

How Students Develop Online Learning Skills

Successful online students share their secrets for getting the most from online classes, focusing on time management, active participation, and practice

By **Alan R. Roper**

More and more, adult learners are finding the convenience and flexibility of online learning a match for their learning goals and busy lifestyles. Online degree programs, courses, and virtual universities targeting adult learners have proliferated in the past decade. Although students can easily locate an online course or degree program that's both convenient and accessible, they may face significant challenges in developing a new set of skills for this type of instruction.

Educators have speculated on the development of student skills necessary to succeed in online learning, but relatively few publications cover the topic from the perspective of successful online students. I developed the study summarized here to provide this perspective and to identify useful strategies that instructors can promote in their online courses.

Methodology

The study began with the development of a set of questions that emerged from a group of online course designers, faculty, and administrators I consulted for ideas. The question set was reviewed and edited by a larger group of faculty and administrators, and an online survey instrument was developed.

Participants for this study were selected from a list of graduates who had earned their degrees by taking



80 percent or more of their courses exclusively online. Students achieving a 3.50 cumulative grade point average or better were invited to participate in the study. Of the 93 students invited to participate, 59 did so. Survey answers were open-ended, allowing respondents to describe online learning techniques they found useful and to tell the stories of their experiences as online students.¹

Successful Online Students Identify Seven Tips

Students responding to the survey agreed on a number of practical steps that helped them succeed in their online courses:

1. *Develop a time-management strategy.*

Students were asked what time-management strategies they found most helpful. One challenge facing an online

student is the self-discipline required to devote adequate time to class in courses that might not have regularly scheduled times to meet synchronously online or in person. Most students found that establishing their own schedules for class time helped them ensure enough time for class participation. One student commented,

Setting and staying to specific study days was one factor that worked for me. For example, in the evenings, throughout the week, I read my lessons. Saturdays were generally reserved for writing assignments. Saturdays were also devoted to responding to other online postings and building on what I had already submitted.

Another student stated that designating specific times to read, complete written assignments, and post dialogue to other students proved helpful. Students also emphasized the need to create a schedule that gave them some flexibility and wasn't overwhelming. One student explained, "I was careful not to put too much pressure upon myself when completing a homework assignment. I found that doing a little bit here and there avoided trying to do too much all at once." Developing a schedule that designates specific times to log in to and participate in class and to carry out other course-related activities such as reading and doing research promotes a student's success as an online learner. Students identified the most helpful time-management strategies as setting a schedule for study time (78.9 percent) and devoting time daily to the course (31.6 percent).

A key difference between in-person and online learning is the independence and ability to participate in the online class at a time convenient to the student. This also presents a potential problem, as procrastination could cause a student to fall behind in the online course. The graduates who participated in the study were asked how they avoided this problem. A few students (15.8 percent) commented that logging in to their course portal every day and checking

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for new postings or updates helped prevent them from falling behind. Other students (36.8 percent) commented that weekly assignments from the instructor kept them on a regular schedule in the course. One student explained,

You have to discipline yourself in maintaining your schedule and not allow any distractions to disrupt your plan. I would allow myself one hour of winding down from work, eat my dinner, and get to my study room. I found that if I put in about 3–4 hours of studying during the week, the weekly assignment would be completed by Thursday or Friday.

Another student stated that an upfront planning process was critical to succeeding in the online course because studying was integrated with many other responsibilities.

2. Make the most of online discussions.

Student interaction mostly occurs through an online threaded discussion that allows students and instructors to interact in asynchronous time. This is a significant shift for students accustomed to in-class discussions. It may provide opportunities for richer discourse through written discussion that allows students to spend time crafting their responses. When asked how they made the most of their online interaction with other students, these students mentioned some interesting techniques. One student commented, "Interacting with the other students was the fun part

of my (online) classes. As much as possible, I would post a response, question, or comment to another student's posting. This built up an online relationship." Another student suggested, "Respond to several student postings, but make sure you have something meaningful to add, don't just say 'good post.' Also, don't always interact with the same few classmates. Look for something to say with various students."

Participating in threaded discussions helped 52.6 percent benefit most from interaction with their classmates, while reading the responses of others helped 15.8 percent. About 21 percent found e-mailing outside of the course platform a useful way to interact with their fellows.

The instructor's role is important in encouraging class discussions online. A student explained, "Weekly discussions were best when the teacher encouraged it, especially by having pro versus con discussion, or asking 'why' or 'how' questions." Instructors who establish clear expectations as to how threaded discussions are used or who ask specific questions in response to student postings can expect to encourage richer online dialogue. Students who incorporate a plan for regular communication with their classmates into their overall course schedule will have greater success in their online course.

3. Use it or lose it.

One challenge some students face when learning online is retention of the course content. Students surveyed agreed that finding a way to apply the concepts helped them retain the information. "I applied the 'use-or-lose' technique. As soon as I'd read or study it, I put the knowledge to work through collaboration with students or at my place of employment."

One way to apply these concepts goes back to the use of the online threaded discussion. Concepts can be interpreted and restated in each student's own words in an active dialogue with others.

Another student commented that "applying the new material to what I already knew" was a helpful way to retain the material from the online course. Several successful online students

mentioned that they retained what they read by developing a way to apply those concepts to a current or past experience, for example at work (31.6 percent). Just under half of the students (47.4 percent) explained that taking handwritten notes from the online text helped them retain essential points. One student explained that she “took notes from the book and micro lectures, just as if [I] were in a regular face-to-face course.”

