Learning Online

Overview

This module provides an overview of the qualities and characteristics that a successful online learner possesses. Some helpful tips and strategies are included in this section to help you reach your highest learning potential.

Objectives

Upon completion of this module, you will be able to:

- Describe the characteristics of a successful online learner
- Develop good study habits and time management skills

What is Active Learning?

According to Paulson and Faust (n.d.), active learning is anything that you as a student do in a classroom other than merely passively listening to an instructor's lecture. This includes everything from listening practices, short writing exercises, and applying course material to "real life" situations and/or to new problems.

Being an active learner means that you are actively engaging in the learning process through basic activities such as reading, writing, talking, listening, and reflecting. A few strategies to incorporate these basic elements into the learning process are described below.

Talking and Listening

Talking about a topic helps you to organize your thoughts and reinforce what you have learned.

Becoming a better listener takes practice! When you actively listen to what someone else is saying, make a conscious effort not only to hear the words but try to understand the complete message.
**Writing**

Writing down your thoughts helps you to process information in your own words. It appeals to individuals who prefer to learn independently.

**Reading**

Summarizing and note checks can help you to process what you just read and helps you focus on important concepts.

**Reflecting**

Reflecting provides insight on your learning and allows you to apply knowledge to your learning experience. It is the central dynamic in intentional learning and problem solving. Take time to find meaning in a learning situation and synthesize it within the context of other newly acquired knowledge (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).
Developing Time Management Skills

For all busy people like you, good study habits and developing time management skills are crucial in order to be a successful online learner and complete your education goals. Online learning offers flexibility and the convenience of being able to study when it is convenient for you. However, the convenience of online learning may cause you to procrastinate, put off studying and submitting assignments until the last minute. Before you know it, you have fallen behind in your studies. In an online course, you will not have regularly scheduled classes as in a face-to-face class but expect to spend as much time working in your online course as you would in a face-to-face course.

Here are some helpful strategies and skills that will help you become a successful learner and have a rewarding online learning experience.

Practice self-discipline: Self-discipline is very important when devoting enough time to your school work. Establish a regular study schedule to help you stay on track. Note all due dates. Use the schedule as a checklist and mark off items that you have completed. You may have to take a divide-and-conquer approach to studying. For example, Monday and Tuesday may be the days that you decide to get all of your reading assignments done. Wednesday and Thursday may be the days when you submit assignments and discussion postings. Friday and Saturday may be the days that you devote to reviewing and responding to online postings, and Sunday may be the day when you begin to prepare for the week ahead. Figure out a routine that works best for you and stick with it. Set interim goals and deadlines for yourself.

Avoid procrastination: Establish and maintain a study routine. Avoid putting off studying and submitting assignments until the last minute. Schedule time to complete the work. Don't fall into the habit of asking the instructor for an extension.

Avoid distractions: Establish a learning space that is comfortable and free of distractions. You may find that studying after the children have gone to bed works best for you. Avoid watching TV, surfing the web, and talking on the telephone. You may even talk with your family to let them know that getting a good education is very important to you. When it's time to study, let them know ahead of time so they will know not to disturb you. Your office (before or after work hours), or a sound proof room in a public library might be good options for studying if you are having trouble studying at home.

My Daily Schedule Exercise

This is an exercise to help reinforce the importance of creating a schedule so you can ensure that you allocate time for working in your online course.

Click on the link to access the activity:  http://www.studygs.net/schedule/

Also, check out other great resources available through the Study Guides and Strategies website.
Online Expectations

Every student enters an online classroom with certain expectations. The following questions and answers outline expectations in the online learning environment.

How much time should I expect to spend per week on my online course?

It is a common misperception that online courses take less time per week than face-to-face courses. In actuality, online courses often require a substantial time commitment. Although the amount of time required for an online course varies. A 3 semester hour course is 45 total hours. As a general rule, expect to allocate at minimum 180 hours for graduate courses and 135 for undergraduate courses. Divide that number by the total number of weeks in the semester to estimate the hours per week. For example, if the semester is 7 weeks long, expect to allocate 25-26 hours per week on your studies for a graduate course (180/7=25.71).

You should expect the following:

- The amount of homework required in an online course will be similar as that assigned in a face-to-face course.

- Most online courses will ask that you spend time participating in discussions with the instructor and other learners. These discussions will play a central role in your learning experience.

- You may be asked to play an active role in group or team activities. This will involve coordinating and working with several other learners who may be dispersed across different regions.

Can I take the course at my own pace?

Although you may have some flexibility when completing assignments, online courses are facilitated by an instructor and require that learners adhere to a course schedule for readings, assignments, and discussions with other learners. It will be important for your success to adhere to this schedule so you can contribute to discussions and group projects in meaningful ways. Your presence in the course will only be apparent if you participate!

Do I need to come to campus for anything?

On-campus meetings, if required, are coordinated through the program in which you are enrolled.

Do I need books for an online course?

Instructors generally require students to use textbooks for their distance education classes.

