For students, online success requires new strategies and habits
by David Healey

Abstract

Online learning continues to grow and expand as students, especially adult learners, discover the advantages of a flexible learning environment that suits their busy lives. For students, success in online classes often requires brushing up on dormant academic skills and adopting new approaches to time management. Some students may find that without the right approach and setting some ground rules for themselves that include scheduling study time, the freedom offered by online learning can be overwhelming if not properly managed. For instructors, it is important to remind students of these best practices as often as possible and to create a constant presence in the online classroom.

Online learning continues to grow and create new opportunities for adult learners seeking to earn a college degree or refresh their skills. In fact, chances are that you or someone you know has taken an online college class.

Obtaining a college degree has clear benefits, yet a college degree remains fairly rare among Americans, with just 25 percent having a four-year degree (Brundage, 2018). We've all heard the horror stories about the college graduate who flips burgers for a living, but the facts show otherwise. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, college graduates had median earnings of $1,137 weekly, nearly $400 more than those with some college but no degree (Vilorio, 2016). The more intangible benefits include improving self-respect and expanding one's horizons beyond the known and familiar.

Online learning is an opportunity to help more adults advance in their careers—and their paychecks. These adult learners are a special group. In fact, my students are awesome. They are soldiers, nurses, police officers, firefighters, IT ninjas, moms and dads, and grandparents. Some are homeless, or very sick, or caregivers. They are heroic in many ways. As busy working adults, they often have been out of school for years. This hiatus from the learning environment means that their reading, writing, and overall academic skills, may be rusty.

What tends to impede their path to success is not the college-level work itself, but the myriad of factors outside the classroom. Another way to put it, is that life happens. More and more, students are looking for education options that fit into their busy lives managing jobs and family (Noel-Levitz, 2013). Given these realities, time management and study skills are as much a part of academic success as mastering the actual course material. The good news is that reviewing strategies for success with students can help them do well in college.

Strategies for Online Learning Success

In my online classes, most students who are successful make a schedule and stick to it. Time management thought leader Leo Babauta suggests taking stock of all our commitments, beginning with family, work, school, volunteering, and hobbies, so that we have a better understanding of how to schedule our obligations (2009). This is sound advice for online learners. Once students grasp the big picture, it may be easier to determine where scheduling time for coursework makes the most sense or what changes they may need to make to find more time.

Students being introduced to one of my introductory Composition classes are advised that an online class may require 10-15 hours of work each week. My suggestion in the introductory seminar is that they plan to devote Saturday mornings to working on class, or Sunday afternoons, or Tuesday evenings. Literally writing these times in a planner or even on the kitchen calendar goes a long way toward completing the work. Simply put, successful students plan the work and work the plan.

Encourage students to develop an early warning system by keeping track of what is due, and when.

More tech savvy students can use tools such as Google or Outlook calendars. Remind students that it's so easy to set a reminder on a smartphone that they have a paper due or a seminar coming up: "OK Siri, remind me to submit the Unit 2 assignment at 5 pm Tuesday."

Communication is key. Most instructors will gladly work with students to help them complete late assignments, but instructors have to know what is going on in students' lives. Are they in the field on military duty and away from an internet connection? Did a storm damage their home and knock out power for several days, or call them away from home to fulfill an emergency services role? It's vital for students to reach out to their instructions and let them know what's happening.

Students need to create a positive learning environment. In other words, where will they do their work? It's amazing, in class discussions, how many students haven't thought this out or who over-estimate their concentration skills. On the sofa, in front of the TV, is not a good location for drafting an essay. Encourage students to create a space where they can get down to business. I often remind my students that the local library can also be a good way to avoid distractions such as that pile of dirty laundry or noisy roommates. Ainsa (2017) suggests having students complete a questionnaire about potential distractions, such as a propensity for constantly answering email, to improve their awareness of better approaches.

Students should not underestimate the value of printing out reading material. Although the class may be online, reading on paper can be a better way to absorb classroom materials. Students can make notes in the margins and squeak that highlighter across the page. A highly organized approach can include a 3-ring binder to collect reading materials for each unit.

In a class with a live seminar or lecture component, students often need a reminder to take notes. The lecture may be recorded and there may be lecture slides, but these notes can guide their own understanding of the material. Students can use a single, spiral-bound notebook to take notes from each lecture and to do their brainstorming for writing assignments.

Use a laptop computer or desktop computer. Students get excited about being able to use tablets or smartphones to attend class or complete coursework, and these work in a pinch, but it's just not very practical to shrink the classroom to such a tiny screen. Taking classes on nothing but a tablet or a phone simply becomes frustrating. Even a slightly dated, used computer is a good investment for the online student.

Students should explore the online classroom so that they are as familiar with it as they are with Facebook or Instagram or another favorite site. Encourage students to click on the links and explore the classroom. They won't break the internet!

Research has shown that one of the most effective approaches to creating engaging online classes is to increase instructor presence (Mandernach, Gonzales & Garrett, 2006). This can mean responding quickly to emails and posting over several days in discussion boards. Working with students online both asynchronously and synchronously is just as intensive as working with students in a classroom and during office hours (DePew, K. E., & Hewett, B. L., 2015). Instructors may not be able to have a cup of coffee with a student on the other side of the country, but they can still invite them into their office for a chat by phone or video.

I get so excited about online learning because the potential is endless as the delivery methods evolve. For example, our university recently began using a video teaching platform for weekly live seminars to help create an even more engaging online learning experience. But no matter how much the technology evolves, student success often comes down to basic academic skills and time management. Finally, we should use this amazing technology to enhance the human interaction that helps smooth the road to student success.

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