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The Learner Who Dropped Out

“I’m leaving my PhD program,” James told me in a low voice.

I had spoken to James multiple times and found him sharp, funny, and meticulous. The last time I had talked to him, even though he had expressed some qualms about his studies, he had been eager to complete his PhD and was exploring potential faculty jobs even though his anticipated completion date was a couple of years away.

“What happened?” I asked.

“The pay is horrible, for one. I could be making a lot more as is without being at school, and once I’m out, it’s not like I’ll be making much more. I thought I enjoyed doing research, but I don’t enjoy it *that* much.”

James had the qualities to be an exceptional faculty member. He was always pleasant and wanted to make me feel comfortable. I was certain he would bring that kind of care to his classroom, and, for a moment, I felt sad about this missed opportunity for him and his potential students. I recognized that the pay for faculty positions in his discipline compared to the

private sector is low and the financial and emotional costs of a degree are onerous—perhaps even more so than James was letting me in on—but I couldn’t help but enjoy thinking of James leading a university classroom. He used to be a K–12 teacher, and from what I understood, his students had loved him.

“Anyway, I am not leaving the field,” he continued. “On the way to the PhD, I picked up a few skills that I think I can apply to jobs in instructional design. There’s plenty of companies around here looking for trainers, designers, and so on.”

Did I mention that James was perceptive? It was as if he had read my mind and was trying to reassure me that the online courses he had taken had not been a waste.

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While many students choose to learn online for a variety of reasons and successfully complete their programs online, attrition (or withdrawal or dropping out) is an issue that has long plagued distance education and online learning. It is important for faculty, administrators, and designers to understand why some students who are initially motivated to pursue an online education fail to complete a program while others continue to persist. Understanding the reasons behind persistence, attrition, and non-completion may help us understand our students better *and* develop solutions to address them.

Though participation in online learning continues to rise, postsecondary institutions still face the challenge of attrition and drop out within courses and programs. According to Croxton (2014), attrition rates for online courses range from 10% to as high as 75%. Many of the same work, family, and personal factors that motivate learners to enroll in online courses can also influence their decision to drop out. Limited academic support and financial challenges can also lead students to withdraw from a course or program (Beer and Lawson 2017).

According to Beer and Lawson, attrition is “a complex, non-linear problem” with an “interconnectivity of factors that contribute to the student’s decision to leave” (780), leading these researchers to urge institutions to engage in collaborative, innovative, and learning-focused strategies to address the problem effectively.

Lee and Choi (2011) have identified three categories of factors contributing to attrition and dropping out: student factors, course and program factors, and environmental factors. These findings reaffirm prior research in in-person and distance education highlighting that students, like James who is concerned about the financial implications of his degree, face a complex combination of internal and external factors that impact their success (e.g., Aragon and Johnson 2008; Kember 1989; Sheets 1992; Tinto 1975). Lee and Choi report that students with less previous academic experience, weaker time-management and problem-solving skills, and lower technological skills were more likely to drop out than students with higher academic and technological skills whose internal locus of control allowed them to work through to completion of an online course. In terms of course design, well-designed programs offering institutional support and interaction reduced attrition, as did designs that encouraged active course participation. Environmental factors that increased students’ persistence in a course or program included a supportive study environment (including financial and emotional support from work, family, friends, and the institution). Therefore, according to these authors, reducing dropout and attrition rates requires an “understanding of each student’s challenges and potential, providing quality course activities and well-structured supports, and handling environmental issues and emotional challenges” (610). In other words, addressing dropout and

attrition rates requires ecological interventions that target not only what students should or shouldn't be doing, but also what other actors could or shouldn't be doing, including the institution, the students' employers, and their family and friends.

This is a point that I will return to multiple times throughout the book. Significantly, the majority of the literature in the area imagines students as being autonomous and independent, so much so that individual actions are often seen as capable of resolving the challenges students may be facing. While that may be true in some cases, and indeed some personal steps may help learners address challenges—such as, for example, the recommendation to reduce distractions while studying—we should recognize that individual effort and personal responsibility can only go so far in an environment where institutional, familial, and societal supports may be lacking.

