**How Can You Help Students Who Won't Ask for Help?**



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It would seem students should want the help of their instructors, especially when they are struggling with course topics, assignments, and meeting deadlines. But the reality is that this is not usually the case and as most educators know, students may even resist the very idea of asking for help and prefer to give up when faced with a challenge. This can occur even when an instructor has done everything possible to encourage students to speak up. For example, I have observed many online classes where instructors created optimal classroom conditions that were conducive for productive exchanges, similar to what I have done within my own online classes, and students still would not ask for help – even when their grades were declining.

I have studied adult education and one of the prominent principles is called andragogy, which is in contrast to pedagogy or a principle about teaching children. According to andragogy, adults as students are self-directed and that means they want to be involved in the process of learning and they can take responsibility for their role. The underlying assumption is that students have the academic experience necessary to understand their developmental needs and know best how to work towards continuous growth. This is an aspect of andragogy that is often overlooked by educators and yet it is critical to remember when working with new or undergraduate students. However, I know of many traditional educators who believe that all adult students need to take responsibility for their assignments, grades, and meeting deadlines – and any form of ongoing outreach is considered to be handholding and not part of the responsibility of an instructor.

But the fact remains that many students are going to need assistance from their instructor at some point during a class, whether they should or should not be responsible for every aspect of their own learning. The question is how to encourage them to ask for help, or even begin to enter into a dialogue with their instructor, so they feel comfortable seeking assistance when it is needed. Here is something else to consider: Will making statements to students such as "I have an open-door policy" or "feel free to ask questions" be enough to encourage them to ask for help? Then there is another scenario that emerges and it involves the students who just do not seem to want to help themselves. What then does an instructor do to help those students?

**What Does an Adult Student Need?**

Adult students need more than course materials and learning resources for long-term learning and retention to occur. Yes, a student can memorize information and pass a test; however, that is short-term learning and may soon be forgotten. That is the premise of a correspondence course and one that is completed without the benefit of an instructor. An instructor can make an intellectual contribution to the class and provide context through lectures, online class posts and announcements, and class discussions.

Students also need guidance, support, feedback, and more importantly, they need direction. I have also worked with graduate students who still have a need for developmental support. Even doctoral students have developmental needs, although their writing is often more advanced and involves higher order thinking. You can engage those students in a more advanced form of discourse when you interact with them. Overall, the most important need that every student has is for their instructor to be present and engaged in the course. But that is only the starting point for the development of a positive working relationship with students.

**Understanding the Fear Factor**

When students begin a class, they start working with an instructor they have likely never met before – and with an online class it is someone they cannot see. They are going to rely on initial perceptions to determine if like or dislike this person, and if they will be receptive to work with, trust, or accept this instructor. There is another interesting aspect to the development of interactions between students and their instructors, and it involves a fear factor that is often experienced until there is some level of comfort and trust established.

For a few students, that feeling of fear or intimidation never subsides. It can be found most often in newer students or those who have no prior academic experience, and they may be intimated by the thought of asking a question, especially if they believe their question is "dumb" or something no one else would ask. I have also seen the fear factor occur as a result of students having had prior negative experiences and as a result, it taints their view of all instructors. Then when they need assistance, it is highly unlikely they will communicate with their current instructor.

**A Proactive Approach to Helping Students**

As an experienced educator, I know that showing up for class and having a positive attitude is only a good start towards having an impact on the progress of my students. I also know that students are going to need assistance and more importantly, there are going to be students who will need help but will not be able to help themselves – until they know that I am working proactively to support them. Below are some of the strategies that I have implemented to assist students in my online classes, using the HELP acronym.

**H**ands-On: What I need to consider, with every interaction I have with students, is the value I can provide when working with or responding to them. When I develop feedback, it needs to be more than canned responses and instead, it should be personalized and address their developmental needs in a manner that demonstrates I am actually paying attention to their work. Even when it seems that the minimal amount of effort has been put into a student's paper, there was some attempt made to meet the requirements and it is my responsibility to respond and help guide the learning process. The more involved I am when I provide feedback, and the more active I am during class discussions, the more I show students that I want to help them and in the long term that encourages their responsiveness to me.

**E**mpathy: One of the most important aspects of being an educator, in terms of how I can relate to my students, is being able to see students where they are at from an individual and developmental perspective – even if I cannot physically see them, or they are of a different age, personality type, or temperament; or they are not particularly easy to work with in general. I have been an online student myself and I know what it is like to work full time and try to balance other responsibilities while working towards academic goals.

There is a hope that the class will be easy to balance and the workload easy to manage, and more importantly, the instructor will be someone you can contact when needed and be easy to work with. What I have learned is to empathize but still balance the need to uphold academic policies, which means that when students are struggling and I cannot change the rules – I offer genuine support and help them in every way I can until they are engaged back in the course.

**L**isten: I have discovered that one of the reasons that students no longer ask for help, and seemingly will no longer help themselves, is that they have asked for help and no one seemed to listen to them. When students are struggling, they want to be heard and understood first and foremost. If an instructor launches into a lecture about what they are not doing right or why there is a problem, before listening to what the student has to say, the student is going to tune them out.

A challenge for instructors is having time to listen to students as it may seem that asking a student to tell them what they need assistance with, and then really listening the issue, may seem quite complex. I have found that when a student is willing to communicate with me, this is an opportunity for me to help them, and I must listen closely to what they have in mind first. I also have to do this in a non-judgmental manner to avoid the perception that I am criticizing them.

**P**rovider: When you think of a provider, it is possible that you may consider someone such as a doctor and that is a very good analogy for an educator who is working with students. A doctor treats symptoms but also is concerned with preventative measures, along with taking care of a person's well-being. I believe that an educator can be a provider as well and address similar aspects for their students. The symptoms would be the errors made when evaluating learning activities completed by students. Some students will go to their provider for help with the symptoms and others will hope the symptoms go away. Those that hope it goes away are the students that may not want to help themselves and those are the students I want to be on the lookout for in my class. The best way I can spot ongoing, untreated symptoms is to see repeated mistakes or errors from week to week – even after I have provided feedback and encouraged a dialogue with the student. I will also take another step and initiate outreach attempts.

I well understand that I cannot help a student who is not willing to help themselves. However, if I have students who are struggling for any reason throughout the duration of my class, and I fail to do anything to help them simply because they do not ask for my help – then I have not fulfilled my obligation as an educator. It is not possible for me to know exactly why a student will not ask for help, ascertain what their prior experiences have been to gauge why they are not cooperative now, or determine if they are holding back simply out of fear. I must be proactive in my attempt to connect with students and build productive working relationships with them. Every student comes to my class for a particular reason. I understand that not every student is going to need my direct assistance but that does not mean they will have no interactions with me at all throughout the course, especially if I make an attempt to connect with them.

To answer the question I have posed in the title of this article, a student will usually not help themselves if they see no value in contacting their instructor. This means they have not established a connection with their instructor, there is no measure of trust established for whatever the reason may be, the instructor has not been present and responsive to the needs of the students, or any other number of similar factors. Of course, there may be instances when a student simply does not care and will not respond despite the best attempt and efforts made by the instructor. Overall, students will engage and respond based upon how well they are connected and engaged to their class and instructor. That is why I work to ensure that students know when they need help in my class, someone truly wants to help them. This is one of the most effective methods of teaching students how to help themselves when they need assistance.

I hope you read and believe in the power of teaching adults,