

How to Be a Successful Distance Learner

Distance learning has been in existence for over 100 years. Although the medium has changed from paper and pencil courses to real-time Internet courses, similar characteristics exist in order for students to be successful with distance classes. In fact, research supports that students who do well with distance classes:

- Are highly motivated;
- Are independent;
- Are active learners;

- Possess good organizational and time management skills;
- Have the discipline to study without external reminders; and
- Can adapt to new learning environments.

Since it is estimated that online learning, a type of distance learning, will constitute 50% of all learning in the 21st century, it is important to learn how to become a successful distance learner.

Types of Distance Learning

Distance learning is a broad, mixed category of methods to deliver instruction or learning. Distance learning can be organized by type, but often different types of learning are combined—termed a hybrid.

What are some of the types of distance learning? Well, of course there is instruction delivered over the internet through learning modules or entire courses. However, there are also video-conferencing, telecourses, radio courses, mobile vans/labs that take materials to communities, video or audio-tape courses, and even asynchronous text files and attachments that travel via email. All of these are types of distance learning.

Often the terms synchronous and asynchronous are used to describe the delivery system of distance learning. Synchronous instruction requires the simultaneous participation of students and instructors. This type of learning pro-

vides interaction in real time with immediate feedback. Interactive telecourses, teleconferencing, web conferencing, and Internet chats are examples of synchronous instruction.

Asynchronous instruction does not require the simultaneous participation of students and instructors. Instead, students can select their own instructional time frame. Asynchronous is more flexible than synchronous instruction. However, asynchronous instruction requires that student's be more self-directed. Listservs, audiocassette courses, videotaped courses, correspondence courses, and web-based courses are examples of asynchronous instruction.

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*John Winn, Commissioner
Florida Department of Education
Dr. Bonnie Marmor, Vice Chancellor
Florida Division of Workforce Development*

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Defining Elements of Distance Learning

Although distance learning takes on many different forms, there are several key features that define distance learning. They are:

1. The separation of teacher and learner during at least a majority of each instructional process
2. The use of educational media to unite teacher and learner and provide course content
3. The provision of two-way communication between teacher, tutor, or educational agency and learner
4. Separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time
5. Control of learning by student rather than the distance instructor

As technology continues to change rapidly, many educational institutions are developing more and more distance education programs. The increasing opportunities through distance learning to obtain college credit, update a specific type of knowledge base, and develop new skills at the workplace require that Florida GED PLUS students be provided with the skills necessary to be successful as a self-directed distance learner.

Effectiveness of Distance Learning

Many educators ask if distance learning students benefit as much as those students receiving traditional face-to-face instruction. Research comparing distance education to traditional face-to-face instruction indicates that teaching and studying at a distance can be as effective as traditional instruction, when the method and technologies used are appropriate to the instructional tasks, when there is student-to-student interaction, and when there is timely teacher-to-student feedback (Moore & Thompson, 1990).

Without exception, effective distance education programs begin with careful planning and a focused understanding of course requirements and student needs. Appropriate technology can only be selected once these elements are understood in detail. There is no mystery to the way effective distance education programs develop. They don't happen spontaneously; they evolve through the hard work and dedicated efforts of many individuals and organizations. In fact, successful distance education programs rely on the consistent and integrated efforts of students, faculty, facilitators, support staff, and administrators.

Role of the Teacher/Facilitator

One important aspect of the effectiveness of learning from a distance is the role of the teacher or facilitator. It is important to provide the distance learner/e-learner/online learner with the confidence needed to have a successful experience. This is especially important at the beginning stages of the program. Designers of successful programs ensure that facilitators have a complete orientation and training program.

Use Effective Teaching Skills

Effective distance teaching requires the enhancement of existing skills, rather than developing new abilities. Effective teachers of distance learning:

- Assist students in becoming both familiar and comfortable with the delivery technology and prepare them to resolve the technical problems that will arise. They focus on joint problem solving, not placing blame for the occasional technical difficulty.
- Make students aware of and comfortable with new patterns of communication to be used in the course.
- Are sensitive to different communication styles and varied cultural backgrounds.
- Remember that students must take an active role in the distance delivered course by independently taking responsibility for their learning.
- Realistically assess the amount of content that can be effectively delivered in the course. Because of the logistics involved, presenting content at a distance is usually more time consuming than presenting the same content in a traditional classroom.
- Are aware that student participants will have different learning styles. Some will learn easily in group settings, while others will excel when working independently.
- Diversify and pace course activities.
- Humanize the course by focusing on the students, not the delivery system. This is possible with even online learning systems.
- Are concise. They use short, cohesive statements and ask direct questions, realizing that technical linkages might increase the time it takes for students to respond.
- Develop strategies for student reinforcement, review, repetition, and remediation.
- Communicate frequently with their students.
- Care about their students.

