

Help-Seeking in Online Learning Environments

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Introduction/Need for Research

In 2015, 2.8 million post-secondary students were enrolled exclusively in online courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Whether students are enrolled in synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid courses they face myriad challenges that are unique to the online environment (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004) and to be successful, must be able to regulate their own learning (Swafford, 2017). However, due to the nature of online courses, a communicative disconnect may exist between the student and teacher as well as among other students (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). This challenge “can interfere with a behavior that is critical to academic success, help-seeking” (Dunn, Rakes, & Rakes, 2014, p. 75). As Edgar, Retallick, and Jones (2016) suggested in the *American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda: 2016-2020*, students must be engaged in meaningful learning in all environments and therefore, an investigation into this phenomenon is warranted.

Theoretical Framework

Self-regulated learning is an active process where students set learning goals and then work toward their goals by monitoring, regulating, and controlling their behaviors which are guided and constrained by their goals and the educational environment (Pintrich, 2000). The theoretical framework guiding this study was Zimmerman’s (1998) model of the development of self-regulated learning skills. This model includes three phases including, forethought, performance control, and self-reflection. The forethought phase includes the processes that precede learning and include analysis of the learning task and self-motivation beliefs. Students who are self-motivated prior to learning will be efficacious in their beliefs and have clearly defined individual learning expectations (Zimmerman, 1998). The performance control phase occurs during the learning process. This phase includes the processes of controlling one’s learning and self-observation, including self-experimentation. Self-reflection is the final phase. According to Zimmerman and Schunk (2001), students perform self-evaluation based upon social comparisons and adjust their performance for the next task. The forethought phase the model served as the foundation for the current study.

Methods

This study was part of a larger descriptive study and included a census of all secondary students enrolled in an online/hybrid introductory horticulture dual enrollment course (N=153). Students completed all assessments (tests, quizzes, discussion posts, final projects) online and engaged in laboratory activities under the guidance of their secondary agriculture instructor. Data were collected, following procedures outlined by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2008) via an online survey platform embedded in a link within the course learning management system. The final response rate was 85%. The study was comprised of slightly more females (57%) than males (43%). Academically, the course included Seniors (44%), Juniors (32%), and Sophomores (24%). Students identified themselves as Native Americans (41%), Caucasian (33%), and Hispanic (26%).

Help-seeking and goal setting were measured using sub-scales of the Online Self-Regulated Learning Questionnaire (OSLQ) (Lan, Bremer, Stevens, & Mullen, 2004). The help-seeking sub-scale included four items and the goal setting sub-scale included five items in a 5-point Likert-type format with response choices ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly*

agree (5). Self-efficacy for learning and performance, intrinsic motivation, and task value were measured using sub-scales of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991). The self-efficacy sub-scale included eight items, the intrinsic motivation sub-scale included four items, and the task value sub-scale included six items. These sub-scales are in a Likert-type format with a 7-point response format with choices ranging from *not at all true of me* (1) to *very true of me* (7).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationships between help-seeking and the precursor variables task value, self-efficacy for learning and performance, intrinsic goal orientation, and goal setting. Results of a Pearson product-moment correlation yielded substantial (Davis, 1971) associations between help-seeking and precursor variables. These data can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Correlations among Precursor Variables and Help-Seeking of Online Students

Variable	Self-Efficacy	Intrinsic Motivation	Goal Setting	Task Value
Help-Seeking	0.68	0.59	0.54	0.51

Note. All correlations were significant at the 0.01 level.

Conclusions

All precursor variables had substantial relationships with help-seeking. Schunk and Zimmerman (2008) indicated these variables serve as a foundation for developing help-seeking skills. Help-seeking aids students in solving problems, maintain task engagement and interest, and learn (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008).

Recommendations

It is recommended that faculty who teach online courses be proactive with students to develop help-seeking skills. Providing students a guide to follow within the course will serve as a foundation for developing the skills needed for success in online courses. As help-seeking is a component of self-regulated learning, including guides for students to follow to improve their self-efficacy in the online environment will increase student engagement and performance (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). Additionally, it is recommended that faculty encourage students to provide feedback on course structure and implementation. Feedback will increase student-teacher interaction, which faculty can use to make continuous improvements to online courses.

Faculty and course developers are encouraged to incorporate valuable learning tasks. Problem-based learning strategies have been shown to aid in the development of self-regulated learning skills (Iran-Nejad & Chissom, 1992). Researchers are encouraged to analyze the relationship between online course discussion boards and help-seeking. Discussion boards provide an embedded platform for students to engage with peers and faculty by posing questions and comments. As this relationship is assessed, faculty can use resulting data to create more meaningful discussion platforms to engage students and ultimately promote proactive strategies for students to seek help.

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