How will I communicate with the instructor during the course?

Instructors can be contacted through TAMU-CC email; however, they may ask that you communicate with them through the Messages tool within Blackboard or the discussion forum. In order to better communicate with you, some instructors may even create a Questions and Answers topic in the discussion forum. Your instructor will advise you about his or her preferred method of communication in the syllabus/course outline. Some instructors will give you an outside email address or telephone contact to use in case of emergencies.
How will I turn in assignments and receive grades?

In the syllabus/course outline, your instructor will let you know how he or she expects you to turn in assignments and receive grades. It is possible to submit assignments and view grades within the course.

Your instructor's policy for late work will appear in the syllabus; this should also outline the timeframe for when you can expect work to be graded and receive email responses from your instructor. For instance, your instructor may state that he or she will return email within 48 hours except on weekends and will grade assignments within seven business days.

The Successful Online Learner

Now that you have learned some of what you can expect during an online course, you might be wondering how you can succeed in the online course environment. Much has been written about the characteristics that make some learners successful. The list below represents a compilation of the most common features of successful online learners and some of the best practices that can lead to success (Illinois Online Network, 2010).

The successful online learner should:

- **Possess self-motivation and self-discipline**: Since the online environment lacks much of the structure present in the face-to-face classroom, you must be self-directed and exercise real commitment when adhering to deadlines and completing assignments. Success in online courses requires commitment and discipline. Keeping up with class and completing all work on time is essential.

- **Be proficient with time management**: Frequently, learners decide to take online courses because they do not have the time to attend class in person. To be successful online, you must carve out time from family, work, or other commitments to spend on your studies.

- **Willingness to contribute**: Actively participate in your class. This means interacting with your instructor and classmates on a regular basis. You should feel comfortable using email, discussions, chat rooms, and group work, to communicate with your classmates.

- **Meet technical requirements**: Most programs list technical requirements for taking a course; these usually include software and hardware requirements. Adhering to these requirements will prevent computer difficulties later in the course.

- **Be able to communicate through writing**: Almost all communication in online courses is written. Moving from the face-to-face classroom to the online environment involves a corresponding transition from the spoken to the written word. Online learners should be fairly comfortable expressing themselves in writing. Many online courses also require a great deal of reading in the course site.

- **Log into your course regularly**: Log on to the course on a regular basis (at least once per day) to check emails, discussion topics, and instructor announcements. Review your discussion postings to see if anyone commented and read any feedback. It will be difficult to catch up if you fall behind. If you have questions, don't hesitate to contact your instructor.
• **Seek Assistance when needed**: If you need extra assistance with mastering course content, utilize the tutoring service and other resources offered by the institution. You might also consider a study buddy to help you. Check with your instructor for help in identifying a study buddy.

• **Stay Up to date on Assignments**: You may have different types of activities and assignments to complete each week. Read textbook readings and supplemental readings on time. Pay attention to assignment instructions to make sure you understand it. Type your written assignment in a word processing software such as MS Word. Plan ahead and don't wait until the last minute to submit your assignment.

**Computer Skills**: A successful online learner needs to have a basic level of computer skills to complete the course successfully. The following computer skills are required.

**The ability to**:

• Create, save, copy, move, and manage files and directories on a computer

• Run applications on a computer when needed

• Use a browser (Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Safari, Chrome, etc.) including navigational tools (back button, bookmark/favorites)

• Use a search engine to conduct research

• Send and receive email

• Send and receive a file attachment

• Paste text into an email message

• Describe any problems accurately to technical support (write the error message down or capture the screen) so that technical support will have a better idea of where to begin assisting you

• Customize your browser

• Download/install software and plugins

**Confidence in Online Learning**: You should believe that high quality learning can take place in an online environment. If you feel that face-to-face interaction is a prerequisite to learning, you may not feel comfortable in the online classroom.

**The Online Learner**

When you walk into a classroom, sitting in one of the desks facing the board is obvious. You wait until the instructor arrives, sometimes chatting to other students. Occasionally, you may participate in group or class discussions by raising your hand; however, the constraints of space and time in addition to the instructor’s presence at the front of the class neatly define the learning space.
Now, imagine that you can enter the classroom at any time day or night; however, you may not be aware of anyone else in the room at the same time. Communication occurs primarily through writing. When you enter the room, you can read messages that others have left and leave your own messages. The course materials are available to read, view and hear.

This second scenario represents the online environment and it can be very confusing for learners who have only experienced the face-to-face classroom. It is our hope that the information about online learning presented in this resource document will help to eliminate some confusion.

A student’ perspective:

"Each semester that I took an online class, I would print out assignments so I could jot thoughts and ideas in the margins. That way I could always see what I was thinking about the assignments. That was a good learning strategy for me.”
Resources


Wetzel, D. R. (2010). 7 Tips for Developing Online Learning Skills: Distance Learning Requires Different Abilities to be Successful. Retrieved February 3, 2012 from website http://www.suite101.com/content/7-tips-for-developing-online-learning-skills-a213415