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Traits of Self-Directed E-Learners

Clearly this new “classroom” environment takes some getting used to for students and teachers. The learners must possess a comfort level that allows them to effectively learn and therefore, succeed in this environment. Motivation, including plenty of positive reinforcement, is fundamental to success as a distance learner. The motivation of learners in non-traditional programs seems to be fundamentally based on personal convenience and lifestyle. Identifying these learner traits, e.g., convenience and lifestyle, the online instructor can better recognize the needs of the learner. Self-directed learners who have selected a non-traditional method to attain their learning goals have made the decision and set their goals to achieve academic success “their way.”

As an e-learner, many students also fit the role of the self-directed learner, a person who participates in a process with or without the help of others, identifies his/her personal learning needs, defines learning goals, develops and implements a learning plan, and then evaluates his/her personal learning gain.

An e-learning environment can be an advantageous one to those students who can continuously strive for improvement based on the satisfactory completion of some goals and the development of new ones.

Keys to Success

The key element of success in any endeavor is the desire to succeed. There must exist the motivation, the commitment, the awareness of the expectations, and the ability to perform the necessary tasks to attain the goal. These are the same elements required to be a successful distance learner.

According to the Illinois Online Network, the “Top Ten Tips for Success” for distance learners include:

1. Be open-minded about sharing life, work, and educational experiences as part of the learning process.
2. Be able to communicate through writing.
3. Be self-motivated and self-disciplined.
4. Be willing to “speak up” if problems arise.
5. Be willing and able to commit 5 to 10 hours per week per course.
6. Be able to meet the minimum requirements for the program.
7. Accept critical thinking and decision making as part of the learning process.

8. Have access to a computer and a modem.
9. Be able to think ideas through before responding.
10. Feel that high quality learning can take place without going to a traditional classroom.

Additional tips to the learner include:

- Participate—contribute your ideas, perspective, and comments.
- Take the program and yourself seriously.
- Make sure that you have a private space where you can study.
- Become a true advocate of distance learning.
- Log on to your course every single day.
- Take advantage of your anonymity; you should not feel intimidated.
- Be polite and respectful.
- Apply what you learn—applying everything you learn as you learn it reinforces your experiences.

Adapted from the Illinois Online Network. Retrieved from the World Wide Web on 05/24/06 at: <http://illinois.online.uillinois.edu>.

Are There Special Skills for Online Courses?

The same types of skills required for all distance learning courses are also required for online or web-based courses. However, due to the use of computers and the Internet, students need additional skills in the area of computer literacy.

Some of the basic skills required to be successful include the ability to:

- Copy and paste information between documents
- Save a document
- Create a basic word processing document
- Connect to the internet
- Download and save word processing documents, e.g., web documents
- Use browsers and basic search engines
- Download and install software and required plug-ins
- Read, write, and send email and attachments
- Use a discussion board
- Participate in a chat room

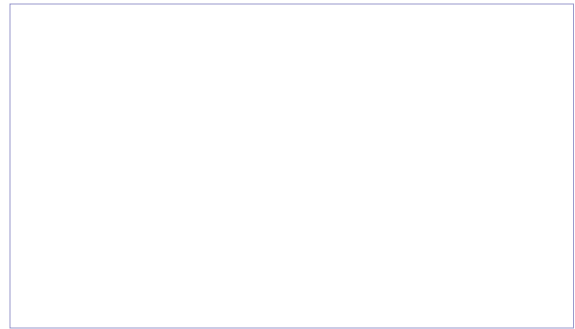
Students who will be enrolling in online courses may wish to first take a computer course or a tutorial regarding online learning so that they are familiar with the technology required.

Florida Atlantic University

Dr. Lucy Madsen Guglielmino
Project Director

Development & Research Consultants

Susan K. Pittman
Bonnie Vondracek



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Improving Interaction & Feedback

As an instructor, it is important that you use effective interaction and feedback strategies when facilitating distance learning. This will enable you to better identify and meet student needs while providing a model to continually improve your course of study.

- Use pre-class study questions and advanced organizers to encourage critical thinking and informed participation by the learners. Realize that it will take time to improve your student's communication skills.
- Early in the course, require students to contact you and interact among themselves via electronic mail, so they become comfortable with the process. Maintaining and sharing electronic journal entries can be an effective strategy.
- Arrange telephone office hours using a toll-free number. Set evening office hours if most of your students work during the day.
- Provide a variety of delivery systems for interaction and feedback, including one-on-one and conference calls, fax, e-mail, video, and computer conferencing. When feasible, consider personal meetings as well.
- Contact each student every week, especially early in the course. Take note of students who don't participate during a session and contact them individually.
- Use pre-stamped and addressed postcards, out-of-class phone conferences, and e-mail for feedback regarding course content, relevancy, pace, delivery problems, and

instructional concerns.

- Have students keep a journal of their thoughts and ideas regarding the course content, as well as their individual progress and other concerns. Have students submit journal entries frequently.
- Make detailed comments on written assignments, referring to additional sources for supplementary information. Return assignments without delay
- Provide continuous support and positive reinforcement.

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