4

Many students are reluctant to seek needed help. In this chapter, we review research on help seeking as a self-regulated learning strategy and describe a set of interventions designed to promote effective use of help seeking.

Understanding and Facilitating Self-Regulated Help Seeking

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Help seeking is an important developmental skill (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981), a form of behavioral, or social, self-regulation employed by cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally engaged learners (Butler, 1998; Karabenick and Newman, 2006, 2009; Newman, 2000; Pintrich and Zusho, 2002). Help seeking is unique among learning strategies as it may imply that learners are incapable of task completion or satisfactory performance without assistance, which can be threatening to self-worth. Many college students fail to seek needed help, considering it an admission of defeat, embarrassing, and something to be avoided whenever possible. There is substantial evidence, however, that more resourceful and proactive learners, who generally employ other learning strategies, are more likely to seek help when needed (Karabenick and Knapp, 1991). For those students, seeking help is considered preferable to stoically maintaining their independence.

**Table 4.1. Competencies/Resources at Each Stage of
the Help-Seeking Process**

Stage		Competencies/Resources			
		Cognitive	Social	Affective-emotional	Contextual-emotional
1	Determine whether there is a problem	X			
2	Determine whether help is needed/wanted	X		X	
3	Decide whether to seek help			X	X
4	Decide on the type of help (goal)	X		X	
5	Decide on whom to ask		X	X	
6	Solicit help	X	X	X	X
7	Obtain help	X		X	X
8	Process the help received	X			

Help-Seeking Process

Models of the help-seeking process propose a number of stages and decision points that determine how learners cope with learning and performance difficulties (e.g., Gross and McMullen, 1983; Karabenick and Newman, 2009; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981). These models share common elements, as shown in the first column of Table 4.1: (1) determine whether there is a problem; (2) determine whether help is needed/wanted; (3) decide whether to seek help; (4) decide on the type of help (goal); (5) decide on whom to ask; (6) solicit help; (7) obtain help; and (8) process the help received. Although listed sequentially, there is no presumption that these events occur in order or even that learners are mindful of the steps involved. Rather, in most instances, the process probably involves a combination of automatic and controlled cognitive processing.

Help-Seeking Need, Behavior, and Intentions

Calibrating the need for help is essential when students confront a learning impasse or are faced with less than desired levels of performance. That information is also important when responding to requests for help, often in the form of questions, or in the absence of help seeking. We usually can infer that help was needed when students ask questions, although that may not be definitive either since students also ask questions for other reasons;

for example, to attract attention in order to demonstrate their mastery of content. Not asking questions, however, may mean that: (a) students have no need to ask because they comprehend the material; (b) they understand very little and need to ask but cannot formulate a reasonable question (Renkl, 2002); or (c) they understand enough to formulate a question but are embarrassed or perceive the instructor as not receptive (Karabenick and Sharma, 1994). Thus, the degree of need for help may not be directly inferred from the absence of help seeking.

Help-Seeking Goals

Attention to learners' help-seeking goals facilitated the recognition that seeking help can be a self-regulated learning strategy. Designed to increase understanding, seeking instrumental help should make subsequent assistance less necessary. A similar view is found in the performance phase of Zimmerman's model of self-regulation that incorporates help seeking as a social strategy for gaining needed assistance from an appropriate source (Zimmerman and Campillo, 2003).

Butler (1998) has identified three help-seeking orientations: (a) autonomous—focused on understanding and increased competency; (b) ability-focused—concerned with not appearing incompetent; (c) expedient orientation (similar to executive help seeking). Ryan, Patrick, and Shim (2005) proposed that help seeking can be characterized as appropriate, dependent, or avoidant. Newman (2008) has described the ideal (normative) adaptive help seeker as one who begins by accurately assessing that help is necessary, formulates an appropriate request for help, understands the best resources available, designs strategies for successful requests, and productively processes the help received to mastery of the material or the ability to solve problems.

