

Conquering the Fear of Online

Advising Students to Successful Online Course Taking

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education continues to grow significantly. It now reaches students in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools as well as adult and professional educational institutions. Once considered a special form of education, distance education is currently the fastest growing form of domestic and international education (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004).



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Technological advances allows learning institutions of all types, from major universities to alternative elementary and secondary schools, to reach students in areas that would once have been considered unreachable. Gunawardena and McIsaac (2004) cited the rapid development of instructional technology and media as a solution to serving the educational needs of growing populations. Developments in technology allow distance education programs to provide specialized courses to students in remote geographic areas with increasing interactivity between student and teacher. With these advances, enrollment numbers for distance education programs are steadily increasing, and with them special concern arises about the need for support services for the online student, including advising.

ADVISING THE ONLINE STUDENT

Not every student takes an online course because the materials interest him or her. Sometimes there are degree requirements, inability to attend face-to-face classes, or other circumstances that lead to the students' enrollment in an online course (Varvel, 2001). Thus, the role of the advisor becomes crucial at setting the students expectations and preparing the students to be successful in an online course.

Self-efficacy plays a significant role in predicting academic achievement (Miltiadou & Savenye, 2003). DeTure (2004) argues that in the last 20 years, self-efficacy has been shown to have a significant impact on student performance. When confidence levels increase, performance levels increase as well. While self-efficacy concerns a person's confidence in his or her abilities to complete tasks or reach goals, it is not based entirely on actual experience with performing these tasks in the past (DeTure, 2004).

Miltiadou and Savenye (2003), citing Pintrich and De Groot (1990), suggested that the improvement of a student's self-efficacy belief leads to increased use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and, thereby, higher academic performance. Miltiadou and Savenye (2003) asserted that to improve students' self-efficacy beliefs with online technology there needs to be an increase in the four sources of students' self-efficacy appraisal.

Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) recommend working with learners to assist them in the development of time management strategies. Time management involves scheduling a time to study, planning weeks or months ahead, choosing a location to study, and effectively using the study time for realistic setting of goals (Miltiadou & Savenye, 2003). Students who use their time efficiently are more likely to learn and/or perform better than students who do not have good time management skills (Lynch & Dembo, 2004). Thus, it is vital that students possess good time management skills and that they set personal study and classroom times in their calendars just like any appointment (Boyd, 2004).

According to Reid (n.d.) there are several key considerations that faculty and advisors may wish to consider while working with students preparing to take an online course:

1. Advise students not to be too quick to enroll in a full course of online study. They should first introduce themselves to the use of technology by enrolling in an elective course offered over the Internet. Generally these courses require less commitment to time and study and will give a "first timer" an approximate means of gauging how well they will perform in future classes. The advice given should be, "Don't bite off more than you can chew."
2. Next, online classes tend to circumvent scheduling problems by allowing learners to make choices as to where and when they study and participate. This can also be the Achilles heel for some of the more disorganized in the student population. It's just too easy to put off study with all the freedom technology provides. Perhaps the biggest problem is going to be letting tasks and time get away. A high degree of time management skills are needed for assured success. These skills are an absolute necessity and as such should be stressed over and over.
3. A big part of computer-mediated education is making the student more responsible for self-learning. Instructors in the online environment facilitate, leaving the student to find their own way. Some students like the idea of having an instructor meeting and leading class discussion with them at a regular time. In the virtual classroom students instructors come and go at all hours. Some learners are sure to discover that this form of communication is difficult for them. How well they do at learning on their own will have a significant bearing on performance.
4. Enough cannot be stressed about the students' ability to navigate around the Internet. Using a variety of search engines and database managers is a prerequisite for most courses. Knowing how to use the World Wide Web,

Newsgroups, FTP, and e-mail for research and study are all part of the necessary tools a student should possess. A few weeks of navigation using the free demo time provided by Internet service providers service will get some of the weaker student's pointed in the right direction. Still, it is suggested that proficiency tests be administered to any student who shows an interest in a computer-mediated class.

