ABSTRACT
Many individuals today are choosing to obtain an education online, however, many of these students face challenges in regards to the workload required and time management. Additionally, while using computers, tablets, SmartPhones and the Internet is commonplace, a large segment of the student population struggles with making the transition from daily internet and social media use to navigating a college course in an online classroom setting as the platforms are different. In higher education, students will be using email, the Internet, chat rooms, and a virtual classroom in their educational experience and may be confused, anxious and frightened with the vast array of technology they are expected to master. As the perception is that students are highly technology savvy, many educators are unprepared for this confusion and anxiety. As students embark on the transition from daily internet and social media use to online learning, having limited time management skills and experiencing apprehension and anxiety that comes from navigating an online classroom platform can undermine student success. To enhance the online college classroom experience throughout this educational endeavor, the authors present strategies for educators that will enable first time online students to manage their time, anxiety, and fear and thereby increase the student’s chances of having a successful educational experience.

KEYWORDS: Online student success, Student time management, Online students anxiety, Fear, Prioritizing

Many individuals today are choosing to obtain an education online, however, many of these students face challenges in regards to the workload required and time management (Kearns, 2012). As students embark on the transition from daily internet and social media use to online learning, having limited time management skills and experiencing apprehension and anxiety that comes from navigating an online classroom platform can undermine student success. (Kelly, 2009) To enhance the online college classroom experience throughout this educational endeavor, the authors present strategies for educators that will enable first time online students to manage their time, anxiety, and fear and thereby increase the student’s chances of having a successful educational experience.

It is the first day of your first college class, your hands are sweaty, your heart is racing, and you feel so unprepared. You are about to enter the classroom. However this is no ordinary classroom, this is an online classroom. Believe it or not, students experience anxiety of entering and participating in an online environment. According to St. Clair (2015), “Online classes are often intimidating for first-time students. Just about everyone who has taught online has encountered
students who are worried and concerned about what will become of them as they venture into
cyber abyss.” (p. 129) The causes of anxiety are different for every student and can be lessened
by being mindful and using strategies to manage stress and anxiety.

**Strategies for Managing Anxiety and Fear for Online Students**

One of the current buzz words is mindfulness. The concept of mindfulness is taking note of what
is happening right now and inviting in experience with curiosity and interest (Creswell & Lindsay,
2014). Students return to school for a variety of reasons; however, the underlying reason which
has been observed is the blanket concept of wanting a better life. A better life for their children to
grow up in, a better life financially, or a better life for personal satisfaction. Many students come to
school thinking that all they need to do is enroll in a course and miraculously all of their problems
will be solved. There is one crucial piece missing. They do not want or cannot determine how
to put in the required time and attention to this endeavor. Edwards states: “What transforms an
idea, a goal, a plan, or a dream into reality is attention. It doesn’t matter whether the plan is to
build a birdhouse or to realize the dream of a loving relationship; attention is required” (Edwards,
2016). Attention is a very common concept in education. For years, teachers have been telling
students to pay attention. To be able to pay attention, we need to gain focus. There are many
distractors in our society that can cause an online student to lose focus on the task at hand. Due
to distracters such as social media, cell phones, and the Internet, often times it is difficult to reign
in focus when it is needed for studying. It is common for the online student to have been out of
school from one year to 25 or more years. This can cause a student to not know how to focus or
gain attention to return to “study mode”. Again, we return to the concept of being mindful. The
question then is how a student can gain focus to know the true causes of their anxiety and in turn
be able to create strategies to overcome the anxiety to returning to school online. Many times
mindfulness and focus can be obtained through meditation and breathing.

Edwards, observed that people breathe fast and shallow at a pace of one to two seconds for
inhalation and one to two seconds for exhalation. During exercises with sophomore English
students he taught breathing techniques of using inhalation and exhalation breaths of 10-12
seconds. He led them in exercises of breathing in two, three, four, five, and six on inhalation and
the same count for exhalation. The consensus of the results was that the students felt great.
They felt a sense of calm and a feeling of being able to use the technique to calm themselves to
focus for such things as sports or preparing themselves for an exam. In addition to breathing to
implement mindfulness students can also engage in meditation, yoga or collaboration. Once a
student has committed to being mindful, then they achieve a clearer understanding of what it is
that causes stress and anxiety towards online education.