Help Seeking and Achievement Goal Orientations

Associations between achievement goal orientations—students' goals or approaches to learning—and help seeking are now well understood (Butler and Neuman, 1995; Karabenick, 2004; Newman, 2008; Ryan, Hicks, and Midgley, 1997). Students with stronger mastery orientations (who focus on understanding) are more likely to seek instrumental help, not so threatened by help seeking, less likely to avoid seeking help, and less likely to seek expedient/executive help. In contrast, students with performance-approach (focus on performing better than others) and performance-avoid orientations (concern about performing worse than others) are more threatened by help seeking and more likely to avoid seeking help and to seek expedience help. Performance goal orientations, however, are not related to the likelihood that students will seek instrumental help (Karabenick, 2003; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997).

Influences of the Learning Context

The following sections include classroom environment factors that influence help-seeking behaviors.

Achievement Goal Structure. Help seeking is influenced by the learning context, typically assessed by students' aggregated perceptions of the achievement goal structure of their classes. Younger students in elementary and middle school classes who are more mastery focused (an emphasis on understanding and improvement) are less likely to avoid seeking needed help (Ryan, Gheen, and Midgley, 1998; Turner and others, 2002). The influence of perceived classroom performance goal structure (an emphasis on ability and interstudent comparisons) begins in middle school and is present during the high school years (Karabenick, Zusho, and Kempler, 2005; Ryan and others, 1998); the influence of mastery goal structure diminishes by the time they reach college (Karabenick, 2004).

Perceived Teacher Support. Classes in which middle and high school students' collectively perceived higher levels of support (a composite measure that combines perceived teacher support for student collaboration and student questioning, teacher fairness and respect and caring) are more likely to seek adaptive help when necessary (Karabenick and others, 2005). Students in classes with teachers they perceive as more supportive are more likely to have questions, less inhibited to ask them, and thus more likely to ask questions when necessary (Karabenick and Sharma, 1994; see also Kozanitis, Desbiens, and Chouinard, 2007).

Framework for Improving Adaptive Help Seeking

Having discussed the variables that influence help seeking, we now turn to the competencies/resources required and interventions that could facilitate its effective use as a learning strategy. The second column in Table 1 lists the competencies/resources needed at each stage of the help-seeking process, some of which are important at more than one stage. *Cognitive competencies* include the understanding when help is needed and knowing how to ask questions. *Social competencies* include knowing what individuals can best help under different situations and knowing how to approach them in a socially desirable manner. *Affective-emotional resources* are the beliefs and emotions that allow learners to tolerate difficulty and not worry about being perceived as inadequate or incompetent. Finally, *contextual-emotional resources* include the ability to work collaboratively, knowing the rules of teacher–learner engagement, and understanding expectations from instructors and parents. Any attempts to improve adaptive help seeking would require a comprehensive approach that includes all of these competencies and resources (Karabenick and Newman, 2009). In Table 4.2, we identify possible interventions corresponding to each of the competencies/ resources. The interventions have been adapted from numerous

Table 4.2. Interventions Related to Needed Competencies/Resources in Help Seeking

Interventions	Competencies/Resources			
	Cognitive	Social	Affective-Emotional	Contextual-Emotional
Goals/Objectives to monitor performance (stage 1)	X			
Academic language scripts (stages 6 and 7)	X			
Task/Goal analysis (stages 1 and 2)	X			
Error analysis (stage 8)	X			
Creating mastery learning environments (stage 3)			X	
Establishing and explaining classroom norms for help seeking (stages 4 and 5)			X	
Cognitive behavioral systems (stages 4, 5, and 6)				X
Social skills training (stages 6 and 7)		X		

instructional procedures to improve learning and interpersonal behavior but most have not been used or studied in relation to help-seeking behaviors. We propose that learners would be more likely to seek help if they had a better idea of what they did not know and how to access help.

