

“Online Learning: Through the Eyes of a Student”

Presented at
Mid-South Instructional Technology Conference
Eleventh Annual Conference
“Fostering Successful Learning”
Middle Tennessee State University
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April 2-4, 2006
Proceedings: <http://www.mtsu.edu/~itconf>

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Introduction

This presentation and paper will look at a student perspective through the eyes of an online student. The course was completely online, not a supplement or hybrid. This presentation will look at what went well, but more importantly what caused problems; it starts with actual experiences and includes content from literature in the field and discussion with other online students. This presentation will also look at the instructor’s role in facilitating the online course and alleviating potential problems.

This presentation and proceedings paper will address briefly two components: student issues facing online students and faculty responsibilities for facilitating and administering the online course.

Student issues facing online students include the following, but are not limited to:

- Characteristics of an online learner
- Equipment requirements

- Organizational skills
- Time management skills
- Learning styles
- Differences between face-to-face and online courses
- Homework assignments
- Motivation
- Cultural issues
- Flexibility
- Due dates

Faculty responsibilities for facilitating and administering an online course include, but are not limited to:

- Technology support
- Formats for instructional materials
- Feedback
- Motivation
- Reinforcement
- Content
- Time constraints
- Quizzes and tests

Research Findings about Taking Online Courses

Before jumping in head first, it's important to understand some of the basic research findings regarding online courses:

- There is no significant difference in outcomes between face-to-face and online learners.
- Online courses may take more time than face-to-face courses.
- Instructional strategies may be similar in face-to-face and traditional courses.
- Most students in online courses are nontraditional students.

Student Issues Facing Online Learning

Student issues facing online learning are varied and may be complex or rather simple. Regardless, if things aren't going well in the course, the simplicity or complexity of the issues or problems may haunt the student to the point of dropping the course or completion of the course. Students, prior to enrolling in an online course, need to know the expectations in order for them to complete the course: time, schedule, equipment, etc. Connick (1999) addresses these expectations in the book *The Distance Learner's Guide*. Palloff and Pratt (2003) dedicate discussion of the online, while Picciano (2001) and Conrad and Donaldson (2004), and Ko and Rossen (2004) discuss many of these student issues in detail. To help students determine

whether they are, in fact, acceptable candidates for online courses, the Illinois Online Networks' survey addresses student concerns and offers tips about how to be a successful online student.

Characteristics on Online Learners

Distance learners enter an online course from a variety of backgrounds, including educational, socio-economical, and geographical differences. They may take the online course at the same time (synchronous) or at different times (asynchronous) from others in their class. Picciano (2006, p. 188) tells us that many U.S. adult distance learning students are between the ages of 25 and 50, two-thirds are female, and most are married and work full-time. The U.S. Department of Education, NCIS, (2003) provides additional information about online learners. Picciano (2001) devotes an entire chapter to the student perspective of distance learning. We (educators and administrators) know many things about students enrolling in online courses, but we must find a way to bridge the gap between what we know about online students and what we practice in the classroom so that student experiences will be successful.

In an ideal world: We know that most successful distant learners are highly motivated, are independent, and are active learners. They usually have good organizational and time management skills, and they have the discipline to study without external members. They can and do adapt usually to new training environments, and they may have different educational goals from others in their class (certificate, degree, additional training). In addition, their backgrounds are frequently quite varied: traditional student, mid-career professional, job changers, students with handicaps/learning disabilities, and/or geographical/logistical differences. Students who enroll in online courses do so willingly, often enthusiastically; to many students, it is the only option available to them to obtain this course. In reality, however, students may actually have to prepare to enroll in an online course so that they can hone the skills necessary to be a successful online learner.