Students return to school for a variety of reasons. Many times the reasons they return to school
and choose to go to school online turn out being their biggest sources of stress and anxiety.
Students going to school online have not only the pressure of school related problems but also
issues from stressors outside of school. Everyone responds differently to stressors and it is
important to identify these stressors and causes of anxiety. According to Bratsis: “the body’s
stress response also known as the “fight-or-flight” response - can help a student focus on taking
a test, get ready to perform on stage, or prepare for a play-off game” (Bratsis, 2012). One common cause of anxiety is a student feeling isolated and alone in the journey. Due to the asynchronous nature of online courses, students are not online with the instructor or other students at the same time. In turn, this causes a student to not ask for help and have a feeling of not knowing where to go or who to turn to when they have a question. In a face to face classroom, the student can raise their hand and get the answer or speak to the instructor after class and get immediate feedback. Students also experience stress and anxiety with time constraints on an online test or quiz. Yang and Cao (2016) note that online students experience test taking anxiety similar to traditional classrooms in regard to the time constraints of tests and the intimidation of taking standardized tests. This is why it is important to understand the causes of test anxiety and how this can be applied to online students.

As with a traditional classroom, students have fears of contributing to the classroom, asking questions, or submitting assignments for fear of inadequacy of their performance. They may not understand or comprehend the learning topic, but remain silent. This is often due to the fact that they do not want to be seen as not intelligent or they may feel embarrassed or insecure in front of their teachers and peers (Hwang et al., 2002). Much of this has to do with the student’s self-efficacy or belief they can perform at a certain level and maintain the motivation to do so. Written communication for an online student is imperative. Every assignment they turn in, every discussion that takes place in the classroom, and most interaction with the instructor will be through written communication. Communication skills consist of English and grammar, formatting of assignments and proper tone when posting in the classroom. Cheurprakobkit, Hale, and Olson (2002) discovered barriers to online learning for students include a lack of knowledge and skill in the use of online learning technologies. This is mostly in the communication and collaboration technologies.

Another source of anxiety in online students comes from fear of the computer. While most may be comfortable with using a computer for a basic word document or social media, about half of all adults have computer anxiety (Yoshida, Uchida, Masui, Fukushima, 2016). The fear of using the computer to access the classroom or to conduct research can prove hindering to students. Computer anxiety also includes anxiety over using the Internet for research or for accessing the online classroom platform. Breaking down each of these areas, it can be stated that anxiety of online learning can be broken down into three specific areas: communication anxiety, online learning anxiety and computer anxiety. As the perception is that students are highly technology savvy, many educators are unprepared for this confusion and anxiety (St. Clair, 2015). For students to effectively succeed in the online classroom, strategies must be put in place to overcome the main anxieties of the online education process, communication and using the computer.

As discussed, the stress of accessing the online classroom can be due to many different fears such as computer anxiety and communication skills. Strategies for overcoming computer anxiety are of utmost importance and are needed to be able to completely function in the online environment. Students who have computer anxiety have this anxiety for a number of reasons. This can be from a lack of understanding or never needed to use the computer in depth. Sivakumaran, and Lux (2011), have developed three strategies which include purpose, positive environment and support. These three strategies can be translated to not only help with
computer anxiety but any anxiety a student may experience in the online environment. Determining the purpose is easy. Students understand to be successful they need to work on computer and communication skills. The student needs to learn the learning management systems (LMS) being used by the school they are attending. One benefit to the student is that once they learn the LMS in their first class, subsequent courses will be set up in the same way and the student will be familiar with the format. How does a student become familiar with the LMS? Using videos or step by step tutorials can help the visual learner to see how to navigate the classroom. A positive environment for the student will consist of the feeling the instructor sets in the classroom. Having a warm, friendly tone or “soft skills” can help the student feel at ease to learn how to navigate the classroom, communicate and even to have confidence in their learning. In Kilburn’s (2013) research, students felt weekly video announcements from the instructor were useful and gave a sense of a connection with the instructor. The third area which has been found to help decrease anxiety in students is support. This can come in two areas support of the student academically and technical support. In his description of best online practices, Meyers (2008) emphasized the need for instructors to validate all student perspectives, as well as acknowledge differing beliefs and biases, to create a safe and welcoming community that helps students become “more engaged and feel more interconnected”. Interaction with students is necessary the need for support in online learning is often mentioned (Coomey, 2011). Strategies to enhance communication between educators and students in an online environment can include phone calls, private messages, kudos notes, and detailed assignment feedback. According to Coomey (2001), “Support includes periodic face-to-face contact, online tutorial supervision, peer support, advice from experts, feedback on performance, support services and software tools”.