Cognitive Competencies

Researchers have indicated that metacognition, or awareness of the process of learning, is an important factor in academic success. Metacognitive strategies include planning for exams and assignments, self-monitoring comprehension, and self-evaluation. Instructional strategies that can improve metacognitive skills are described next.

Goals/Objectives to Monitor Performance. Accurate self-monitoring leads to more specific help seeking (Tobias, 2006). Although learners may realize they have a problem in an academic area, they may not understand

exactly what competencies they have failed to master. Providing them with an outline for each unit of instruction that includes a concise statement of the goals/objectives, followed by an example of the goal and the location in assigned material where the standard is discussed, could help students determine what they know and do not know. Monitoring their progress would allow them to better determine more precisely if and where help is needed.

Academic Language Scripts. Structured oral language practice routines can teach learners how to interact (e.g., Levy and Dutro, 2008), such as providing structured scripts to help learners improve their literacy skills. This same approach could be used to establish guidelines for seeking and receiving help. In the technique called "pair and share" applied to help seeking, instructors can organize the class into pairs and provide scripts to assist learners to ask for and receive help.

Task/Goal Analysis. Instructors often conduct a task analysis to identify the knowledge (preskills and new knowledge) required to learn and perform a task (Dick, Carey, and Carey, 2009). In completing a task analysis, the instructor asks: "What is it I want my learners to do? What do they need to know to do it?" Once the terminal objective emerges, the instructor works backward to delineate which capabilities learners must acquire to read that objective. Task or goal analysis is used in the design of instruction for instructors. By showing learners the learning sequence in the task analysis, instructors communicate the necessary knowledge or steps needed to complete a task to learners, and students can use the information to help monitor their understanding.

Error Analysis. Different disciplines use different methods for studying errors in content areas. These error analysis procedures can be very useful in stage 8, process the help received. After receiving help, the instructor can ask learners how they arrived at the incorrect answer by orally describing each step taken in attempting to solve a problem. The instructor can identify the different errors made and review each one, and the instructor can request that learners attempt new problems and explain the process they will take in solving the problems. These procedures can help learners process the help they receive.

Contextual-Emotional Resources

The following sections include classroom strategies for creating mastery learning environments, and also establish and explain classroom norms useful for help seeking.

Creating Mastery Learning Environments. Ames (1992) identified six areas of instruction that can lead to a more mastery goal orientation:

1. The type of *task* that learners are asked to do
2. The degree of *autonomy or authority* learners are allowed in classroom activities

3. How learners are *recognized* for their outcomes
4. *Grouping* practices
5. *Evaluation* procedures
6. The scheduling of *time* for completing activities.

Maehr and Anderman (1993) provide specific examples of strategies in each of these areas that can support a more mastery goal orientation.

Establishing and Explaining Classroom Norms for Help Seeking. Newman (2008) identified a number of questions learners usually have about help seeking in the classroom, including, for example: What should I ask? Whom should I ask? How shall I formulate my question? Which of my friends is most likely to know the answer? It is important that instructors discuss the rules and procedures they wish to establish early in a course and, perhaps, use scenarios to discuss different situations that will occur. For example, some instructors want to be interrupted for questions during a presentation while others may want learners to wait until he or she is finished speaking (Karabenick and Sharma, 1994; Kozanitis and others, 2007). Some instructors may allow students to work collaboratively during class periods while others allow collaborative work only outside of class. It is important for instructors to discuss classroom rules and procedures to help learners understand how they might obtain help as well as the types of help resources available in the classroom and when to access them.

Affective-Emotional Resources—Cognitive Behavioral Systems

A number of cognitive behavioral systems are used to change attitudes, emotions, and beliefs, such as rational emotive therapy (Ellis, 1998), cognitive therapy (Beck, 1995), and cognitive behavior modification (Meichenbaum and Goodman, 1971). These systems can be used to change certain negative beliefs about help seeking.

