

Self-Regulation

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Over the last twenty-five years, the construct of self-regulation (SR) has emerged as one of critical importance to answering the question of what the self does. According to researchers Kathleen Vohs and Roy Baumeister, “self regulation refers to the many processes by which the human psyche exercises control over its functions, states and inner processes.” Self-regulation can be seen as involving the complementary processes of continuous (self) monitoring and (strategic) adjustment. In the socio-cognitive perspective, SR is seen as an individual difference that is strongly influenced by contextual factors. In contrast, sociocultural approaches to SR stress the importance of social interaction and the social context in mediating the achievement of SR. For sociocultural researchers, SR is seen as a social process and not merely some intra-psychological event. Indeed, SR involves processes within and among the cognitive, affective, and conative domains, all of which are embedded in and influenced by the social and cultural contexts of the individual.

In psychology, understanding SR is viewed as crucial to the understanding of the functioning of the self. It is argued that failure to self-regulate is implicated in **“nearly every major personal and social problem affecting large numbers of modern citizens.”** The failure/inability to self-regulate manifests itself in addiction, eating disorders, emotional problems, health problems, debt, violence, underachievement, procrastination, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Further, from a more theoretical perspective, it is proposed that the evolution of the ability to self-regulate may have been critical in fitting humans for participation in culture.

Self-regulation is an important concept for educators. The development of SR is seen as critical to fostering the lifelong learning skills that are a desired essential learning outcome in all modern educational systems. Substantial empirical research evidence also links the use of academic learning strategies and academic time management to self-regulatory strategies. There is also consistent evidence that high self-regulating students perform better under consequential test conditions than low self-regulating students.

Self-regulated learning (SRL) is defined as “an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features of the environment.” This definition highlights the important aspect of SRL, namely, that self-regulated learners possess “cognitive and metacognitive abilities as well as the motivational beliefs and attitudes needed to understand, monitor and direct their own learning.” Specifically, research supports the following characteristics of self-regulated learners: the setting of specific, proximal goals; the adoption of powerful cognitive strategies; monitoring of performance for progress towards the goal; physical and social environment restructuring; effective time management strategies; self-evaluation of methods; correct attribution of causality; and adapting future methods. With regards to motivation, research supports the view that self-regulated learners tend to be highly self-efficacious and focused on increasing their level of mastery. They also view what they learn as valuable, interesting and useful.

Motivation plays a critical role in SRL. It is argued that the possession of metacognitive and cognitive strategies alone cannot promote academic achievement, and that students must be motivated to use SR strategies. In one model, since goal attainment is related to strategy choice and motivational beliefs during the problem analysis forethought phase, then self-monitoring of the effectiveness of the strategy sustains motivation during the task performance phase. This allows for the attribution of failure to

strategy use (and not individual inability or deficiency) during self-reflection, which preserves student motivation. Another model views the management of affect and motivation as an important part of SRL. Thus regulation of motivation is seen as an important part of SL, at least as important as the regulation of cognition!

Several intervention studies have demonstrated the potential for improving students' performance and attitude by training in SR knowledge and skills, specifically metacognitive skills. Researchers' attention is also now being turned to developing models of the affective and volitional aspects of SR.

Teachers can assist students to become better self-regulating learners by: (a) helping them to set specific achievable goals; (b) helping them to set proximal achievable goals; (c) giving students real and meaningful choices regarding tasks and/or methods; (d) teaching subject-specific (and general) study strategies; (e) helping them to self-evaluate their work accurately; (f) monitoring their beliefs about learning, especially attribution of success/failure; (g) allowing them to seek social assistance when necessary; and (h) gradually withdrawing these scaffolds as students SR skills improve.

The ability to successfully self-regulate is a skill whose benefits will remain with learners for the rest of their lives.

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