**Time Management**

Many students are motivated by the desire to obtain a college education; however, they struggle with a lack of time management and organizational skills in order to achieve success in an asynchronous learning environment. Often times, students have unrealistic expectations of the commitment needed for the college experience. Addressing expectations is something that should be the responsibility of the higher education institution and the student. It is up to the student to make the most of their academic experience. It is also up to the institution and their representatives to provide an environment that allows for social, emotional, and intellectual interaction. (Richardson et al., 2014) Supporting this, educators should focus on creating time management strategies that can be used both in and out of the classroom. The ability to manage time effectively is a learned behavior; however, many students begin their college careers feeling overwhelmed with the demands of the college experience, especially when it comes to finding balance in their daily lives and completing courses asynchronously. In order for students to remain focused and motivated in an online environment they will need good time management and organization skills (Basila, 2014) To help students gain success in the online classroom, it is important for educators to teach basic time management skills. These skills, which can be applied to their daily lives as well, will lend great success both in and out of the classroom.
According to Vences Cyril (2015), time management skills aid in student preparedness with time and schedule organization which helps students submit academic work on time. This is, however, a skill that needs to be taught and practiced. There are several ways that educators can help students develop good time management strategies for success as an online student. One of the most important skills in teaching time management is that of organization. This is a fundamental area that many online college students find challenging at first, especially in an asynchronous learning environment.

Many students who struggle with time management due so due to not understanding how to organize their approach to academics at the University level rather than being due to the students unwillingness to work hard. (Van deMeer et al., 2010). To help online students get organized and develop a sense of balance, educators can ask students to take a look at a 24 hour block of their daily schedule. A visual representation of how a student spends their day can be a big eye opener as they can “see” and reflect on where they may be wasting time during their day; thus providing a basis for developing a block of time dedicated to class work during the week. With that being said, educators should also help students determine the best time of day to set aside a block of time when they are most alert and have minimal distractions.

Häffner (2015) supports this and notes, “Prioritizing their different tasks; setting clear, challenging and proximal goals with deadlines; planning and scheduling their work day and monitoring goal progress might be good advice for students to increase perceived control of time and decrease stress.” (p. 92) Once a dedicated block of time is set aside, educators should teach students how to create a “to-do” list. Depending on the learner, a “to-do” list can be either paper/pencil or using digital media. Doing so allows students to write down daily tasks such as school work and personal tasks with deadline; thus, helping online students gain control of what needs to be accomplished as well as their respective deadlines. From there, have students prioritize each task using a ranking system and begin completing each action item from their list. Some approaches to creating lists and managing time are the Covey method, the ABC method, and the 80/20 Rule. Covey (2008) describes a high-level prioritization and in this scheme, tasks are categorized by four quadrants: QI - Important and Urgent , QII - Important but Not Urgent , QIII - Not Important but Urgent, and QIV - Not Important and Not Urgent. Keener (2008) notes that “While QI - QIV prioritization doesn’t help you decide which QI activity to do first and which to do second, and so on, it can be very enlightening to find out which quadrants your tasks are in”.

The ABC method is to always start with a high priority, most urgent ‘A’ task, even if one can only accomplish a small part of it. A- high priority and must get done, B- priority, not as urgent as A, and needs to get done, C- one would like to get this done but it is not a priority thus, it is not as important or urgent. (American Intercontinental University, 2014) If an unplanned task comes up do not address it until after it has been put on the list and prioritized. Another rule is the 80:20 Rule. This argues that typically 80% of your outcomes come from 20% of your inputs. (Schenck, 2011) The important thing to remember is that in life there are certain activities done (our 20%) that account for the majority (our 80%) of happiness and outputs. The 80/20 rule shows how to achieve much more with much less effort, time, and resources, simply by identifying and focusing efforts on the 20 percent that really counts.

Another aspect educators should consider in teaching time management skills is to assist students in developing personal and academic goals. There is an incredible relationship and
connection between these two that often afford online students a great opportunity to find balance when they feel overwhelmed. Goal setting helps students take an active role in their learning. “It has fundamental impacts on increasing student motivation, self-regulation, self-efficacy and achievement.” (Turkay, year, p. 8) Students that create goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely. This way they learn to take ownership of their learning by organizing and prioritizing what they need to do and when it needs to be done. For example, educators can emphasize the importance of setting weekly goals in order to manage their time more effectively in an asynchronous environment.

As online classrooms evolve, students will tend to have the same anxieties of communication and computer fear among others. Remaining mindful in their quest for education can lead to seeking strategies to alleviate the stress and anxiety. Having access to an instructor who not only has knowledge of technology and the subject but also uses soft skills to build a relationship with the student is imperative to an online learning experience which results in a student completing their program successfully. In addition, teaching students how to manage their time is needed as many do not know how to approach this when it comes to online learning. Students will need to learn how to organize their time, prioritize tasks, and set appropriate goals to assist in their success. These skills, taught by educators, will be transferable to all areas of their life once practiced and mastered.
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