

Editorial

First Thoughts on Metaskills

An often-repeated opinion, supported I believe by considerable empirical evidence, holds that in the knowledge-based economy, advantages accrue to people who are skillful in managing their continued learning. Workers are needed, it is said, who are self-sustaining, self-pacing learners who can construct their own knowledge, either alone or in learning teams, and who are able to link learning with real-world problem solving. It is also claimed, quite reasonably I feel, that the new Internet/Web-delivery technologies have a powerful potential to support such learner-workers by providing access to a nearly infinite range of information sources. However, it seems that before they can “make sense” of this vast store of information, people have to develop certain advanced metacognitive skills. The skills of knowing how to access, glean, select, review, and integrate this content into personal knowledge are the essential foundation on which all else will be built.

A particularly important cluster of such metaskills (though a better term than “skill” is needed to describe this) makes up the ability to be an autonomous learner. The importance of developing the ability to guide one’s own learning, and when using external resources to do so under one’s own control, has long been discussed in distance education literature. Recent dissertations provide fresh insight into this as well as the other long-established view that the experience of actually being a distance learner helps develop and strengthen the metaskills of the autonomous learner (see, e.g., Anderson 1999; Ozen 2000).

I find in my own everyday online teaching that students frequently report that one of the things they like about studying through this medium is the “feel” of self-management. One of my aims is, of course, that there will be a high transfer of this ability to manage learning to other potentially educational contexts. These may be formal contexts, or, perhaps more important, informal contexts in which it will be particularly desirable, indeed essential, that the student has the ability to organize his or her own learning program. Such contexts are likely to be work related. Given the importance of problem solving and teamwork, indeed team problem solving, we would like to think we could help develop such skills in our distance learning program and that they would be valuable for our students in the world of work. A recent dissertation study in which some such generalizable benefits of distance learning were reported was that of Sorg (2000). The study suggested that students found their distance learning helped improve not only

cognitive strategies but also such skills as managing personal resources and managing technology. The new technology has the distinguishing characteristic of facilitating learner-to-learner interaction, and so one would hope that the problem-solving learning processes being developed by the increasingly autonomous learners would have the additional characteristic of being conducted in learning teams. A fair degree of evidence is beginning to appear to support this idea (see Collins and Berge 1998; Winer, Chomienne, and Vázquez-Abad 2000).

In our modern-day distance learning environments, online group projects, exploration of multiple sources of information enhanced by branching tutorials and use of the Web's hypertext/hyperlink capabilities, as well as the practice of evaluating each other's work can all be built into course design. It is certainly challenging for the instructional designers, but it is also potentially incredibly valuable in the payoff for our students when that payoff takes the form of the transferable metacognitive skills of the autonomous learner.

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Congratulations to Evan S. Smith, whose article, “Writing Web-Based Distance Education Courses for Adult Learners” in *The American Journal of Distance Education*, Vol. 15 No. 2, won the Specialty Books Award for Research in Independent Study. Dr. Smith received the award at the American Association for Collegiate Independent Study convention in Athens, OH, November 10, 2001.