4. *Make questions useful to your learning.*

One student commented that “asking questions is integral to learning. By asking questions, fellow students and instructors would go deeper into the subject. Going deeper made the subject matter more understandable.” The online course environment typically provides communication tools (such as threaded discussions, e-mail connectivity, and live chat) that students can use to ask in-depth questions. Students also can take the time to craft questions that may go beyond what they would ask in an in-person course, probing the subject with greater specificity. Another student explained,

Asking questions helped me to understand the material. I was a student that did not have experience in many [online] classes, but the other students did. Asking questions of some of the other students helped me understand the principles and practices professionals in the field face on a daily basis.

From the responses to this survey, successful online students spent time researching and crafting questions (21 percent) and making them clear and understandable (10.5 percent). They found thoughtful questions to be a valuable resource in support of their online learning experience, although 26.3 percent of their peers admitted they just asked questions.

5. *Stay motivated.*

Without direct physical contact and interaction with other learners or an instructor, online students can lose their interest or motivation mid-way through

their course or program. The graduates who participated in this study were asked what motivation techniques they found most helpful in preventing burn-out or loss of interest when studying online. As one student put it, “keeping your eye on the prize” is always helpful. Another student commented, “The main motivator was envisioning myself in cap and gown, walking up and receiving my degree, and having all my dear family and friends in attendance.”

Students also mentioned they find motivation in getting a good grade (21 percent) and in setting personal goals (42 percent). One student stated, “I always want to get an ‘A’ in every course I take. It doesn’t matter as much in graduate school as it did as an undergraduate, but it still motivates me.”

Some students took advantage of opportunities to work with other online students, using the encouragement and feedback they received from that connection to stay motivated (15.8 percent). One student explained, “I had a friend (in my online courses) that I teamed up with, and we tried hard to make sure we not only finished our assignments, but that we turned in only the highest quality work possible.”

Each individual may find something different that works for him or her in staying motivated. One student promised to buy himself a new truck if he completed the degree. With a greater amount of work done independently in online courses, a new online student would be well advised to consider developing personal techniques for staying engaged, specifically by creating a self-motivation plan.

6. *Communicate the instruction techniques that work.*

Instructors in online courses employ a variety of techniques aimed at engaging the learner. The participants in this study discussed some of the techniques that were most successful. One student commented, “I liked instructors who logged in often and asked a lot of questions. Not only did this help to increase understanding of the subject, but it gave people the opportunity for class participation.” Another student added,

“One teacher went farther than I would expect, but I found his technique wonderful. He posted the initial question for discussion, and then asked us individual questions based on our answers.” This technique worked well with a variety of learners (42 percent). The instructor was able to craft questions that matched the students’ level of understanding of the material and provide online resources that helped them (15.7 percent).

7. *Make connections with fellow students.*

The participants in this study had the opportunity to share successful techniques and practices that helped them in developing their online student skills through some open-ended questions. One student mentioned that making a friend (connected with online) helped. Being part of a community of learners is helpful in courses that are taught in-person, and the same holds true for online classes (15.8 percent). One student explained that “it made a huge difference when you had good students in the class.” Another student commented,

The experience was enriched greatly by the relationships and interaction with my fellow students. It amazes me how well we got to know each other even though we were often thousands of miles apart and were only virtual classmates.

I learned as much from other students and their experiences as I did from the instructors. I never expected that type of rewarding learning experience in a traditional classroom.

Using online threaded discussions in their course management system, the students can extend classroom discussions beyond the traditional boundaries of physical class time. Students in the online class may get to know one another more from recognizing the writing style and expression of thoughts and ideas rather than by physical attributes. Many students develop meaningful connections with their online classmates that can translate into career networking opportunities later.

Summary

The responses of these successful online students highlight several techniques instructors can use to help their students develop effective online learning skills. Most important is a student's ability to develop a time-management strategy to help manage course requirements as an independent learner.

Students who participated in this study agreed that online discussions with fellow students and the instructor are central to the learning experience. Instructors can encourage students to develop techniques to make the most of online discussions, which may add to a student's learning experience and promote success in the online course. The instructor can also encourage students to apply concepts from the online course, or as one student described it, "use it or lose it," to develop an ability to retain and synthesize course objectives.

The successful online students who participated in this study also agreed

on the importance of developing and asking thoughtful questions as a technique to engage both fellow students and the instructor. As one student explained, this is a way to "go deeper into the subject" and that "going deeper makes the subject matter more understandable."

Staying motivated in the class is a challenge for students studying independently. Students who develop a personal motivation strategy find it a great asset to the online learning experience, one that can keep them from losing interest or burning out.

Another technique the successful online students in this study agree on is the importance of making a connection with fellow students. Students who develop a meaningful connection with their fellows can receive and provide support. The online connections also promote a sense of being a learner among other learners.

No magical formula guarantees success in online learning. One important

step for instructors teaching an online course is to recognize that a different set of student skills may be required for students to get good grades (indicating that they have achieved the desired understanding of the subject) and to get the most from an online course. The techniques identified by successful online students can promote a rich learning experience for other students and provide a foundation for them to develop these skills. Instructors can help them get there. *e*

Endnote

1. The percentages may be somewhat misleading because this survey asked open-ended questions. A survey using Likert scale coding would focus responses into a few specified categories, thus producing higher percentages.

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