Yukselturk and Bulut (2007) offered several recommendations for the design of high-quality online learning environments. The following is a partial list of recommendations that can also be looked at as best practices for advising students entering online classes:

1. Learners should be directed to be self-regulated learners (metacognitively, motivationally, behaviorally active participants).
2. Learners should attend orientation to obtain information about the nature of online learning and to become familiar with the requirements of online learning.
3. Learners should be encouraged to keep their motivation at high levels.
4. Learners should interact with other students by sharing information and opinions, analyzing data, and solving problems.

With these recommendations, advisors should help the performance of online learners.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL ONLINE STUDENTS

Web-based e-learning systems place more responsibilities on the learners than traditional face-to-face learning systems (Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006). Online learners must also have a greater skill set than face-to-face students. Successful online students

are expected to have access to necessary hardware and software, and to be proficient in using the technology. Other differences include an emphasis on communication through writing, and a greater need for self-motivation and self-discipline (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006).

According to the Illinois Online Network (n.d.) the online student should possess the following qualities:

1. Be open minded about sharing life, work, and educational experiences as part of the learning process.

Introverts as well as extroverts find that the online process requires them to utilize their experiences. This forum for communication eliminates the visual barriers that hinder some individuals in expressing themselves. In addition, the student is given time to reflect on the information before responding. The online environment should be open and friendly.

2. Be able to communicate through writing.

In the Virtual Classroom, nearly all communication is written, so it is critical that students feel comfortable in expressing themselves in writing. Many students have limited writing abilities, which should be addressed before or as part of the online experience. This may require remedial efforts on the part of the student.

3. Be self-motivated and self-disciplined.

With the freedom and flexibility of the online environment comes responsibility. The online process takes a real commitment and discipline to keep up with the flow of the process.

4. Be willing to "speak up" if problems arise.

Many of the nonverbal communication mechanisms that instructors use in determining whether students are having problems (confusion, frustration, boredom, absence, etc.) are

not possible in the online paradigm. If a student is experiencing difficulty on any level (either with the technology or with the course content), he or she must communicate this immediately. Otherwise the instructor will never know what is wrong.

5. Be willing and able to commit to 4 to 15 hours per week per course.

Online is not easier than the traditional educational process. In fact, many students will say it requires much more time and commitment.

6. Be able to meet the minimum requirements for the program.

The requirements for online are no less than that of any other quality educational program. The successful student will view online as a convenient way to receive their education—not an easier way.

7. Accept critical thinking and decision making as part of the learning process.

The learning process requires the student to make decisions based on facts as well as experience. Assimilating information and executing the right decisions requires critical thought; case analysis does this very effectively.

8. Have access to a computer and modem (Internet connection).

The communication medium is a computer, phone line, and modem; the student must have access to the necessary equipment.

9. Be able to think ideas through before responding.

Meaningful and quality input into the virtual classroom is an essential part of the learning process. Time is given in the process to allow for the careful consideration of responses. The testing and challenging of ideas is encouraged; you will not always be right, just be prepared to accept a challenge.

10. Feel that high quality learning can take place without a traditional classroom.

If the student feels that a traditional classroom is a prerequisite to learning, they may be more comfortable in the traditional classroom. Online is not for everybody. A student that wants to be on a traditional campus attending a traditional classroom is probably not going to be happy online. While the level of social interaction can be very high in the virtual classroom given that many barriers come down in the online format, it is not the same as living in a dorm on a campus. This should be made known. An online student is expected to:

- Participate in the virtual classroom 5-7 days a week
- Be able to work with others in completing projects
- Be able to use the technology properly
- Be able to meet the minimum standards as set forth by the institution
- Be able to complete assignments on time
- Enjoy communicating in writing.

CONCLUSION

With increases in technology the ability for institutions to offer distance education courses will continue to grow, reaching students in areas that were once considered unreachable. Universities use distance education to increase the number of students who have access to higher education; companies use it to upgrade their workers' skills and keep them abreast of rapidly advancing technologies; individuals use it for their own professional development and to enhance their career opportunities; governments use it to provide on-the-job training to teachers or other workers, to enhance the quality of traditional primary and secondary school-

ing, and to deliver instruction to remote rural areas that might not otherwise be served (Postashnik & Capper, 1998).

What does this mean for higher education institutions? Special attention needs to be paid to the online student. Proper advising of the online student, setting the expectations up front, preparing the student for what they will face in the online course can lead to greater course satisfaction and retention of the online student.

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