

## Instructional Strategies for Learners with Cognitive Impairments in Online Education

Scott Grabinger

Students with psychiatric disabilities represent a growing number of students in postsecondary education. The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill found that almost 27% of college students between the ages of 18 and 24 struggle with mental illnesses including depression, ADD, schizophrenia, post traumatic stress and bipolar disorders. As more veterans from Iraq return home and seek education, dealing with PTSD and traumatic brain injury become which adds import to the issue. HealthyPlace.com found that counseling centers reported an increase of 56% from 1988 to 2002 in the number of students with severe psychological problems. In fact, our surveys of several university disabilities offices around the nation report the growth rate of students seeking help for psychiatric disabilities at 10% to 50% a year. These impairments affect a wide range of learning processes including attention and memory, use of verbal and written language, executive function, problem solving and reasoning, and social function.

Additionally, the impact of cognitive impairments on learning with technology — specifically with online courses — is becoming an urgent issue. Allen and Seaman (2005) report that 65% of institutions offering face-to-face graduate courses report an 18% growth rate from 2004 to 2005 at the graduate level and 33% growth at the baccalaureate level.

Our poster session focuses on the needs of students with impairments when studying online and to describes a research program underway to identify specific successful learning strategies. We have two specific aims for this poster:

1. to bring to the forefront the problems that students with mental illness may have when learning online; and
2. to provide a construct based on three brain networks — recognition, strategic, and affective — to guide the development of more flexible teaching methodologies.

One of the initial problems students with disabilities encounter is in finding support. In on-campus courses students can find support at the disabilities office including tutors, note takers, extra time, and separate rooms for test taking. However, these offices are ill equipped to deal with distance learning problems for several reasons. First, on-site services are often not available to online learners. Second, obtaining support means that the student must disclose his/her illness—something that almost all students with a mental illness are loath to do (Bushnell et al., 2005). Third, these supports occur *outside* the classroom rather than *within* the classroom.

Thus, the crux of our argument and the goals of our research program are to turn the traditional accommodation strategies for students with special needs 180°. Accommodations for those with disabilities must be located *within the instruction* rather than placing on students the onus of finding support outside of the course environment. Instruction can and should be designed to be flexible and accessible enough to support the range of diverse learners — not just the “typical” student. This strategy will serve improve instruction not just those with psychiatric disabilities but the wide diversity of students.

We will report on a research study to identify successful and poor instructional strategies.