


8 Student Personality Types in Distance Learning Part 1

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I was taking advantage of some down time, cleaning out some of my old files on my computer, when I ran across a great article I saved that covered student personality types. When I originally read this article, I only had several years of experience working in the distance-learning realm. Now, years later, I have seen all these student types at one time or another, and throughout the years, noticed several others worthy of mention.

Before moving into some observations, I do need to provide some context for the environment in which I work. Our population consists of postgraduate students working in middle management positions. The classes are small, 18 students to one instructor, and progress through the year as a group. The yearlong curriculum is not self-paced. The college delivers the content in a mix between asynchronous and synchronous modalities. Blackboard is the asynchronous platform that delivers the lesson material using a combination of computer-based instruction, online exams, and discussion board forums. We use Blackboard Ultra and/or Defense Connect Services for the synchronous portions of the curriculum, which include delivery of student briefing products. Of course, there are the standard necessities like email, telephone, and administration that accompany facilitation.

Distance learning (DL) presents a unique set of challenges for instructors ranging from the basics like methodologies to interact with students, to motivating students to keep pace with the curriculum and help them balance the external challenges like family and work issues; and

student types are a part of the equation. While I base the observations from a distance-learning environment, many may apply across all learning environments. So let us explore some of the student types.

After the Fact Jack: Understandably, circumstances arise in life that preclude one's ability to attend class: work, health, personal, training, and a plethora of other life events will take precedent at times. We expect distractors and are prepared to make alternate arrangements; simply address the situation beforehand. Yes, emergencies do happen, but the majority of the time students know in advance that they will not be available to participate due to one reason or another. Often times we can have the student provide products before and work ahead. Yet "After the Fact Jack" does not say anything until the meeting/due date has come and gone. The assignment is due on Tuesday, and Wednesday you get a call that "Jack" is traveling and is having problems connecting or some other conflict. The class briefed the product last night, and "Jack" calls the next day—he had a meeting but forgot to let you know. The intro briefs tell the students to inform the instructor BEFORE the fact; AFTER the fact is an excuse . . . yet "Jack" is out there.

The key here is to address these situations early in the course and enforce your policy. At the beginning of the course, ensure students understand the policy. I provide it to them in their initial class meeting, and again in hard copy. If need be, have the students sign and return the policy demonstrating that they understand it. At the beginning of the course, students do forget, so I tend to provide that one free pass and allow them to make it up. However, for the chronic abuser of the policy, there is a time when it becomes obvious that they just are not going to abide by the policy. In those cases, it reflects on their grades.

Intermittent Irene: Synchronous sessions require computer connectivity along with the ability to participate (translation, talk and hear). We run "commo checks" with students at the beginning of the year and continue work through issues until students can talk/hear. Even run a quick roll call at the beginning of each class or some kind of check to ensure students can hear and talk. As the class progresses, connectivity is great, and now "Irene" is up to brief next. Yet, miraculously when it is "Irene's" turn to brief, the system boots her off and she is not available. OR the microphone will not work, or something.. Then once the class moves on, things work well again. This happens on occasion to most, but all the time to "Irene."

In cases, an initial "customer service technician" approach can solve many of these issues. Much of this comes from you having more experience with the systems than your student does. Not everyone who takes a distance-learning course is computer savvy. I always post user guides and information on the system we use for students on Blackboard. As the course progresses, question the students with issues to help troubleshoot. However, there will be times when the issue is beyond your capability to assist the student. In those cases, I send them to the appropriate help desk to solve the issue. The bottom line is this: it is incumbent upon the student to be able to participate in the class. In the end, if the student cannot participate, their options slowly diminish to not getting credit (e.g., poor grades) or having to disenroll from the course until the help desk can fix the issue.

The Winger: “It is only a lot of reading if you do it” and “if you wait till the last minute it only takes a minute” are the mantras of “The Winger.” Why study when you can bloviate?! The “Winger” is going to “wing it.” The concept of actually doing the readings, research, or even reading previous guidance provided by the instructor is foreign to the “Winger.” At the beginning, the “Winger” is not readily recognizable, since everyone is learning new concepts and techniques. However, as the class matures and begins to demonstrate improvement with the concepts and application of the theory from the curriculum, the “Winger” will emerge. The “Winger” is still relearning the same mistakes. They often times show few indications that they even read some of the material provided in the lesson(s). Their approach appears to be one of just reading the requirement and giving it a try; see what happens. Poor grades seem to roll off the “Winger’s” back like water off a duck. As time marches on, the majority of the class is learning and getting better, but the “Winger” is still repeating the same mistakes over again.

There comes that epiphany where, while reading the “Winger’s” work, you scratch your head and ask “what the heck is going on!?” Sometimes this is a sign there are other issues in the student’s daily life that cause their studies to become tertiary. . . . Take some time to explore and see if there are some deeper-seated issues. Personal issues are difficult to detect in a distance-learning environment, because you do not personally interact with the students. Often times you can craft a solution that will allow the student an opportunity to address the personal issues and remain with the class. Once the student resolves the issues, the “Winger” disappears. Conversely, there are times where the “Winger” is just that! Going to wing it. Talking, coaching, mentoring, providing reference material, guidance, feedback . . . you name it, it doesn’t change their approach. In those cases, their grades drop, and they have no desire to work harder, remember there are other students striving to do better, so spend your time with them.

Coat Tail Tom: “Coat Tail Tom” manifests during group projects in several different forms ranging from not participating with the group unless the instructor is around, not submitting products to the group, or submitting late products that are wrong and relying on someone in the group to fix them. Other times “Tom” is just too busy to participate. The *why* is irrelevant, “Tom” will always have a reason. Now, life happens. Occasionally there are legitimate events and reasons that override a student’s ability to participate. However, these are one-time occurrences; but not for “Tom.” The common theme with “Tom” is the desire to do as little as possible, letting everyone else in the group do the bulk of the work; then “Tom” expects to get the same grade as the rest of the group.

For group projects, make sure to have a group-grading standard that explains the elements that make up a student’s grade and make sure the students know it. This is especially important in a course that does many group projects. One of the most demoralizing things you can do is to have a policy that gives all the group members the same grade. I used to only publish the group grading standard, but after several years just telling the students the policy at the beginning of the class and posting it for them to read, realized that was not enough. I now have them read, sign, and return to acknowledge they understand the policy. That way, when they ask (some still will) why they did not get the same grade as the group, you can point

to elements in the policy. Another tool is peer evaluations, because these can provide a look behind the scenes. Sometimes they will confirm what you already know; other times surprise you. In the end, do not pair “Coat Tail Tom” up with anyone in the group; leave them with an element that they have to do on their own. No one else is there to do the work for them; pull out that coat tail.

So far we discussed several of the less motivated personality types one might encounter, along with some potential approaches to consider. Part two of this article addresses some of the more motivated personality types along with some approaches for them as well.

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