

Chapter 12

The Experiences of a Learner Support Person in the Online Education Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the perspective of a learner support person from the online learning environment. Online learning issues, like feedback, at-risk behaviors, ethical issues, and more, are outlined in the chapter, and personal experiences are included to provide an insider's input. Characteristics of an effective instructor are discussed, as well as the overall structure of the online learning environment (the learning management system and course design), specifically through the lens of asynchronous online learning. Future research recommendations and solutions are addressed as they relate to online learning and from the perspective of teaching personnel, explicitly from an online graduate teaching assistant acting as a learner support person.

INTRODUCTION

A teaching assistant is one of a set of learner support persons functioning in courses. Initially, it is important to define the role a learner support person. The word *learner* means student, and a learner support person is someone who works with students to help them achieve academic success. Other definitions are *instructor* or *teacher*. In addition, the roles of teaching assistant, tutor, and advisor relate to a learner support person's identity. However, since a learner support person provides holistic support,

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the role is not confined to academics. Students require support on a personal level, especially when enrolling in their first online course, to help with acclimation and adjustment to the online learning environment.

From the middle of the twentieth century, graduate teaching assistants were required to participate in research labs and dive into the teaching sea and swim (or swirl) (Wertheimer & Woody, 2017). Training a teacher/instructor/professor was not given attention until the new millennium (Wertheimer & Woody, 2017). Even today, the evaluation and definition of effective people who teach (in person or virtually) remain challenging (Wertheimer & Woody, 2017).

Specific characteristics have been identified by Trammell and Aldrich (2016) that are related to the instructor role in face-to-face environments that students prefer: caring, enthusiastic, approachable, inspiring, fair, well prepared, and helpful, with the most prominent being genuine. Yermack and Forsyth (2016) investigated students' implicit theories of university professors. These four characteristics were associated with students' descriptions of an effective professor in a traditional university environment: intelligent (knowledgeable, educated), approachable (helpful, caring, understanding), dedicated (engaged, prepared, organized), and dynamic (engaging, challenging).

Additional characteristics have been identified by McGuire (2017). An effective online instructor and online supporter humanize the course website, chunk the course content, make expectations explicit, structure and direct online discussions, offer prompt feedback, and make content relevant (McGuire, 2017). Burgess (2015) noted that the environment (either in person or virtual) is not critical for effective teaching. The teacher's effectiveness is the significant factor that constitutes a constructive learning experience for students. The apparent differences between these two teaching environments are clear. One is a physical classroom in a building and the other is a virtual classroom through a computer screen. Despite this difference, the setting does not matter in terms of instructor or learner support effectiveness.

BACKGROUND

EDITOR'S NOTE: The author of this chapter was part of a cadre of teaching assistants explicitly hired for the psychology First Course. Psychology had volunteered to initiate this innovative program as part of a university effort to increase retention among graduate learners in an exclusively online program. Later innovations included course evaluations for the teaching assistants, ongoing supervision and training for TAs, and opportunities to work in the innovation writing component of the course. Please refer to the chapter by Dr. Susan Myers for more on this course and the innovations in this endeavor.

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