What Part of Self-Paced Don’t You Understand?

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Introduction

Self-paced education and training offer both teachers and learners a great deal of flexibility and the opportunity to optimize the learning environment. By establishing the conditions necessary to make learning as effective and efficient as possible, this approach offers a great many advantages to organizations operating in an increasingly competitive, globalized, and technology driven world. Knowledge in the Information Age is often highly perishable. Getting new knowledge to those who need it when they need it requires a very agile and adaptive learning environment. In large, dynamic, and often geographically dispersed organizations, it can be much more efficient to bring the education to the learner rather than bring the learner back to a centralized classroom environment. However much care must be given to the design and execution of these distributed learning systems. Realistic expectations of what can and cannot be done are paramount.

What Does Self-Paced Learning Mean?

Self-paced learning can be defined as an offering in which the learner determines the pace and timing of content delivery. It is sometimes described as self-regulated learning. Different educational philosophies offer varying interpretations of the concept, but common to most of them is “an acknowledgment of the interaction of affective and cognitive processes at a level of abstraction. Self awareness at a cognitive and emotional level would appear to be the key enabling process in the development of self-regulatory strategies” (McMahon, 2001). However not all students have or are able to develop such self awareness. Many are used to the higher level of support typically available in a face-to-face classroom environment. Thus the freedom and flexibility of self-paced learning programs can also be a double edged sword in terms of a lack of accessibility of such support mechanisms as are typically built in to traditional learning environments.

While learner self-awareness is considered to be the key enabler of successful self-paced learning, organizational self-awareness is also a critical component. This factor is certainly a key consideration in the traditional academic world where colleges and universities seek to expand student access to classes through online courses and resource centers. It is even more important, perhaps critically so, in the business world. In the aforementioned race to provide “just in time” knowledge to Information Age workers, organizations must be conscious of the limitations of self-paced learning programs as well as their advantages. Distance Learning in general, and self-paced DL in particular, is often seen by cost conscious organizations as an attractive alternative to expensive instructor led learning. While it is true that many economies can be had in self-paced learning, sufficient attention and resources must be applied to establishing an environment in which it can succeed.

The theoretical underpinnings of self-paced learning can principally be found in two schools of thought—Equivalency Theory and Andragogy. The former calls for “equivalent learning experiences for all students—distant and local—in order for there to be expectations of equivalent outcomes of the educational experience” (Simonson, 1999). The later posits that adult learning requirements are different than those of children (Knowles, 1978) and so logically, adults should be taught differently than children.
The four assumptions that drive Andragogy are changes in self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, and orientation toward learning. Applying these two theories to the design of self-paced learning programs, if one strives for learning outcomes that are as good as a classroom system then one must account for the growth of the adult student’s self-directedness, the importance of the learner’s own experiences, readiness to learn what needs to be learned, and problem solving orientation.

**Self-Paced Learning in Practice**

There are numerous self-paced learning programs, both formal and informal, in use across virtually all academic, business, and government organizations. This section will present a few representative examples of such programs in a variety of different fields.

**Jhpiego**

Jhpiego is an international non-profit health organization affiliated with Johns Hopkins University. Headquartered in Baltimore, Maryland, it has offices in 30 countries and has worked with more than 140 countries around the world. As such it is quite evident why Jhpiego has chosen to use a distributive, self-paced learning model. The goal of the organization is “the establishment of sustainable educational and training systems that will ensure a steady supply of clinical trainers and health care providers and ultimately will lead to improved quality of health care” ([http://www.jhpiego.org/](http://www.jhpiego.org/)). Toward this end they use a variety of innovative strategies including on-the-job training, modified Computer Assisted Learning (ModCAL), technology-assisted learning centers, and email-based training courses. Material is provided in printed format, online, and CD-ROM.

One of the distinctive features of their approach is the acknowledgment of the subtle difference between self-paced learning and individualized learning. The former process puts the learner in full control of the pace while the latter adds some time constraints that may be at least partially controlled by the trainer or facilitator. This factor is most effective in addressing the needs of those learners who do not have the self-awareness skills critical to this type of environment. The open-ended nature of true self-paced learning can be vulnerable to student procrastination without some sort of time limitation.

Jhpiego also takes a middle-of-the-road approach in presentation of information in their group-based courses. The courses are designed for an average learner with the acknowledgement that more capable students may become bored while those less capable may be overwhelmed. The self-paced approach accompanied by a skilled facilitator functioning as a guide can be a boon to both types. There is robust faculty training and qualification program to ensure facilitators are fully prepared to assume that role. For more information on this excellent program see [http://www.jhpiego.org/](http://www.jhpiego.org/).

**Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Australia**

To prepare its students for the modern work place, which requires a higher level of independence, Australian industry has urged its educators to develop a more flexible approach to delivery of the required training. In response The Open Learning Institute (OLI) in Queensland and the Open Learning and Technology Network (OTEN) in New South Wales now offer a wide variety of self-paced programs in such disciplines as Accounting, Hospitality, Engineering, Hairdressing, Information Technology, and others. These programs consist of a mix of Computer-based Learning (CBL), online, and video-conferencing.

