



A Student's Perspective: Online Education

By Dionna Marie Di Pierro

Online learning is truly the wave of future education, but it is not a panacea for securing a degree. The myth that online education equates to an easy A and a quick degree is being debunked each day as online education enters into the realm of traditional education. Although there are many positive characteristics associated with online education, students who are unprepared to meet the expectations of the virtual learning environment will experience disappointment and potential failure.

Here are a few ideas that faculty and students new to online education should consider before opting to teach or learn in virtual worlds.

Traditional vs. online

The online learning environment requires immense self discipline and independence. As much as universities stress these elements for success, students and teachers will never quite know what to expect until they have fully immersed themselves into the technologically driven online environment. In most traditional classroom settings, the professor guides students through the syllabus. The first day of class may simply be an overview of what is expected of students, the material that will be covered and the general framework of the course. These first days of initiation into traditional college-level courses, however, are generally days in which students are given the opportunity to decide if they want to remain in the class, with the drop period as a potential exit strategy—a kind of get-of-jail-free card if success seems unlikely.

Here, they have the opportunity to engage with professors in a real-world setting, see them, hear their voices, learn about their mannerisms and try to glean something about their personalities—factors that enhance knowledge about these individuals and increase or decrease comfort levels in regards to them.

The online environment, however, is far different, as the responsibility for reading the syllabus, course requirements and expectations are all duties relegated directly to the student. The first day of class is more like being dropped into a dunk tank than being coddled through the class rubric as students are in face-to-face classroom settings. Concealed behind their computer monitors, professors do not offer up too much information about themselves, a fact that tends to distance them, ironically, within the distance-educational setting.



Personal investment in education

There are several elements of the online learning environment that students should be aware of prior to beginning an online course. Students must understand they have to immediately get to work when beginning an online course. They have to fully comprehend the syllabus and assess whether or not they can complete the amount of required work.

Some online courses follow the regular 16-week semester format. Many of them, however, are condensed, and students are required to complete the same amount of work for a traditional semester in half the time, and in some cases, even less than that. Students should, by no means, think that online courses are a cakewalk or that there is minimal work to complete. On the contrary—this type of learning environment can be completely stressful, and some students may feel overwhelmed and even isolated in the virtual classroom. While the online environment may be conducive for many working professionals or those who simply have busy schedules, it is not for everyone—teachers included.

Students must remember they are only going to get out of the class what they put in. This is probably something we recall our parents telling us as children, but it most certainly rings true in the case of online courses. An important element to remember is that when students finish their degrees and apply for jobs, they should be fully knowledgeable in all fundamentals that comprise their respective degrees.

For example, those individuals who hold MBAs should understand the concepts associated with that degree, and they should be able to apply them in the workplace. Students must read their textbooks and critically comprehend the information or they may find themselves extremely embarrassed when, in the workplace, they are unable to intellectually support the degree hanging on their office wall.

The textbooks selected by the university's academic departments are chosen specifically to encompass the majority of information a student is expected to learn during the course of the semester. It may seem tempting to some students to simply avoid reading the textbook, knowing they will never be called on in class by the professor, as in a traditional setting. However, this action undermines the entire educational process by making it utterly fruitless. Reading textbooks and completing the assignments—coupled with self-motivation and the desire to understand—are keys to learning the material and becoming fully educated in a given



discipline. After all, the point of higher education is to acquire expertise in a given discipline, not pretend one's way through by cheating.

Discussion boards: cultivating a learning environment

Oftentimes, professors use the online discussion forum for students to answer assignment questions, engage with each other and share experiences that directly relate to the material. A good online course will require that answers to discussion questions are comprehensive, well structured and include several solid references. Some of the most enlightening information gathered in online courses can be obtained by researching topics for discussion questions and seeking solid references and experts on the subject matter.

Students should take time to ensure they fully understand the discussion questions and have formulated responses that will exhibit their knowledge of the topic and even engage other students in a discussion thread. Students can learn quite a bit from each other, and the discussion forums should be used to learn from others' experiences, research and even opinions on particular topics.

Group projects

Group projects are regularly used in online courses to aid students in collaborative activities that might be comparable to those experienced in the workplace. Theoretically, this is a fine idea, but pragmatically it falls short in some respects. Online group projects were probably the most challenging and frustrating elements of my online experience. The problem with this type of project is that students can simply hide behind their computer screen and e-mail myriad excuses for why they have failed to complete their portion of the assignment. Oftentimes, the onus falls on one or two highly engaged students, and the purpose of the group project—the cultivation of creativity via collaboration and group ownership of the problem—is defeated. In my experience, unfortunately, this was the case more often than not, and studious individuals (I was one of them) bore the brunt of the work, carrying most of those in the group who wouldn't or couldn't contribute.

Online students need to be totally prepared to participate and understand that they may end up working in a group project in which more than one group member may fail to pull his or her weight. Additionally, professors generally require that the entire project be completed to obtain a passing grade. This means that if one student fails to complete his or her portion of the

ASQ Higher Education Brief December 2010 (Vol. 3, No. 6)

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assignment, the responsibility will fall directly to the other team members who will have to research and write not only their respective part of the assignment, but also the assignments of all the others who skipped out on their parts.

Most professors are like supervisors in the corporate setting—they do not want to manage the dynamics of the group, as that is simply part of the professional learning and organizational process. They want the job completed and to be completed well. While this type of group or collaborative project may not be part of the rubric in every online course, students should be prepared to deal with the aspects of group interaction and all of the elements associated with completing a task collectively.

This means they should not assume their colleagues will take their responsibilities seriously. Students may find themselves in situations in which their teammates refuse to take responsibility, fail to provide quality work or hide behind the most creative of excuses that would make anyone shed tears of frustration. This is most certainly not always the case with all group activities online. Students need to be prepared, however, to deal with these situations that might cause additional stress or create major time management issues when their colleagues are absent without leave for the duration of the battle plan.

Continuous process improvement

The good news is that online courses are continuously evolving and improving by virtue of student feedback, a fact not lost on for-profit universities and colleges. In addition, the online forum offers a fertile place for technological creativity, and professors who are tech savvy are beginning to give their online courses a much richer feel. Many professors are recording their lectures on video, and students can stream them live through their online platform. Additionally, there are virtual white boards, live chat rooms, online simulations to aid in the learning process and a myriad other tools that can be used to make online courses engaging and fun.

Students should be honest in their course evaluations and state those elements of the course they liked and appreciated, as well as disliked. Professors can use this information to ensure the online course is continuously evolving and improving, and by extension, the quality of online educational degrees.

All things considered

Remember, online education is not for everyone, and this mode of learning may not be
ASQ Higher Education Brief December 2010 (Vol. 3, No. 6)

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compatible with your learning style. However, if you work full time, have family commitments, and still want to earn a degree, you should give it a try.

Don't sign up for online courses thinking that you can skate by. You will do a great deal of hard work, and to be successful, you will have to be dedicated and committed to your success.

You will be spending the same amount of time on your online courses as you would in live, face-to-face courses. Make certain that your online university or college is fully accredited. Last but not least, have realistic expectations.

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