
The interest in online education has increased dramatically in the last few decades. In 1999-2000, the percentage of undergraduates who took online distance courses was 57 percent in US (National-Center-for-Educational-Statistics, 2002). According to Palloff and Pratt (2003), we have moved beyond the infancy stage of online education. Increased attention has been given to ways we can provide learner-centered and learner-focused online learning environment.

In response to this call for learner-centered online education, Palloff & Pratt published their new book, *The Virtual Student: A Profile And Guide To Working With Online Learners*, which addresses the establishment of an online learning community. Palloff and Pratt are known by many scholars and educators who are interested in online education. In their previous work (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; R. Palloff & Pratt, 2001), they have established that learners should be the focus of any online course. They have also established that instructors should not teach but can only facilitate the acquisition of knowledge online. The authors came to realize, however, that their previous studies had focused on instructors hence learners had been left out of the picture. This new book, therefore, is devoted to online education with a focus on virtual learners.

Guided by a belief that good online learning involves good pedagogy, andragogy, and heutagogy, this book provides guidelines, strategies, and tips to foster successful online learning. Essentially, *The Virtual Student: A Profile And Guide To Working With Online Learners* is concerned with questions like "who that person is and what that person needs to succeed in an online course, what the virtual student should expect, and what the instructor should expect from the virtual student" (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

The book is divided into two parts. Part one provides a profile for virtual students, whereas part two presents issues, concerns and strategies to work with virtual students. Part one starts with a portrait of our virtual student body. This includes a description of the successful virtual student, the delineation of student needs, and the presentation of student satisfaction with online learning. Chapter 2 addresses virtual learning communities from the student perspective.
Particularly, this section is concerned with the role of learners in online community and the ways to maximize interactions. Moving to chapter 3, learning styles are the center of the discussion with a focus on how to create a differentiated learning environment online. In chapter 4, the topic of a digital divide is explored. The equity topics addressed in this chapter include gender, cultural, geographic, religion, spirituality, literacy, and disability issues. Chapter 5 examines various virtual student needs ranging from technical support to integration of appropriate policies for students.

The focus in the second part of the book shifts to how to address virtual students’ specific issues and concerns. Chapter 6 describes the rationale and the ways to design good student orientation. Particularly, elements for successful and effective orientation are presented in detail. Chapter 7 addresses a vitally important, yet often overlooked issue: time and commitment required for online teaching and learning. Chapter 8 highlights the importance and the methods of assessment and evaluation. Specifically, the assessment of students’ performance and the evaluation of courses are described in detail. Chapter 9 discusses legal questions with respect to virtual students. The problems addressed range from "who owns a student’s work once it is posted in an online discussion?" and "how do intellectual property and copyright issues affect students?" to "how do we deal with the archiving of courses and the use of those courses later on?" The final chapter of the book is devoted to administrative issues related to attrition, retention, and group size. The causes of attrition are explored and the strategies to increase levels of retention are described.

The whole book finishes with a collection of practical resources for both faculty members and students. The tools for faculty include sample course outlines, guides to developing critical thinking skills and good discussion questions, design principles to use case study methodology, and guidelines for student evaluation. Student tool kits are comprised of a self-assessment questionnaire, tips for being successful online students, communication tools, guidelines for feedback, instruments for time management, and tips for writing reflection and research papers.

The Virtual Student: A Profile And Guide To Working With Online Learners can serve as an introduction to online learning in higher education or training settings. I think this book has three strengths. The first strength, which is the best part of this book, is the practicality of the issues being discussed. In a similar manner to Palloff and Pratt's previous books, all of the topics addressed here are very helpful for people who are interested in online education, especially for those who are relatively new in the area of online teaching and learning. The sample tool kits and guidelines can be easily adapted and effectively applied to most online courses (more so in 'cohort-based' learning as indicated in the preface). I particularly like the detailed instructional techniques for each individual topic provided at the end of each chapter. These tips can be used as quick references and are immediately applicable to most online learning environments. The second strength of this book is the inclusion of students' contributions. That is, the book is "written through [students’] words, experiences, and eyes" (p. xix). The third strength is that this book is suitable for both students and teachers who are interested in online education. Strategies, guidelines, and suggestions are provided not only for instructors, but also for online learners. For instance, the tool kits presented at the end of the book for students offer useful information about communication such as lists of emoticons and acronyms, netiquette, online writing skills, and quoting strategies.
I find, however, there are also weaknesses associated with the book. First, the principles and
guidelines presented in the book are best suited for courses in social sciences and humanities.
The book would be strengthened by adding discourse that addresses virtual learning
environments for teaching subjects that require a lot of hands-on experiences (e.g. science and
engineering). Further, there is a need to address more administrative issues such as how
administrative practices can support or hinder successful online learning.

References


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