Equipment Requirements

National surveys of computer use in the United States indicate that the percentage of households owning a computer is doubling every 5 years (Picciano, 2006, p. 54); however, not every household having a computer has an up-to-date system. There is a basic requirement for equipment for students in an online course. Ko and Rossen (2001) discuss equipment requirements in detail. The CMS (course management system) used will have a set of minimum requirements. Students need to know this requirement and be in agreement to not only meet but surpass what is required. If students do not have this basic minimum equipment and system functions, either they cannot participate in all aspects of the course or their participation is hindered. This criteria would likely include the type of equipment, Internet service provider, software applications, and transmission details.

Technology Skills

According to Bitter and Pierson (2006, p. 3-4), "Since the inception of the personal computer in 1977, two "generations" (two 12-year cycles) of students have completely progressed through the school system. Their experiences with computers depended on the visions and financial

priorities of their teachers, administrators, and state and community leadership.” Students are enrolling in higher education institutions, presenting with a varied level of technological competencies.

Online students may need basic skills in the following areas: word processing, Web creation, PowerPoint basics, research strategies (including electronic searching), basic keyboarding skills, and CMS skills. Some institutions require students to take a short course in how to be an effective online learner, where they learn the basic skills needed to take an online course. Conrad and Donaldson (2004, pp. 37-45) provide a sample skills survey as well as some basic assignments to determine whether students have the requisite skills to participate in an online course. Palloff and Pratt (2003) also address the technology skills issue.

What could possibly go wrong, you might ask. To name just a few of the problems: access time (dial-up rather than high-speed connections), older software editions, no or limited experience in creating a Web page or PowerPoint presentation, limited comfort level with technology, or limited keyboarding skills.

Organizational Skills

An online course is usually structured much differently than a face-to-face course. Because of ongoing, or routine, activities in this course plus week-specific assignments, the student must be organized in such a way as to make sure every part of the course responsibilities is completed. A week-by-week checklist might be used to assure all the activities and work are completed. Conrad and Donaldson (2004, p. 19) tell us “There will be technological glitches as well, but the personal hurdles far outweigh the technological ones.” Some of these personal hurdles can be anticipated and planned for, while others happen without warning. However, a neat work environment, a location where peace and quiet (if only for a limited period of time), daily structure for completing part of the course work are only a few ways to keep us on track. Something as simple as a three-ring binder with appropriate divisions for keeping track of library resource materials, assignments, schedule of activities, schedule of assignments due, and checklist for completion of work (especially reoccurring activities) can prove beneficial.

Time Management Skills

“The ability to manage your time is a critical factor in your ability to be successful in an online course” (Palloff and Pratt, 2003, pp. 172-73). This statement may be considered one of the greatest understatements relating to online learning. Because of the frequent use of chats, threaded discussions, and presentations which require feedback by a certain time, time management skills are critical. For example, in the use of a threaded discussion, not much can be accomplished if all students attempt to complete the threaded discussion activity only hours before the deadline. There is little time for feedback, processing, and discussion. In addition, time management skills are critical is allocating sufficient time to complete assignments and activities. Not only is time the issue, but also scheduling the blocks of time needed to complete the work.

Pallott and Pratt (2003, pp. 172-73) suggest the following general tips for managing time in an online course:

- Log on to the course site daily or every other day with the intention of reading only.
- Prepare your first post for the week in response to the discussion questions posted by the instructor or student facilitator—these should be your original ideas. So wait until after you have posted your response to begin reading the responses of your student colleagues.
- Print new messages if you need to in order to give yourself time to review them at your leisure.
- Once you have read and reviewed what's new, formulate your response off-line using your word processing program. This gives you time to think about what you want to say as well as to check your grammar and spelling. Do not feel that an immediate response is necessary—you can take your time.

Since students enrolled in online courses have other responsibilities (i.e. work, family, hobbies) they will need to set aside time to work on their assignments and activities. Some students can do their course work only in the evenings, while others can work on assignments during the day. Frequently, access to a computer has to be “sandwiched in” among other responsibilities: preparing dinner, helping children with homework, getting children ready for bed, alternating computer use with significant other, etc. This access simply cannot be left to chance, but rather it should be scheduled.