In rational emotive therapy:

1. Learners deal with different emotions and attitudes. The experience helps them develop greater awareness of their own emotional states and how they vary over time.
2. Learners learn how to detect the automatic thoughts and identifying beliefs that underlie their thought processes and influence their emotions.
3. They evaluate and dispute their automatic thoughts and beliefs.
4. The process focuses on eliminating the maladaptive thought and beliefs and replacing them with more positive beliefs and statements.

The research on help seeking indicates that many learners would benefit from a process to assist them in dealing with faulty beliefs that prevent them from asking for help.

Consider this example of the process:

A (activating event). Phil receives a D on his history examination and knows he needs help.

B (the irrational or helpless belief that follows the event). "My teacher will think I am dumb."

C (consequence). Phil feels helpless and anxious and believes that he will not succeed in the class.

D (disputing irrational beliefs). "Okay. I did poorly on this exam. Everyone needs help at one time or another. Giving help is what instructors do. I'm going to do something about my low test scores."

E (new effect). "I still feel disappointed that I didn't do well, but I now have a plan to do better in the future. I'm going to seek assistance when I don't understand something. I can be a good student!"

Social Competencies—Social Skills Training

Goldstein and McGinnis (1997) have developed a social skills intervention called *skillstreaming*. For example, their program includes a number of skills that are useful in help seeking, such as starting a conversation, asking a question, asking for help, helping others, dealing with embarrassment, responding to failure, and numerous other skills. Asking and receiving help requires a number of important social skills that some learners have not learned. This lack of knowledge prevents learners from positive interaction with peers and limits their requests for assistance. Therefore, teaching learners specific prosocial behaviors related to help seeking may improve the social behaviors they use in their requests for help.

Next we present five suggested steps to teach the skill of asking a question (trainer notes in parentheses; Goldstein and McGinnis, 1997, p. 71).

1. Decide what you would like to know more about. (Ask about something you do not understand.)
2. Decide whom to ask. (Think about who has the best information on a topic.)
3. Think about different ways to ask your question and pick one way. (Think about wording; raise your hand.)
4. Pick the right time and place to ask your question. (Wait for a pause; wait for privacy.)
5. Ask your question.

The skillstreaming is that last step in a 5-step process in which before one asks a question, the learner proceeds through steps 1 to 4. The procedure includes four methods: (1) modeling (having someone show you the skill), (2) role-playing (trying out the skill yourself), (3) feedback (having someone tell you how well you did), and (4) transfer (trying the skill when,

where, and with whom you really need to use it). Using these four methods, learners view videos, complete homework assignments, practice using the skill, and receive feedback on their behavior.

Implications and Future Directions for Research

As students advance through the grades, and especially in higher education, there is the presumption that they have acquired the self-regulatory skills required for effective learning. Considerable research (Simpson, Hynd, Nist, and Burrell, 1997) and experience suggest otherwise, however, including the fact that many students lack the competencies required for adaptive help seeking. More successful students have acquired key self-regulatory skills than have less successful students. Study skills texts and courses (Dembo and Seli, 2008; Weinstein, Husman, and Dierking, 2000) are designed to remediate these deficiencies, but rarely they have focused on help seeking. The research, analysis of competencies, and interventions described here would be an important complement to college students' self-regulated learning tool kit.

College instructors often emphasize the importance of help seeking in courses such as meeting with a teaching assistant or instructor or learning with other students. (See Barkley, Cross, and Major, 2005, for a description of various collaborative learning techniques.) Unfortunately, instructors fail to provide information to learners as to how to seek help. The literature in higher education has focused on the use of collaborative learning (see Barkley and others, 2005; Webb, Ing, Kersting, and Nemer, 2006) as a way to improve learning by working with others. However, learners are not taught the required competencies/resources. In summary, although many instructors want to encourage help-seeking behavior, they are not teaching the competencies/resources involved in this important self-regulatory skill. Instructors must use instructional time to provide students with learning experiences that involve using competencies/resources effectively to complete specific tasks.

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