for assignments, and adding examples or templates, can also be a proactive approach to create a more positive mood for the online student. A safe environment can be further created by encouraging students to ask questions to seek clarification when they feel tense or in doubt. Furthermore, instructors can openly share their past feelings regarding learning new concepts. By empathizing with students, the instructor demonstrates a high level of care while promoting the students’ overall sense of self-efficacy.

References:


Ben Vilkas, manager, full-time online faculty, Grand Canyon University. Crystal McCabe, instructor, full-time online faculty, Grand Canyon University.

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This is a good way to set our students' motivation to do their task and life's goals. Wish this could be added up to another online education site for reference of anyone interested.

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great article - I am currently taking online classes for the first time at GCU and I really like these suggestions. I think these are great ways for the instructor to connect with their students - Great job!

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