Chapter 16
The Inventory of Learner Persistence

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ABSTRACT

The Inventory of Learner Persistence (ILP) was designed to assess persistence in learning and specifically within the context of autonomous learning. Autonomous learning is defined as the manifestation of persistence along with desire, resourcefulness, and initiative in learning; learner autonomy is defined as the characteristic or personal attribute of the individual to exhibit agency or intentional behavior. Thus, persistence in learning is the exhibition of volition, goal directedness and self-regulation. The development of items for the ILP provides a theoretical framework for defining persistence from a cognitive and psychological perspective and provides a mechanism for understanding persistence from other than a post hoc behavioral standpoint. The implications of such assessments can provide an analysis of where a learner may be in terms of their development and readiness for learning that will require persistent skills for success.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the research into persistence in learning has been viewed as an outcome or result such as the completion of a program or degree. In education, particularly in higher education, persistence rates are reported in terms of graduation attainment and program completion. As an outcome measure of student success, persistence for degree completion provides useful data for the evaluation of programs. In this type of analysis, persistence is seen as the end result and does not provide any understanding into the individual differences or any understanding of why an in-
individual has the ability, capacity, drive, or will to complete a learning endeavor as encompassing as a degree program or as specific as a course. These types of descriptors are usually described in the psychological literature and while their importance is understood, little research had been done to quantify and articulate exactly what the behaviors are and how they are manifested. This aspect of persistence resides in the cognitive and psychological behaviors of an individual that are manifested in persistent-like behaviors. This dimension requires some understanding of what the individual is cognitively doing prior to the demonstration of the persistent behaviors. It would be expected that the display of any intentional behaviors would require some cognitive processing. After all, one does not arbitrarily react or respond; we are thinking organisms and have the capacity to deliberately select and chose a course of action. Thus, before one can exhibit any behavioral control one must be able to cognitively exhibit control in thinking processes. Intentional and deliberate behavior requires forethought, planning, assessment of capability and resources both internal and external. Thus, understanding persistence in learning is grounded in intentions, beliefs, and attitudes to persist in learning.

The Inventory of Learner Persistence (ILP) was designed to assess persistence in learning and specifically within the context of autonomous learning. Autonomous learning has been defined as the manifestation of persistence along with desire, resourcefulness, and initiative in learning; and, learner autonomy is the characteristic of the individual to exhibit agency—that is intentional behaviors.

The research and subsequent development of the ILP provides a conceptual model and theoretical foundation for understanding the behaviors associated with intentions to exhibit persistence in adult learners. Intentions are grounded in the research of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and Ajzen (1985, 1988, 1991). Ajzen asserts that an intention is an indication of an individual’s attitude toward the behavior, social pressure (subjective norm) and control (perceived behavioral control). By changing or influencing any one of the three facets, the likelihood of increasing the intention to perform the actual behavior will likely increase the chance of the actual behavior being performed. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1988, 1991) proposes a model about how human action is guided in that intentions are the precursors of behavior. The ILP is not concerned therefore with the actual behaviors in as much as the intention to perform the behavior; in this instance, persistence in learning.

The behaviors identified as important to persistence in autonomous learning are: volition, self-regulation, and goal-directedness. Much of the persistence in learning literature and research has focused on quantitative outcomes such as retention and attrition in programs. However, the ILP is concerned with the level of intentions that an individual manifests prior to the actual performance of the behavior. From this perspective, the ILP serves as both a model and measurement of the cognitive and motivational aspects associated with persistence in learning. This model provided the theoretical foundation for the development of a self-assessment instrument, the Inventory of Learner Persistence, which identified and quantified an individual’s intention to persist in autonomous endeavors. The construct of persistence in autonomous learning is presented in terms of attitudes to engage in specific learning behaviors, but measured in terms of behavioral intentions.

A distinction is to be noted with respect to the term self-directed and autonomous. While the terms are used interchangeably, self-directed learning implies a behavior while autonomous learning implies intentions to exhibit a behavior such as persistence in learning. The intention and behavior correlation is a robust relationship since we do form intentions for behaviors that we do not plan to do nor do we exhibit deliberate behaviors for which there was no intention.