Chapter 15

Resilience and Its Importance to Online Students

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ABSTRACT

Resilience is a key life success trait that can spell the distinction in success or failure of learning experiences for students. The online classroom is characterized by some unique challenges regarding student resilience. These challenges, as well as prospective strategies to overcome them, will be specifically discussed in the areas of technology, communication, and student assessment. Understanding the factors that facilitate development of online student resilience will enable instructors to create maximally effective learning experiences for their students.

INTRODUCTION

Resilience is a characteristic that is sometimes associated with “hardiness” or “grit” (Bonanno, 2004 Ledesma, 2014). At the opposite end of the spectrum, a lack of such resilience can equate to frustration, withdrawal and failure to persist (Holling, 1973; Garnezy, 1990).

Such resilience can either foster or inhibit successful learning. The online classroom contains features that can be problematic for some students who are deficient in resilience. At the same time, resilience itself is a skill that can be cultivated and improved (http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx). Online instructors who are aware of the components of resilience can be instrumental in helping their students not only master specific content material, but also to build these resilience skills that will serve them well both personally and professionally. This chapter will identify challenges and contain potential solutions to those challenges for online instructors in the areas of technology, communication and assessment of student learning.

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BACKGROUND

Let’s begin with the meaning of resilience. What does this trait consist of? And why is it important? The literal translation of resilience is elasticity. This term refers to the flexibility or bendability of some object (Greene, et al., 2002). Gunderson and Holling (2002) and Walker et al. (2004) have defined this flexibility as follows:

*Resilience is the capacity of a social-ecological system to absorb or withstand perturbations and other stressors such that the system remains within the same regime, essentially maintaining its structure and functions. It describes the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization, learning and adaptation (Holling 1973; Gunderson & Holling 2002; Walker et al. 2004).*

With regard to persons, this flexibility takes the form of adaptability to external life events that may be perceived as stressful. While one person might give up in frustration, a resilient individual will choose to persist through to a successful resolution of the problem. Greene, et al. (2002) have referred to these traits as positive coping, adaptation and persistence. The idea is to face the stressor head on without significant disruption to one’s overall level of functioning (Perry, 2002). Holling (1973) has referred to this ability to return to equilibrium following a stressor as “bouncing back.” According to Garmezy (1990), the key question to ask oneself is: “Do you succumb or do you surmount?” In this regard, Bonnano (2004) has highlighted the importance of self-perception as a filter in our choice of response. Yet another classic saying comes to mind here: “We can…if we think we can.”

One particular area singled out in the resilience literature is risk taking (Rutter, 1987). Can the individual recognize and welcome the opportunity to grapple with positive risks? This is especially important if the attendant rewards include enhanced learning and acquiring new skills.

When considering resilient responses, it’s important to recognize that they are not necessarily easy or pleasant. The APA Psychology Help Center cautions that pain and sadness may be part of the experience when choosing to confront adversity or take on positive risks (). In other words, the classic adage, “No pain; no gain” definitely applies to resilient behavioral choices. At the same time, APA reminds us that adaptability can be learned with determination and practice.

Now that the components of resilience have been identified, let’s focus on how they might present some particular challenges, especially in online learning.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Issues, Controversies and Problems

First let’s note some general challenges for college students in the area of resilience. Then we will specifically focus on how the online classroom can exacerbate some of these concerns.

Gray (2015) has noted a general rise in neediness on the part of college students. They fear taking risks and initiating actions on their own. Instead, they look to their instructor to provide specific step-by-step instructions on how to solve problems and think through ideas. In addition, students have shown increasingly low frustration tolerance in waiting for answers. They not only expect their instructors to show them what to do step by step; but they expect to get this help immediately, at the first sign of