5

*The professor needs to understand the adjustment students must make to succeed in an online classroom.*

# Students as Seekers in Online Courses

*Mark Canada*

After twelve years of attending class, reading and studying, writing papers, and taking tests, even the greenest college freshman intuitively understands what it takes to succeed in a classroom. What happens, though, when that classroom is taken away? As online courses become more prevalent, many college students have had to adjust to learning without lectures, without live discussions, and—or so it may seem at times—without live professors. Responding to an informal survey I conducted, several students admitted that taking my online Introduction to Literature course meant changes: "With other classes it has always been the same old same old," one student said. "Upon entering this class, though, everything was different." Of course, students still can succeed in this different environment—as, indeed, this student did—if they make a few adjustments.

Despite this student's initial impression, an online course resembles a traditional course in many ways. In both environments, for example, a teacher guides students through a body of knowledge and skills. Students, in turn, show the teacher—and themselves—how much they have learned by producing something, perhaps a paper or a test. Finally, the teacher evaluates this product, often suggesting ways the student can improve. In other words, education—online or otherwise—is a form of exchange. The only difference between a traditional course and an online course is the form of this exchange: traditional courses are in person with paper; cybercourses are online in pixels. This single discrepancy, however, means that online students must shift their focus in a fundamental way—from viewing the teacher as a source to viewing themselves as seekers.

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## Hardware and Know-How

The most obvious adjustment that online students make illustrates this shift. In traditional courses, a few basic motor skills are often sufficient to interact with the professor. In an online course, on the other hand, even the simple act of asking a question involves skills more advanced than raising a hand. Indeed, I ask students who wish to enroll in one of my online courses to sign an agreement indicating that they will have, before the course begins, access to the World Wide Web and a browser, an e-mail account, and the ability to use these resources, as well as others. Thus, even before they can begin submitting work to me, these online students must take the initiative to acquire special equipment and skills. Although some professors may not expect students to have all of the access or skills I describe, some may expect more. Before advertising an online course, professors may want to draft their own agreement, specifying the knowledge and skills that students must have before the course begins.

## Independent Learning

The online student, however, cannot live by RAM alone. Even more important is the ability to manage time and work effectively (Draves, 1999). Monitored by teachers who may call on them or quiz them, students in traditional courses resemble athletes practicing under a coach's watchful eye; in each case, the individual can rely on immediate—and, in some cases, forceful—external motivation. The online student is more like the pianist in a private practice room; a test will come eventually, in the form of either a recital or perhaps a performance, but the motivation to prepare for that performance must come from within. "I have found that I cannot procrastinate in the completion of the weekly assignments," one of my online students tells me. "As soon as you put the assignment online, I start reading everything I can get on the topic." In writing about this course, other students use words such as "organized," "disciplined," and "self-motivated." Some students, because of their personalities, may be cut out for the independent learning that takes place in an online course. One of my students remarked: "I have never been one who needs much guidance or needs to have a teacher looking over my shoulder." But others must make the adjustment toward better time management if they are to succeed online.

Of course, just a few weeks into their first semester most college freshmen taking traditional courses recognize that they have to take some responsibility and develop effective work habits if they are to keep up with reading and writing assignments. Online students, however, require such independence and initiative simply to acquire the knowledge they are supposed to gain in a course. Although they may not always see it as such, a lecture is a luxury for students in a traditional course. In most cases, students in traditional courses have to read articles, textbooks, or novels out-

side of class, but they often can rely heavily on the professor to review this material, highlight key points, and ask provocative questions. Without this luxury, online students must learn to be seekers of knowledge rather than mere receptacles of it. For one thing, they must approach a reading assignment as they would a lecture. In addition to taking thorough notes that condense the material to key points and illustrations, they should continually ask themselves questions and try to articulate answers. Now in the position of being their own teachers, they may even want to sketch an outline of a lecture they would give to a group of students. Finally, because they do not receive the oral guidance that inevitably accompanies a traditional course, online students may take special care to read the syllabus and all instructions on assignments more than once.

