

Self-Regulating Online Course Engagement

Attrition rates in online courses will decline if trainees simply reflect on where they are directing their mental resources.

By Traci Sitzmann

During an online course, trainees are often given control over their instructional experience, which makes dropping out as simple as turning off their computers. But in fact, evidence suggests that attrition rates for online courses are often double those found in traditional, on-site courses. This prompts the question of how organizations can reduce attrition from this delivery medium.

Recent empirical evidence demonstrates that prompting trainees to self-regulate can substantially reduce attrition. We conducted an experiment with 479 adults participating in voluntary online Microsoft Excel training. The course lasted four hours and was divided into four online modules.

Half of the trainees were asked self-regulation questions throughout training, designed to stimulate reflection on their concentration, understanding of the training material, and effectiveness of their learning strategies. For example, trainees were asked to rate on a five-point scale, “Am I focusing my mental effort on the training material?” and “Are the study strategies I am using helping me to learn the training material?” The other half of trainees were assigned to a control condition to provide baseline evidence of attrition rates and how much trainees would learn if they were not prompted to self-regulate.

Attrition was 17 percent lower among trainees who were prompted to self-regulate than among trainees in the control condition. Thus, asking trainees questions to stimulate self-reflection substantially increased the probability of completing a voluntary online course.

Prompting self-regulation also resulted in a 5 percent increase in test scores relative to the control. On average, trainees in the control condition scored 76 percent on the four exams in the

course—which is a C average. Trainees who were prompted to self-regulate scored in the B range on the exams, with an average test score of 81 percent. This result is consistent with several previous research studies that demonstrated that learning improved over time when trainees were prompted to self-regulate, relative to the control condition.

The research also found that trainees who were prompted to self-regulate spent additional time reviewing the training material rather than merely clicking through the slides to reach the end of the course. Trainees who were prompted to self-regulate spent an average of 30 percent more time reviewing the course material per module than trainees in the control condition, which explains why they also learned more in the course.

Attrition from training greatly decreases organizational benefits and increases the cost of the course per learner who completes training. The current results highlight that adults are capable

The BIG Number

17%

is the reduction in course attrition rate when trainees are prompted to self-regulate.

of improving their learning in online training when they are asked questions to stimulate self-reflection throughout the learning experience. The self-regulation prompts can be incorporated in all online courses free of charge.

By prompting self-regulation, organizations can provide trainees with the online learning support they need and increase their return-on-investment in online training programs.

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>>Self-Regulation Prompts Retention

Research has shown that asking yourself questions about whether you are concentrating on learning the training material will increase how much you learn during training. The training program will periodically ask you questions about where you are directing your mental resources and whether you are making progress toward learning the training material. Honestly respond to these questions and use your responses to direct your learning during training.

- Am I concentrating on learning the training material?
- Do I understand all of the key points of the training material?
- Are the study strategies I'm using helping me to learn the training material?
- Have I spent enough time reviewing to remember the information after I finish the course?
- Am I setting goals to help me remember the material after I finish the course?
- Would I do better on the next quiz if I studied more?
- Am I focusing my mental effort on the training material?
- Do I need to continue to review to ensure I will remember the material after I finish the course?
- Are the study tactics I have been using effective for learning the training material?
- Do I know enough about the training material to remember the material after I finish the course?
- Am I setting goals to ensure I have a thorough understanding of the training material?
- Do I know enough about the training material to answer all of the questions correctly on the quiz for this module?

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