In a survey of students enrolled in these programs educators found that the most common reasons given for choosing a self-paced method were lifestyle related. The ability to fit their studies within work, family, and social constraints was seen as having the best of both worlds. However these flexible external
study programs had the lowest completion rates in five of six disciplines examined. Although many external study students believed that they required more flexibility in order to complete their studies, it paradoxically seems that a more structured environment is also required. Here, facilitator involvement and encouragement to develop time management skills is an important element of success. Total flexibility can be, for some learners, too much of a good thing. One of the most important lessons learned from the experience of students and teachers in the VET independent learning programs is the fact that self-paced learning is not appropriate for everyone and not appropriate in all environments. Successful programs require the right student, the right teacher, and the right social environment (Misko, 2000).

Joint Professional Military Education

The United States military forces are a highly trained, technologically capable, and globally dispersed organization. They operate in a complex and constantly changing world. Education and training in the Armed Forces are career long requirements at every level of every service. The military world is truly one of life-long learning and self-paced programs are a critical element in that world. Independent learning programs have been a staple in military training and education for a very long time but the operational tempo of the post-9/11 world has made them even more critical. Rapid response requirements, short notice deployments, short turnaround between deployments, and Individual Augments (IA) in support of the Global War on Terror have made dedicated classroom learning a luxury that just cannot always be afforded. Yet learning must go on. One particular element of that learning is Joint Professional Military Education or JPME. The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 has made this education a statutory requirement for officer advancement and promotion in all branches of the Armed Forces. Each branch has its own service college that includes both resident and non-resident studies. Although different approaches are employed to suit the unique needs of each service, common elements apply throughout.

A representative example is the College of Distance Education at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. At this writing there are over 4000 students enrolled in classroom, online and independent study programs. The degree of flexibility and independence increases incrementally by each method. The seminar-based classroom program is a traditional face-to-face, instructor led system that requires student attendance at a fixed time and place. The Web-based online program is also instructor led and has fixed start and finish dates for each cohort of approximately 20 students. The program is completely asynchronous with students free to log in whenever they want. As long as assignments are completed within certain limitations, there is considerable flexibility within this program. Instructors monitor student progress and intervene as necessary when they fall behind. The Independent Study version is completely student-centered and self-paced. Course material is provided via CD-ROM and printed readings. Facilitators are available via email to answer questions and/or offer guidance. Suggested timelines are provided for completion of each course, but the individual student controls the pace of his or her learning.

A comparative review of end-of-course student feedback is informative regarding the efficacy of each method. Students in each program are asked to complete a survey providing both quantitative (Likert scale) and qualitative (narrative likes/dislikes) data about the course. In two significant criteria—Overall Satisfaction and Future Value—the classroom method received the highest student ratings, followed by the Web-based Program, with the Independent Study Program third. However, in the criterion of Instructor Feedback—all three programs were rated essentially the same. In the narrative portion of the critiques the most frequently noted factor that students liked about the Independent Study program was the flexibility/ability to set their own pace. The most frequently noted dislike was the lack of interaction with an instructor or other students. As with the Australian VET programs, even though students like and appreciate the flexibility afforded by a self-paced learning environment, it can prove to be an impediment if not administered with a visible element of facilitator encouragement and support. Also like the Australian programs, completion rates for the Independent Study programs were significantly lower than both the Web-based and Seminar programs. In recognition of that fact, in 2007 a systemic effort was
made to contact every student enrolled in the program who was not making acceptable progress. This effort resulted in an increase in both completion rates and voluntary withdrawal. By far the most common reason given for withdrawal was not enough time to devote to study. Prior to the student contact effort the program was averaging 8.6 completions per month. Since the contact program began completions have increased to an average of 16.8 per month. The lesson learned here would be that leadership must recognize that if JPME is going to be mandated, an appropriate social environment must be provided to allow learners to work on the courses.

Summary

The three representative samples described here certainly do not provide a comprehensive picture of the world of self-paced learning. They do however illustrate some of the major advantages and disadvantages inherent in the process:

Advantages

- Learners can control the environment, which can be a good motivator
- Learning is active rather than passive; learners assume responsibility for their own learning
- Learners can gain knowledge, skills, and abilities when they are needed
- Bringing education and training to the learner can reduce costs
- Allows teachers/facilitators to spend more time with learners who need attention

Disadvantages

- Not every one has the necessary skills and self awareness to learn independently
- Too much flexibility can lead to procrastination and failure to complete requirements
- Overly optimistic assumptions on cost savings can lead to insufficient resource support
- Lack of student support from the organization can make learners feel isolated

Cognizance of these factors should guide both learners and organizations in the decision to participate in self-paced learning. Realistic expectations are the key.

References


About the Presenter

David Magill is the Program Manager for the CD ROM-based Distance Learning Program at the College of Distance Education of the United States Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. He is also a Professor of National Security Decision Making at the College. He has taught graduate classroom seminars on the resident faculty of the College and since 1999, has taught both classroom and online
courses for the College of Distance Education. Prior to joining the College of Distance Education, he also taught Program Evaluation and Defense Resource Management courses for the Defense Leadership and Management Program (DLAMP) with the University of Massachusetts. Professor Magill holds a Master of Arts in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College and a Ph.D. from Salve Regina University.