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More than 5.2 million students are participating in distance education through degree-granting postsecondary institutions, according to the Department of Education (2016), with nearly 2.7 million of them engaging in distance education courses exclusively. Defined by Henry O'Lawrence (2007) of California State University as any teaching whereby the student is physically separated from the instructor and not in the same room, as in a traditional classroom setting, distance education is popular because of the flexibility and convenience of online classes for both the learner and teacher, regardless of their geographical locations. At the same time, distance education presents certain potential drawbacks, including the lack of face-to-face interaction, motivation, and classroom experience.

Study Buddy

During distance education and online classroom instructing, teacher and student engagement happens through technology; typically, with a computer as the mode of interaction, whether through forums, discussion boards, emails, or other electronic means of delivery (Regier, 2014). Teaching can come in many forms and can be delivered in many different ways. Because distance education classes rely to various degrees on peer-to-peer interaction through such contexts as discussion boards and group assignments and projects, classmates are often informally teaching one another, just as they do in person during traditional study groups. By establishing a particular classmate as a partner, the study buddy relationship can establish a more formal support system of teaching one another, as well as sharing details of class instruction,

materials, or assignments that one partner might have missed. The relationship can help drive success and goal achievement through shared knowledge as well as mutual emotional encouragement—the buddies provide one another with a listening ear, someone to share ideas and thoughts with, and readily available feedback (Haudan, n.d.).

Such support can be crucial. In a study comparing two groups, with peer interaction encouraged through a computer course for one group and not the other, Poellhuber, Chomienne, and Karsenti (2008) identified student motivation and persistence as key contributors to stemming dropout rates among online distance education programs, and they further noted that motivation might also decline when learners feel isolated. The study authors reported that the students related their motivation in the course to the enhanced tutoring and peer interaction, which they stated were both positive and stimulated their self-efficacy.

My Perspective

In 2013, I enrolled as an occupational therapy doctorate student through a distance education program. Many different emotions gripped me as I worried about starting this journey in my life. I dealt with fears of failure, lack of confidence in my abilities of returning to school after so long, and concerns over an inability to learn in a virtual environment. Those worries were quickly confirmed as classes started and I found myself disorganized, needing more interaction and instruction, and quickly frustrated with the lack of face-to-face time with my cohort and instructors.

Soon after starting the program, I made a connection with a classmate who, like me, was an older student returning to school after being in the work world for a long time, so we had some shared experiences and concerns about returning to school. Through conversations in our class, we connected and exchanged phone numbers; began to talk daily; and shared ideas, thoughts, and

interpretations of assignments and class discussions. We both brought prior knowledge and understanding to the study buddy relationship that helped us share insights for enhanced performance in the online classes.

For me, having a study buddy whose learning style complemented my own allowed me to gain knowledge, insight, and understanding of class material and instruction that I might otherwise have missed. Finding someone with similar likes and dislikes allowed my study buddy and I to mesh together better and build the relationship on a more personal and trusting level and in a more collaborative way. For me, having a study buddy throughout my distance education experience provided me with the sense that I was not alone in the doctorate program—I had someone to hold me accountable for assignments and deadlines, and encourage me to achieve my academic goals. The peer-to-peer collaboration gave me someone to talk to and who would listen, challenge me to stay on task, meet deadlines, and bounce ideas off of. Additionally, the study buddy relationship enhanced my learning by giving me a different perspective and viewpoint on assignments and objectives, unbiased and uncensored constructive peer review, support from a friend, open and honest feedback, and a common and shared experience.

Conclusion

Occupational therapy students can benefit from a study buddy relationship because of the support, accountability, friendship, and trust that the relationship provides to accomplish class tasks together, meet deadlines, and set goals and achieve goals through a supportive collaborative learning team.

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