

**The Media Center
What's It Like to Take an Online Class?**

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Online learning is one of the most rapidly growing areas of education. It is expected to continue expanding as more colleges and universities increase their offerings and today's undergraduate students, already comfortable with technology and online learning, begin their graduate and professional development coursework. Online learning has earned a level of respect, no longer being viewed as suspect or just an easy way to earn a credit or grade.

According to the Sloan Consortium, a group of institutions and organizations committed to quality online learning, e-learning is now part of mainstream education:

- Sixty-five percent of schools offering graduate face-to-face courses also offer graduate courses online.
- Sixty-three percent of schools offering undergraduate face-to-face courses also offer undergraduate courses online.
- Among all schools offering face-to-face Master's degree programs, 44 percent also offer Master's programs online.

The 2005 Sloan report also reported a 22.9 percent overall increase in the number of students taking one or more online courses, growing from 1.60 to 1.98 million students.

< Sloan Consortium 2005 report summary, <http://www.sloan-c.org/resources/survey.asp> >

Last spring I visited with three long-time colleagues who, like me, became online instructors. We agreed that teaching online is enjoyable, challenging, and stimulating.

The Online Learning Experience

What's it like to take an online class? In this article we'll hear from graduate students who have taken multiple online courses from several universities, fulfilling a need to earn course credits toward a degree or meet professional development goals. One person stated she had taken 14 online courses, just because she is a "poster-child" for online learning and a true lifelong learner.

Learners are drawn to online learning for many reasons. Mike Weber, a Wisconsin middle school media/technology director, wanted a course that would help him manage his media program. Annette Mikula, a Wisconsin human resources director, enrolled in an online course because her district was discussing online learning. She thought it would give her "a good perspective to actually take an on-line class" so she "could offer the student perspective to the district conversations." Vermont resident Mary

Ann Kadish was drawn to online courses because she wanted to take graduate work in library science while she was teaching out of the country.

Mary Beth Sancome-Moran, a community information librarian in Minnesota, did not purposely seek an online program. But because she was living in rural western Nebraska at the time, she “needed to find a course of study that was completely online. Once I was involved, I enjoyed it immensely.” She eventually learned her entire MSLS online. Pennsylvanian Amey Johnson also received a MLS degree online after enrolling in a program because she couldn’t find a classroom teaching job.

Freedom, Flexibility, Friendship, and Convenience

Whatever their reasons for initially taking classes, all of the interviewees praised the freedom, flexibility, and convenience of learning while also juggling professional and personal schedules. Alfi Velasco-Hurst from Germany said, “I enjoy the ease of taking the classes. Being able to take the class on my own time schedule is wonderful. I can wake up early, complete some assignments, and work at my own pace.” Kadish appreciated the consideration of instructors who allowed her to work around holiday breaks while she was teaching overseas. Weber added, “I was able to work early in the morning or late at night. Many days I came into school early to work and many nights I worked at home.” Johnson wrote, “It was also nice to be in p.j.s with tea while I worked.”

Online learners are enthusiastic about the continuing conversation that discussions provide. Sancome-Moran was in a cohort group and made lasting friendships with classmates, even though they met in person for the first time at graduation. “It also allows me to interact with educators from different states and countries,” she noted. Anne Oelke, also from Wisconsin, described “the wide diversity of students from around the world.” Mikula also enjoyed the “collegiality and rapport that you can develop with the other students. For example, there is one particular student who I have taken 6 or 7 classes with. I feel like I know her and we converse through electronic means.” Student who teach overseas enjoy the opportunity to stay in touch with educators in the U.S.

Mikula added that in the online discussion forums, “all students have an equal voice. Sometimes in a traditional classroom you have one or two students who tend to dominate the classroom discussion and others who say nothing. In this on-line forum everyone is required to talk to each other. I really get a lot from reading what others have to say. . . I gain perspective that I would not have otherwise.” Wisconsin teacher Kurt Wong credits the discussion with improving writing skills. It helped me “sharpen my posts and response skills to people. I am a person who communicates extremely well face to face so this forced me to stretch a bit while dealing with the online forum.”

