

Strategies to Succeed in Distance Learning

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This article helps you if you are taking a course as a new distance learner. It also provides tips and ideas to distance instructors to improve their teaching at a distance.

Despite the recent popularity of distance education, only 8% of undergraduate, and 10% of graduate students in institutions of higher education have been exposed to it. Learning at a distance, however, is growing rapidly; in some institutions the number of learners double each year. Others offer distance learning opportunities to their students at a slower rate. New learners, and instructors can benefit from reading this article alike, given the growing popularity of distance education.

Becoming a More Effective Distance Learner

Learning at a distance is similar to conventional learning, but it is sufficiently different to require some time and effort to understand and appreciate its distinguishing features. For example, one of the benefits of distance learning is that well designed programs provide adequate instruction to students about

- how to learn,
- when to study,
- how to know if they are making progress, and
- when to change strategies when progress is not apparent.

Although it is expected of students to learn in conventional schools, rarely they are instructed about what learning is and how they can become aware of their abilities to learn and gradually take more responsibility for their own education. It is simply expected of them to learn. Distance learners, however, should expect adequate instruction on how to learn so that they gradually increase their confidence and level of self-determination and eventually become autonomous learners. Successful learning at a distance requires the ability to reflect about one's learning, and become a responsible and self-directed learner.

As you engage in learning at a distance you must select learning strategies that help you learn better, while becoming more aware of

- What motivates you to learn
- How you think about your learning tasks, and
- Determine which activities are more conducive to your learning.

Learning at a distance, also, includes several other factors that are usually not present in conventional education. In distance learning, very often, there

is:

- Lack of face-to-face feedback from an instructor
- Absence of an immediate peer group
- Learning in isolation, and
- Learning at home or other similar environments where distractions are plentiful.

Getting Started

Distance educators use a variety of media to reach you as a learner. Rarely there is only a single medium involved in distance learning. Print materials, video tapes, and audio cassettes are used by many instructors to reach their learners. Recently, many institutions have adopted the use of a combination of web-based instructional materials and email to interact with students. Many institutions also have installed videoconferencing facilities and teach a variety of courses via this powerful medium.

Depending on the medium of communication that is employed in teaching a course, you have to either own, or be able to access the right mix of technologies to interact with the instructor. It is important that you find out, for example, what is the minimum level of computer equipment and telecommunication requirements for each course or program in which you intend to enroll. Once you have determined the technologies you need, you should consider the environment in which you intend to learn.

While studying, you should be comfortable. This requires that you use proper furniture for your workstation. Preferably, the desk and the chair you use should be adjustable so you can assume a proper posture while sitting for long periods of time to study. [For more information on furniture, lighting and other environmental factors see the U. S. Department of Labor web pages on the subject.](#)

Other factors you should take into consideration include the following:

- Select an inviting and comfortable place to study
- Organize your tools, and supplies in advance
- Make sure you know what instructional materials you need for each course and how you should receive them. For example, if the study guides, and other print materials are shipped to you, find out when to expect receiving them, and what you should do if you did not. Also, if the instructional materials are on an Internet server, you must find out if you need special software, a username or a password to access such materials.
- Decrease possible sources of distraction as much as possible. For example, make sure friends and family know you are studying and should not be disturbed.
- Understand your biorhythm and select a time for studying when you feel you are alert and ready to learn. Periodically, get up and walk or do simple exercises to replenish your body--s oxygen.

