

A Leading Torch on Self-Regulation of Learning: An Interview with Dr. William Y. Lan

by
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You have made many contributions to the SSRL SIG over the course of many years as both a member and as the Senior Chair of the SIG. Which moment during your time as chair would you consider the highlight of your service?

It was so many years ago when I served as the chair and the program chair of the SIG, so I needed to dig into the emails and documents to refresh my memory. Amazingly, as I opened the files, the busy and exciting time I worked with my dear colleagues Drs. Linda Garavalia and Frederick King just came back to me as if it happened yesterday.

To serve as the chair of the SIG was demanding but also very rewarding. I think the highlight of the years of service was organizing a panel discussion on "The Future Direction of Research on Self-Regulated Learning." Looking at the list of the renowned researchers we contacted to serve as the panelists of the discussion, I somehow wonder if I had such a close relationship with the scholars whose names we often see in papers, journals, and books.

Connecting with SRL scholars was an extra benefit of serving the SIG. The scholars, with the well-established scholarly reputation in the field of educational psychology, were so humble when approached by others. They were always willing to advise and mentor budding researchers.

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Dr. William Y. Lan

Dr. William Y. Lan was a Chair of the AERA SIG Studying and Self-Regulated Learning more than 15 years ago. He earned his PhD degree in Educational Psychology in 1990 from University of Iowa.

Dr. Lan started his professional career in the College of Education at the Texas Tech University teaching courses in educational psychology, statistics, research methodology, and measurement. There, he served as the Associate Dean of the College of Education, the Director of Assessment of the College of Education, and the Chairperson of the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership in the College of Education.

Dr. Lan has published more than 70 refereed research articles and book chapters and presented more than 100 papers at international, national, and regional professional conferences. His areas of expertise include motivational theories and educational applications, self-regulated learning theories and educational application, positive psychology theories and applications, and research methodology and statistics.

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I still remember Dr. Zimmerman commented on a manuscript that I sent him for feedback. (Sorry, Barry, I did not know better then and bothered you without considering how busy you might be.) I remember the time I did poster presentations at the AERA conferences besides Drs. Schunk and Pintrich. They patiently answered questions from the audience and, when the traffic was slow, they viewed my poster and provided me with insightful bits of advice. They demonstrated the manner of “a scholar and a gentleman” that I admire the most. I think the SIG created such a platform for junior researchers to have a close working relationship with the masters in our discipline as their mentees and apprentices.

In addition to being a prominent researcher and teacher of educational psychology in the United States, you also have also worked extensively in both research and teaching at the international level, including but not limited to countries such as China and Thailand. Which international project stood out to you the most? What insights did you gain from working in these settings, and how have they influenced you as both a researcher and a teacher?

My research experience on self-regulated learning (SRL) has changed my research interest and agenda. Initially, I was interested in the research on motivation. However, other researchers' work helped me see the potential of self-regulated learning. I always remember what I read from a book edited by Drs. Zimmerman and Schunk, “The ultimate goal of education is to shift the responsibility of learning to the shoulder of learners.” If learners take the responsibility of their learning, motivation should not be a problem at all because they will motivate themselves! My passion for self-regulation or self-regulated learning has extended to domains outside of education. I always tell my students, “If you are self-regulated, you cannot fail in any task you undertake.”

So when I was awarded the Fulbright Scholar Grant to work in Thailand for a semester, I tried to combine my research interests in SRL, positive psychology, and strategy instruction to address a concern on the aging or aged population, a topic that my Thai colleagues wanted to work with me during my visit. We thought that if senior citizens know their strengths and virtues (from the positive psychology perspective) and know strategies to cope with the barriers in the aging process (as self-regulated people), they will look for opportunities to apply and develop their strengths and virtues and employ the coping strategies when experiencing challenges. By doing so, they will become satisfied during the autumn season of their lives. More importantly, the identified coping strategies could be taught to other seniors (strategy instruction). We were ambitious that we might be able to develop an international collaborative project on the topic because the aged and aging population is the concern of many, if not all, countries.

SRL becomes the most favorite topic of my teaching. The students of our program know me for my enthusiasm in the topic. In addition to lecturing SRL in courses of motivation and educational psychology, I offered a doctoral seminar on SRL using the excellent book edited by Drs. Schunk and Zimmerman, *Handbook of Self-Regulation of Learning and Performance*. As I am approaching the end of my career, I hope my enthusiasm is contagious to my students so they will continue the promising and brilliant line of research on self-regulation and SRL.

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Your research in self-regulation is prolific and spans many diverse topics within this field of study such as the use of technology and learning in online environments. What are some research projects you are working on now, and where do you see heading your research? What areas do you think the field of self-regulation research can go next?

The rapid development of online education has opened a frontier for SRL researchers to explore. SRL is more needed in the online learning environment than in traditional classrooms, but our knowledge on SRL is primarily based on studies conducted in regular classrooms. Learners must be self-regulated and possess different SRL strategies to succeed in online learning. Just think about how students will do differently in setting goals, managing time, seeking help, constructing effective learning environment, and fighting distractions in the online courses than what they do in regular classrooms. That is why in recent years I devote my research effort to online SRL, trying to understand the characteristics of self-regulated learners in the online environment and the online SRL strategies they utilize.

The preliminary findings of the research are interesting. For example, students told us that, without regular class meetings, time management was the most significant challenge they had in the online course. However, they also shared with us many clever strategies they figured out to manage their studying time. Also, we tend to assume learners in the online learning environment are isolated so online instructors should create as much interaction as possible among the students and between the students and the instructor to reduce the sense of isolation. However, students told us they sometimes shut down all social media and email so they can concentrate on learning and not be disturbed. This strategy helps us realize that interaction in online courses could be either constructive or destructive, and there might be a threshold of the amount of interaction that students prefer to have, beyond which communication becomes the distraction.

Finally, what piece of advice would you offer to aspiring researchers and scholars pursuing the fields of studying and self-regulation?

I believe online education is an irreversible trend of American or even global education, and SRL is an indispensable factor for the success of online learning. There are so many unanswered questions on online SRL waiting for us to answer them.

Another question on SRL that deserves our attention is how to develop self-regulated learners. As literature shows, self-regulation occurs when children/students gradually internalize external expectations (e.g., standards, norms, values) to the expectations they hold for themselves. Therefore, the external expectation and scaffolding that facilitates the internalization process are two necessities to develop self-regulated learners. How to create such an environment in classrooms, schools, families, and communities where students perceive the high expectation on them as well as the supportiveness they receive from others is a crucial question we need to answer if we want our children and students to be self-regulated. I tried to use the research and theory of parenting style to show how the authoritative relationship that is characterized by both high expectation and supportiveness is most likely to develop self-regulated learners. The study supported the prediction, but more research on developing self-regulated learners is needed.

Mr. Kyle Du is a co-historian for the Studying and Self-Regulated Learning SIG, a doctoral student in the Educational Psychology program at the CUNY Graduate Center, and a faculty member of Educational Psychology at Queens College. His research interests lie in the use of innovative statistical strategies to report and summarize data.



Mr. Kyle Du