

ASPH Technology Watch!

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Study Skills for the Online Student

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The following material includes excerpts from a new, web-enhanced book titled "You CAN Learn Online." It is published by McGraw-Hill.

What study skills do you need?

Certainly, if you go online, you need the same kind of general study skills that any student needs. But the environment of the online classroom and the assumptions behind the design and teaching of an online class dictate an emphasis on certain study skills that you should be aware of. The following is a list of study skills that you at the very least need to have in order to be successful online.

Time Management Skills

Most online classrooms are not bound by the same time and space restrictions of the traditional classroom. Its "anywhere/anytime" nature is both an advantage and a disadvantage. True, the adult balancing work and family has an opportunity now to "take class" at his or her own leisure (though most online classrooms have definite assignment deadlines and attendance policies that depend upon class participation, usually through the threaded discussion board), but that sense of leisure can be the downfall of many a student. You will need to be skillful in prioritizing your time and committing to a consistent study schedule. You will need to be able to "shut the door" on friends and family and sit down in a quiet place, conducive to study, and study. And you will need to be able to assess what the week's work is in a particular online class and divvy out your study time appropriately.

Self-Directed Learning skills

Online instruction is about facilitation, collaboration and student-centered learning. The online instructor has designed the course for those students who do not need a lot of hand-holding. The students are intrinsically asked to be active participants in the class and in determining and resolving his or her own learning needs. You will need to find and sustain your own motivation for taking the class and learning the materials. You must be aggressive in your own learning by applying new knowledge to what you already know, by "connecting the dots," so to speak, between materials in the classroom, the work of the classroom, and the work of the world outside of the classroom. Understanding how the class will ultimately impact your work and family life will strengthen your motivation to stay on task. You must be responsible for understanding the parameters and expectations of the class, for understanding assignments, directions, and assessments. If you do not understand directions or feedback from your instructor, or criteria for assignments, you must feel comfortable directly asking the instructor and/or classmates for clarification. And, finally, you must participate fully and timely in class activities ranging from class discussions that ask you to comment on fellow classmates' work to group collaborations in which each team member is responsible for the success of a project.

Group Work Skills

Facilitation and student-centered learning are based on the theory that adult students learn best by teaching each other and learning from each other. Many online courses are designed so that students are given real-life problem scenarios and asked then as a group to find a solution to the problem. Because the online environment is "anywhere/anytime," logic would have it that group work online would be much easier to accomplish than group work in the classroom where

classmates find it difficult to find the time or place to work together outside of the class. Interestingly enough, group work online can be just as difficult. Group members don't respond to requests to meet online; some group members find themselves burdened by inactive members who shirk their portion of the work. As part of a group, you must be able to communicate effectively online with other members, be able to divide up group work fairly, give useful feedback, and assist in synthesizing the individual work of group members into a final document or project.

Communication Skills Online

An online class becomes a self-paced tutorial when there is little communication built into it. Right now, the online classroom is predominately text-based. You will communicate with your online instructor and classmates through email, written assignments, threaded discussion boards, and chatrooms. Excellent writing skills become a high priority in the online classroom since your ability to "synch" with your online instructor and classmates depends upon your ability to express yourself well in writing. Like it or not, the online instructor will be assessing the quality of your work and your abilities as a student through your writing. Here are some questions you need to ask yourself:

- Do you know how to control tone and voice in your writing? Given the amount of web space given over to "netiquette" rules (rules on the proper way to communicate online) and the use of "emotions" (symbols used online to represent emotions such as :) for a happy congenial smile), a lot of people writing online don't. Jokes, satiric commentary, no matter how well-meaning, and "friendly" admonishments regularly backfire online because not only do people not know how to control their writing but the very anonymity of the online environment makes it harder for people to interpret meaning. There are no physical body cues to advise them.
- Do you know how to respond effectively to discussion questions? Are you the "yeah, I agree with what he said" kind of student? That's not going to make it in the online classroom. Online instructors have found the threaded discussion board to be one of the best teaching and learning online tools available. They are expecting you to read the questions, reflect, inquire, research, organize, and develop your answers. Instead of allowing the writing in a threaded discussion to be "haphazard" or the writing of an early-brainstorming, online instructors are demanding polished, academic writing, the quality of which will help determine the final grade for the course.
- Do you know how to effectively "workshop" another classmate's work? To give constructive feedback? This skill at peer-critiquing becomes vitally important in the online classroom designed for collaborative student learning.

Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking is essential on or off line. A popular categorization of the kinds of thinking that any of us can engage in at anytime is called "The Bloom's Taxonomy." [1] The kinds of thinking are "ranked" from what's called "lower cognitive thinking" to "higher cognitive thinking." Simply memorizing facts and understanding the meaning of things are ranked at the lower end (essential, but not showing the human being off to its highest intellectual ability), while the ability to analyze something or show how parts of different things can be become a new kind of whole or to evaluate something are ranked at the high end. Most instructors are interested in higher cognitive learning--your final understanding of all the content of the course and how it applies to the world around you. Here's an example: memorizing Martin Luther King's speech "I have a Dream" is certainly commendable, but analyzing its implications for the world he lived in as compared to the world you live in now is the higher end of learning. Critical thinking skills comes from developing what is called a "deep approach to learning" [2]

Deep Approach:

- Focus on what is "signified" (e.g., the instructor's arguments).
- Relate and distinguish new ideas and previous knowledge.

- Relate concepts to everyday experience.
- Relate and distinguish evidence and argument.
- Organize and structure content.
- Internal emphasis focusing on how instructional material relates to everyday reality.

Online Research Skills

Do you know how to research the World Wide Web and find academically relevant, sound information and opinion? Do you know how to incorporate research into your written opinion? Many online instructors are finding the WWW to be a valuable resource for up to the date, contemporary information. They are asking their students to go online and search out relevant websites and data-bases and to share that information with the class. Unfortunately, the WWW also contains a lot of "junk," unsubstantiated information put online by the well-meaning, average "shmoe" who simply doesn't have the academic background and understanding of the expert. How do you analyze a website? What makes it a "good" one or not? Do you know how to search the Web efficiently? We have some specific ideas that we will discuss in the next edition. Be sure to check back for our next edition of Technology Watch, ***Web Searching for the Online Student***.

All of this is about teaching you to teach yourself so that you will be able to live out your life, outside of school, with wisdom, understanding, and critical insight.

1. **Carneson, J., G. Delpierre, and K. Masters.** "Designing and Managing MCQs: Appendix C: MCQs and Bloom's Taxonomy." Designing and Managing Multiple Choice Questions--Handbook Aimed to the Staff of the University of Cape Town, South Africa. <http://www.aln.org/alnweb/journal/jaln-vol3issue2.htm>
2. **Engineering Outreach.** 2001. Distance Education at a Glance, Guide #8. College of Engineering: University of Idaho. <http://www.uidaho.edu/evo/dist8.html>