Bawa (2016) for example, points out that students who are new to online education may be surprised by the time commitment and rigor of online courses, and find that meeting the demands of such courses may require a new level of academic time management and discipline. Bawa notes that “if learners are not comfortable with self-learning and constructing knowledge out of their own initiatives, the online environment can become intimidating for them” (4), and thus helping students develop self-directed learning skills can positively affect their motivation to continue within a course. However, such personal action may need to be accompanied by broader support including instructional scaffolds, institutional supports, familial support, and so on.

Other scholars have addressed this issue by examining factors that can increase student persistence. As Shaw, Burrus,

and Ferguson (2016) argue, “effective online learning is about providing students with a rich, engaging, professionally-relevant, and academically rigorous education” (212), a point which affirms that attrition is related to the design of online learning experiences and not just students’ readiness, family and job responsibilities, and other factors that they bring with them to postsecondary education. According to Kim and Frick (2011), persistence, as a “continuation of one’s studies in spite of obstacles, is often considered a measure of program effectiveness by higher education institutions” (1) and is affected by “external factors such as course factors and support, person factors such as self-efficacy and autonomy, and academic factors such as time and study management” (22).

Some facilitators of persistence identified by Hart (2012) in a review of the literature included previous academic proficiency; intrinsic motivations, such as goals, self-efficacy, and relevance; satisfaction with a course or program due to high-quality interactions with instructors and peers; and support from family, friends, and coworkers. Identified barriers to persistence included a lack of academic and technological skills, limited external sources of support, and limited support and interaction with the instructor. Ultimately, according to Hart, an “almost unanimous agreement exists in the literature that communication with the instructor, motivation, and peer and family support can be used to overcome barriers to persistence and lead the student to success in an online course” (38). Croxton (2014) has also argued that course designs that foster interactions between students and their instructors and peers can play a significant role in the retention and persistence of online learners.

A practical approach to address the multidimensional nature of attrition, retention, and ultimately success in online

settings requires investments in instructional design, learner support structures, and personalized interventions. This approach addresses individual, institutional, and environmental factors and may involve a wide-range of strategies ranging from institutions developing a sense of community among learners; instructors developing content that is relevant, useful, and interesting; and instructors identifying at-risk students early and intervening with appropriate supports or solutions. These suggestions acknowledge that, as Yang, Baldwin, and Snelson (2017) put it, “the quality of an online program seems to be an important factor that impacts students’ persistence” (24) and recognize that attrition is impacted by an ecology of factors that go beyond the individual student. To foster persistence and success, high-quality online courses and programs must go beyond the learner. They must respond to the learners *and* their environment.

It is worth acknowledging that much has been said about high dropout rates in MOOCs. In studying ways that learners attempted to address challenges they faced in MOOCs, my colleagues and I arrived at the realization that non-completion may indicate something else, perhaps something instructive for typical higher education offerings. Following an investigation of nearly 100 learners’ experiences in MOOCs, we wrote:

From one perspective, students are signing up for multiple MOOCs and failing to complete some of them. From another perspective, MOOC students are inventing a much more dynamic course sampling and trial experience than what traditional residential “shopping periods” allow. Rather than committing to a set of learning experiences by an arbitrary date, participants dynamically allocate their attention and effort as they are able and in courses that prove capable of capturing their interest.

Rather than ask the question “Why can’t MOOC providers motivate students to make the same commitments that traditional higher education requires of course registrants?” it might be equally productive to ask, “Why can’t traditional educational offerings adjust to allow students to make the kinds of flexible allocation of learning time and commitment that MOOC students are demonstrating?” While it makes sense for faculty to consider how they can reduce attrition within their own courses, it is also important to recognize that dropping a course can be a signal of a deepening commitment to another course. (Veletsianos, Reich, and Pasquini 2016, 8)

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- Dropout and attrition are one of the most significant challenges facing online learners.
- Dropout and attrition are complex problems stemming from student factors (e.g., lack of preparation), course program factors (e.g., lack of interaction at the course level or lack of community at the program level), and broader environmental factors (e.g., lack of community/societal support).
- Addressing these problems requires an ecological approach that not only tackles individuals’ circumstances and challenges but also targets systemic issues that contribute to student persistence or lack thereof. Solutions must respond to individual learners *and* their environments.

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