Learning Styles

Students learn in different ways, and professors instruct using a variety of instructional strategies and materials. A study of learning style differences (Aragon, Johnson, and Shaik, 2002, pp. 235-37) found that both the face-to-face and online students are similar in their learning and study strategies, with the exception of study styles, and the online students also report a higher preference for abstract conceptualization in comparison to the face-to-face students. By design, an online Internet environment will require students to utilize reflective observation (learning by watching and listening) and abstract conceptualization (learning by thinking) simply because of the way course materials are organized and delivered (Aragon, Johnson, and Shaik, 2002, p. 242). Overall, this study showed that online learning can be as effective as face-to-face learning in many respects, even though students have different learning style preferences (p. 243).

Homework/Assignments

Homework and other assignments need to be “spelled out” very clearly. In the event a student has a question about the assigned work, the instructor must be available for consultation and feedback. This feedback period should be within 12-24 hours; some faculty, however, will need to indicate to students when feedback should not be expected: weekends for some faculty, a block of time when the faculty member has no or limited access to the Internet, etc. Conrad and Donaldson (2004, pp. 26-27) suggest a rubric for every assignment; this rubric will list each key

element of the activity as well as define the various levels of effort and determine the grading points for each level. Time consuming to create a rubric, yes; however, the rubric clearly specifies the expectations for the activity and the effort required by the student to achieve a desired score.

The homework and other assignments (threaded discussions, journal entries, etc.) should be evaluated and/or commented on within a very short turnaround time. In Palloff and Pratt (2003, pp. 131-21), Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" were adapted by Graham, Kursat, Byung-Ro, and Duffy to focus on best practices: "Instructors need to find a balance in the amount and frequency of their online feedback so that students know that they are present and paying attention, but not so much that they overwhelm the group or dominate the discussion."

Ko and Rossen (2004) recommend more than one form of graded assessment be used, including the option with most course management systems to provide automatic feedback. In many quizzing programs, students who answer a question incorrectly can receive automatic instructions for remediation (i.e. review certain pages of the text or reread an instructor's lecture notes) (p. 93).

Motivation

Online students may be motivated by any number of factors: promotion, salary scale, personal goals, job requirement, luxury of not physically attending a traditional class. One motivator that "keeps students engaged" is the ongoing contact with the instructor and other students in the course. The learning community (Palloff and Pratt, 2003, pp. 15-28), if developed effectively, supports the idea that the educational experience is more inspired as strong relationships develop among the students: openness, flexibility and humor, honesty, willingness to take responsibility for community formation, and willingness to work collaboratively.

Cultural Issues

When a course involves students from two or more countries, it can be an exciting learning opportunity. Certainly another potential challenge related to cultural patterns of learning. KO and Rossen (2004) detail some of the specific concerns of cross-cultural classes. If students are used to an instructor-centered classroom where there is little student-initiated participation, online learners may need specific guidelines about when and how to volunteer their comments and questions (p. 127). Palloff and Pratt (2003) devote an entire chapter of their book to "Gender, Culture, Lifestyle, and Geography" issues; this is a must read for instructors as well as students.

Flexibility

Willingness to "roll with the flow" is very important in online learning. For example, if one of the assignments is to participate in a chat room (synchronous), there may be difficulty of all students being online simultaneously. One alternative, especially if there are a number of

students in the class, is to divide the class into 3 groups: the morning, the afternoon, and the evening “chatters” so that all students can participate.

Due Dates

Assignment due dates haunt faculty and students even in the online environment. If the due date is non-negotiable, students must know this in advance; although a rigid rule, the students know they can submit an assignment early or “suffer the consequences” of missing the deadline (no acceptance of assignment or a late fee attached). Some of our course management systems will literally shut off the acceptance of assignments after the due date (and time); students need to be aware of this cut-off date/time. The course syllabus is a logical place to discuss due dates and implications of tardiness.