The potential for frequent feedback from instructors is another positive aspect of online learning. When instructors are in frequent and engaged contact with their students, the level of satisfaction with the course is higher. Students especially appreciate individual feedback and offers of assistance; some students commented on receiving phone calls when instructors recognized they were frustrated or uncertain how about to complete an assignment. Mikula described a top-notch instructor who kept her motivated to learn and was “inspirational in helping me realize the potential within.”

The Other Side

The most negative of the student comments about online learning were about instructors who were unorganized, did not have clear expectations, or were lax in responding to queries. Mary Ellen Cravotta,

who teaches in Germany, noted that when there is a small class there could especially be a limited amount of instruction or interaction. Sancome-Moran said, "That was very frustrating. I would tell a professor teaching an online class to be hyper-vigilant about answering emails and board postings."

Many respondents said they miss the face-to-face aspect of learning even though they thoroughly enjoyed the online interaction. Cravotta said, "I much prefer a real class where you can see and interact with everyone involved. You can also ask questions, see other projects and participate in discussions." The demands of online discussion can sometimes be too much. Minnesota teacher Kim Penrod said she least liked "having to chat about each discussion thread; some people seemed to log in just to see their names in print." Others have learned to just ignore messages from people who are tiresome in their posts.

Conversely, it can be annoying if students do not reply or participate in discussions. One student described a personal frustration. "People seem to be too timid to reply to many of my posts. I have well thought out posts that are often different from some of the prevailing wisdom. Most seem to avoid my posts like the plague." As digital immigrants, some online students are not comfortable with discussion boards and do not always participate eagerly. Weber confessed that he sometimes put off responding until near the deadline. "Unfortunately, this does not lead to great discussions," he said. And all that discussion does "require too much time in front of a computer," according to Julie Greller, a New Jersey media specialist.

Technical glitches are another "least favorite" of online learners, but they recognize such things can happen with any technology and find they have good support from their online colleagues and their colleges' tech support departments.

Tips and Tactics

Most agree that online learning is more work than face-to-face learning. It requires a fair amount of reading, which can be difficult for students who are more visual or aural learners. Johnson said, "It is also more work because you need to type everything and have to choose your words so that others understand them." But, as with anything, you get out of it what you choose to put into it; hard work adds credibility and value to the course. Laura Kruschek, a Wisconsin media specialist, was getting frustrated about an assignment, "wondering if I can't find this, how am I going to complete my activities... and show my middle school kids how to use this? That's how you know you're learning something, when you have to struggle a little. So... thanks for making me struggle." Paul Mugan from Iowa spent a great deal of time on Web design courses and found it worthwhile. "I enjoyed what I was doing and wanted a functional website for my classroom so I was motivated. I had to take breaks just to get out and do other things. When I was finished I had something that has completely changed my teaching."

Successful online learners are disciplined, self-motivated, and organized, and they know how to manage their time. They offered these tips for achieving success.

- Work on the class at least twice a week.
- Start assignments as soon as you get them.
- Participate in discussions.
- Keep track of your time and make sure you have a calendar with the due dates for assignments.
- Work in large chunks of time; a half an hour is generally pointless.

- Make sure you read all the grading and assignment information. Follow instructions. You can get in trouble if you don't.
- Print out the readings or your eyes and back will ache.
- Don't be afraid of new technology and a new venture; there are tutorials, professors, and other students to help you master it. Just ask.
- Work in ways that accommodate your personal learning style.
- Get to know your classmates; they're one of your best resources and can be invaluable.
- Don't be afraid to ask your family for quiet time to work, or do your work when your kids do theirs.

Is online learning—or possibly online teaching—in your future? Given its rapid rate of growth it may very well be. A glance at the e-learning report in a recent edition of *U.S. News and World Report* provides a comprehensive overview of programs at more than 2,800 traditional colleges and virtual universities. (<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/elearning/elhome.htm>, accessed April 2, 2006) The Chippewa Valley Technical College in Wisconsin even has a 12-question quiz you can take to receive instant feedback about your learning needs and styles. (<http://www.cvtc.edu/vcampus/Internet/Quiz.htm>)

Mikula advised educators to give online learning a try. It “may not be for everyone, but given dynamic instructors, students can truly engage in the learning process.” Johnson added, “Enjoy it; you will learn more than just the topic of the course.”

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PULLQUOTES TO USE:

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