Chapter VII

Self-Regulation and Online Learning: Theoretical Issues and Practical Challenges to Support Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

This chapter illustrates theoretical issues and practical challenges to support lifelong learning, namely the development and use of self-regulation within online learning environments. Self-regulation, or the ability of students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning is a critical skill for lifelong learning (Longworth & Davies, 1996; Zimmerman, 2002) and online learning (Niemi, Launonen, & Ræhalme, 2002). While self-regulation may be and has traditionally been viewed and investigated from a social cognitive theoretical perspective, this chapter proposes that a Vygotskian view of self-regulation may be more applicable to investigating self-regulation within the social and cultural context of online teaching and learning. Case studies, personal essays, and contemporary research focusing on self-regulation in face-to-face and online environments are utilized to examine, discuss, and illustrate key challenges and strategies to support lifelong learning within online environments.
Introduction

For a student to become a lifelong learner, it is critically important that they develop and utilize effective strategies for learning how to learn (Dohmen, 1996; Longworth & Davies, 1996). While other skills and knowledge, like creative thinking or being able to utilize evolving technological resources, may be important for students to engage in learning across the lifespan, the skills and knowledge that underlie one’s own ability to effectively learn is perhaps most critical to lifelong learning. Scholars interested in lifelong learning may refer to skills and knowledge about “learning how to learn” in various ways. Self-directed learning (Conceição, 2002), self-knowledge (Longworth & Davis, 1996), and self-management (Longworth & Davies, 1996), for example, have been utilized to describe key processes and skills that are essential to becoming a lifelong learner. However, these terms related to “learning how to learn” fall under the conceptual umbrella within the psychological domain of self-regulation. Self-regulation, or the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one’s own learning processes and strategies, therefore, is a key psychological feature of lifelong learning (Zimmerman, 2001).

The primary objective of this chapter is to discuss theoretical issues and practical challenges facing online educators to support the development and use of self-regulation by students within their courses. In particular, this chapter proposes a Vygotskian theoretical perspective to ground future investigations concerning self-regulation within online learning environments. A review of the research literature in the area of self-regulation and online learning illuminate gaps in our understanding of how online learning environments impact student self-regulation. Practical instructional strategies from the literature are presented and briefly discussed in an effort to support self-regulatory skills necessary for lifelong learning within online environments. This chapter also suggests a robust research agenda to investigate student development and use of self-regulation within online learning environments.

Self-Regulation and Online Learning

It is probably most accurate to state that self-regulation, as a psychological construct, encompasses categories of strategies that are utilized by students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1988). Self-regulatory behavior is actually the end result of effectively using a multitude of strategies (Brooks, 1997). For example, developing and utilizing good time management skills (i.e., adequately estimating the time needed for tasks) are very important for a student to effectively plan for their own learning. Therefore, self-regulation is really a collection of strategies that, together, greatly impact student learning.