Resources

According to Ko and Rossen (2004), there are three different resource levels: low-tech, mid-tech, and high-tech. The high-tech institution has installed a full-scale course management system for its departments or colleges, and it has support for the system. Most CMSs allow for the mounting of copyrighted materials for a limited amount of time within the course, available to only those students officially enrolled in the course. In addition to the online resources, students need access to the library databases and print materials. Interlibrary Loan (ILL) can help with the print materials. It is helpful to have a contact person identified for the library resources that students will need. It may even be necessary for the online instructor to conduct or invite a reference librarian to lead a brief bibliographic instruction for students to learn how to use available library resources.

Faculty Responsibilities for Administering and Facilitating an Online Course

Faculty have certain responsibilities for administering and facilitating an online course, according to students. These responsibilities discussed in this presentation and proceedings are from the student perspective, not the faculty perspective.

Technology support

Technology is but a mere tool in making a course available to students. The institution is obligated to provide a system which works and support staff to assist students when they need advice or assistance. Many course management systems provide for in-house technology support, in some cases providing a HelpDesk to work with students. In addition to the technicians, students expect the instructors to have a basic understanding of the course management system and its intricacies; troubleshooting is often requested via telephone or e-mail, and the student’s initial call for help is usually to the instructor.

Formats for instructional materials

The formats used for instructional materials should be basic and easy for students to access. For example, if a faculty member creates a document in AppleWorks or Microsoft Works, not all students will be able to open the documents, unless of course they have that particular software available on their computers. A suggestion to faculty: use Microsoft Word (which most students can access) or place materials within the CMS as a .pdf file. Keep the streaming video short and relevant. Keep the discussions relevant. And by all means, explain ahead of time about the formats which will be used.

Feedback

Students learn by doing, and they learn by receiving feedback from the instructor as well as their peers. Respond to student concerns and questions, and provide feedback to their assignments; it is not unnatural or unreasonable for students to expect a turnaround time of 12-24 hours. If this time frame is not possible for a period of time, explain that to the students. In addition to turnaround time, students expect more than a letter or number grade. They expect detailed explanations of what items or components did not meet the criteria, and they also appreciate positive feedback.

Motivation

Students need to hear that they are doing a good job. They also need to hear whether they are working below course expectations. Prompt, meaningful feedback and comments can be wonderful motivators. This feedback can come from the instructor as well as student peers. “Good ideas. I’d like to think about them a little and then discuss them in detail.” “Wow!” “☺” or even “I ♥ this!” can serve as motivators for students to keep up the good work.

There are other forms of motivation which may be considered. Once a student reaches a certain number of points, that student would not be required to take the final exam. Or, each student can elect to take part in a cafeteria plan: 5 article reviews, 1 Web page, 5 threaded discussions, and 1 midterm exam can be counted the same as 4 article reviews, 1 Web page, 4 threaded discussions, 1 chat room, 1 PowerPoint presentation, and 1 final exam. Or, some combination of the previous two options can be completed in lieu of a final exam.

Reinforcement

Reinforcement can come in a variety of ways. E-mails, telephone calls, in-person visits, “cutsie” messages, in-depth messages can all serve as reinforcement. In a traditional face-to-face class teachers often bring in candy or cookies; in the online environment, the non-tangent items must be used. Verbal reinforcement is quite welcome.

Time constraints

Students insist they “have a life” and need to be able to have some flexibility in their online course activities. Students indicate deadlines should be flexible or at least negotiable. As adult learners, the students are managing work, family, and school—no easy feat.

Quizzes and tests

Are quizzes and tests really necessary? Adult learners are more comfortable with project-based assignments and activities. The traditional tests and quizzes are not representative of what the online learner actually knows and can do.

Conclusion

Online learning is here, it's here to stay. For some students, this is the only way they can take classes and complete a degree. For other students, it's a choice. For some, it's a luxury. Students have definite ideas about what should be included in an online course and how this course should be structured, administered, and facilitated. This presentation and paper have identified online learning through the eyes of a student—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and how online courses can be more effectively and efficiently done.

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