Learning Strategies

Now that you have acquired proper hardware and software, and sitting in a comfortable place, you should follow the following simple procedures to establish an effective learning strategy:

- Review the instructional materials and set specific goals for each time period devoted to studying. Be realistic in what you can accomplish at each time interval, and reward yourself with a break when you reach a milestone
- Read the objectives for the chapter or module you are studying first
- Take the pre-test, or read the self-study questions, if they are included in the instructional materials
- Read the abstract, summary, or conclusions before studying the main body of the chapter or module
- Read the glossary and see if you are familiar with the vocabulary
- Skim through the main body of the materials and see how familiar it looks

If you feel comfortable with the new material, you can proceed and achieve new learning goals. Otherwise, you need to prepare better for learning new concepts or skills. This means

- going back to a previous module and mastering it
- reading a book or an article that prepares you better for the new course, module or learning experience
- organizing a self-study group and bringing themselves up-to-speed for the new course, or learning experience.
- taking a prerequisite course first

If you decide to proceed with the new module, chapter or lesson the following tips are useful:

1. Set Milestones

-- It is important that you set a series of personal milestones even if the course you are studying does not require it. When you reach and achieve a specific milestone, reward yourself by thinking that you have successfully reached a new level in your learning.

2. Develop a List of Immediate Interest

Being a responsible learner means accepting new challenges and striving to meet them. If what you are learning is directly related to your interest you are more likely to maintain a high level of motivation for studying and mastering new concepts or skills. Here are some ideas for helping you maintain a high level of motivation.

- Think about the knowledge and skills you are learning now and how they relate to your immediate and long term interest.
- Make a list of skills, ideas, and concepts which are immediately relevant to what you want to accomplish
- Make a list of skills, ideas and concepts which would be relevant to what you want to do in 3 to 5 years
- Develop a list of interests to consider later

3. Develop Good Reading Habits

- When you begin a new lesson ask yourself, what do I want to learn from it--
- Look at the table of contents and the author--s introduction to become

familiar with what is covered in the lesson

- Read the chapter abstracts, or summaries to get a quick idea of what is covered in the lesson
- If you are reading a textbook and need to find something quickly, use the index at the end of most books
- Make reading a habit. By reading more you can become a better reader
- Avoid silent vocalization. If you form the words silently in your mind, it takes longer to read. Try to read with your eyes. It may feel strange at the beginning, but you will gradually get used to it
- Knowing and understanding the vocabulary of a discipline leads to faster reading. Keep a dictionary handy when you read, or refer to <http://www.dictionary.com> to find the meaning of unfamiliar words quickly
- Concentrate on your reading. It is important that you stay away from distraction while you read

4. Take Notes

- While listening to a lecture or reading a text, take notes
- Read your notes immediately after and see if you would like to add to them or make corrections or revisions
- Study your notes periodically
- Compare your notes with others taking the course

5. Rewrite or Paraphrase

- Rewriting or paraphrasing often helps to find out if you have mastered a concept or idea, or need to revisit source materials
- Compare your rewritten material, or paraphrased passages with the original material

6. Determine if You Are Making Steady Progress

- When immersed in a new learning experience, you may lose sight of the progress you have been making all along. Periodically, compare the level of your current knowledge and skills with the level of competencies you had before you started on this new course of study. Realizing the progress you have made is likely to keep you motivated for achieving future success

7. Apply Your Newly Acquired Knowledge and Skill

- Try to implement what you are learning in a safe situation

8. Retain Your Newly Acquired Knowledge and Skills

- As the old saying goes, practice makes perfect. Applying your knowledge and skills once is not enough to keep you motivated for an extended period of time. Make sure that you repeat your performance in appropriate intervals to achieve a higher level of perfection. When you see how well you can do something new, you will remain motivated.

9. Make A List Of Concepts And Ideas Which Interested You The Most and Decide How You Would Pursue Learning More About Them

- Would you ask the instructor
- Is it better to discuss them with your study group--
- Do you need additional resources, books, journal articles, websites, etc.--

10. Make A List Of Concepts And Ideas Which Were Vague, And Unclear

- Decide what would be the best way to clarify vague and unclear concepts
- Would you ask the instructor--
- Is it better to discuss them with your study group--

-- Do you need additional resources, books, journal articles, websites, etc.--

Following these tips and ideas is likely to increase your learning effectiveness, keep you motivated and overcome obstacles you may encounter.

<http://www.distance-educator.com/dnews/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=10461>