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## What it Means to be a Self-Regulated Learner

By: [Maryellen Weimer, PhD](#) in [Teaching and Learning](#)

“Self-regulation is not a mental ability or an academic performance skill; rather it is the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills.” (p. 65) That definition is offered by Barry Zimmerman, one of the foremost researchers on self-regulated learning. It appears in a succinct five-page article that offers a very readable overview of research in this area.

Three research findings are highlighted. First, “self-regulation of learning involves more than detailed knowledge of a skill; it involves the self-awareness, self-motivation, and behavioral skill to implement that knowledge appropriately.” (p. 66)

The point here is that large differences have been observed between the way novices and experts view their learning. Novices rely on feedback from others; they compare their performances with those of others. They fail to set goals or monitor their learning. They frequently attribute failure to deficiencies that can’t be remedied. “I’m just not smart enough.” Expert learners manage their learning at every stage. They recognize when they have failed but then focus on how they can fix what went wrong. Second, self-regulation is not a trait that some students have and others do not. Rather, “it involves the selective use of specific processes that must be personally adapted to each learning task.” (p. 66) It’s about setting goals, selecting strategies to attain those goals, monitoring progress, restructuring if the goals are not being met, using time efficiently, self-evaluating the methods selected, and adapting future methods based on what was learned this time through.

Finally, there is a relationship between self-regulation and “perceived efficacy and intrinsic interest.” (p. 66) Learners have to believe they can learn, whatever the task before them, and they need to be motivated. “With such diverse skills as chess, sports, and music, the quantity of an individual’s studying and practicing is a strong predictor of his or her level of expertise.” (p. 66) One notable finding from research: the actual process of self-regulating can be a source of motivation, even for those tasks that may not be motivating themselves.

The article identifies three times when self-regulation aids the learning process. First, before the learning task is tackled, the learner should analyze the task, set goals, and develop a plan of approach. Obviously, beliefs about the self as a learner influence decisions made at this stage.

Second, learners need to self-regulate as they do the learning (or perform the task). They need to deploy specific learning strategies or methods and then observe how well those strategies and methods are working.

Finally, they need to self-reflect after completion of the learning task. This involves self-evaluation and “causal attribution,” which refers to beliefs about what caused the outcome. If a student has done poorly on a math exam and attributes the score to an inability to learn math, that attribution damages motivation, whereas attributing the score to misuse of particular equations means there’s a chance the student can fix the problem. Reflection after the fact also includes whether the learner is satisfied with the performance—that too impacts subsequent motivation.

Despite the power of self-regulation to motivate learners and to increase their success, “few teachers effectively prepare students to learn on their own. Students are seldom given a choice regarding academic tasks to pursue, methods for carrying out complex assignments, or study partners. Few teachers encourage students to establish specific goals for their academic work or estimate their competence on new tasks.” (p. 69) Zimmerman goes on to point out that most teachers don’t give students opportunities to self-assess their work and most do not explore student beliefs about themselves as learners.

Reference: Zimmerman, B.J. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. *Theory Into Practice*, 41 (2), 64-70.

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- See more at: <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/what-it-means-to-be-a-self-regulated-learner/#sthash.xS60Mfjv.dpuf>