To help students adjust to working effectively as independent learners, professors should emphasize the pursuit of knowledge—perhaps even using words such as "seek" and "explore"—when they communicate with their online students. An assignment might make this point even more forcefully; in the first week, for example, the professor might require students to do some research on a relevant topic and share it with their classmates through an e-mail listserv or an online forum. Finally, to substitute for the questions they ask in traditional class discussions, professors can post a Web study guide, where students can find study questions, lists of terms, and other relevant material. I use such study guides in all of my courses, and I frequently draw on them when creating quizzes, exams, writing assignments, and other exercises.

In part, working effectively involves students' efforts to adapt the course to fit their own learning style. Because they lack lectures, online courses may be hardest on auditory and visual learners, who will have to adjust to learning without listening to a professor's voice, hearing themselves speak in a class discussion, watching a professor's gestures, or seeing material written on a chalkboard. They also may miss audio and visual aids that could augment their learning. In my traditional literature courses, for example, my students and I frequently use maps, musical recordings, videotapes of plays, and photographs of art and manuscripts as we explore literature in historical context. The World Wide Web makes a vast amount of such material available to online students as well, and professors can make it easy for their students to see and hear this material by creating links to it from their own Web sites. Again, however, online students—especially auditory and visual learners—have to train themselves to be seekers. Even if the professor does not require or even mention additional resources, online students should take the initiative to locate and use audio and visual materials to supplement their reading. In addition to running Web searches, they should take advantage of their college library, where they can find maps, and in some cases, videotapes and compact discs.

Some online professors also convey information through e-mail messages and World Wide Web sites, and students should treat these supplementary

materials as essential reading. I use a number of such materials in both my traditional and my online literature courses to explicate poetry, discuss historical context, and outline research methods. Knowing that they can expect me to cover at least some of this material in lectures, group exercises, or class discussions, many of my traditional students probably manage without studying these supplementary readings—perhaps without ever looking at them at all. But my online students must learn the terms and concepts from supplementary readings or not learn them at all.

Some online courses may require students to seek information even outside the assigned or supplementary readings. In such courses, the importance of being a seeker of information is even greater. In my traditional courses, for example, I regularly use class time to define literary terms, such as *persona, lyric poem,* and *Gothic.* In my online courses, however, I sometimes direct students to find these definitions themselves. Online students, thus, should become familiar with credible electronic and print sources, especially subject encyclopedias, and develop the habit of visiting these sources whenever they need to find a definition, clarify a point, or explore a subject in greater detail. Professors can help students find such sources by identifying several in their course materials and offering an optional library session.

If an online course places a greater burden on the students to acquire knowledge, it also requires them to work harder—or at least to work differently—to synthesize this knowledge. In virtually every course, students at some time must make connections, interpret facts, and devise arguments through writing, usually by responding to essay exams or writing papers. But in an online course students may have to write much more often. For example, in my online courses I simulate class discussion by assigning weekly essays, which students post on an online forum. After reading these essays I post an overview in which I affirm strong responses, correct mistakes, and add some of my own insights on the reading. Although some students probably contribute fewer words in these essays—about 350, on average—than they would in a group or class discussion, the medium of synthesizing their ideas in writing presents them with a far greater challenge than oral discussion. Several of my online students have mentioned this challenge to me. One wrote that she had always considered herself "a persistent, dedicated, and driven individual," but revealed that the format of this course tested her in ways she "never thought would be possible." She went on to say: "The assignments were quite clear as they were posted, but they required extensive thought and research." Noting both reading and writing assignments, another student said: "It almost seems there is a trade-off. If you are given the opportunity of an online course and there is no travel time or attendance, then you will pay for this convenience with massive amounts of work. I have thoroughly enjoyed this online course, but to be honest, I feel that for a three-credit hour course, I have worked my buns off."

Thus, in the case of some online courses, students may need to adjust to thinking through and articulating their ideas primarily in writing rather

than through oral discussion. Of course, this format may be a draw for some students. Two of mine have said that they enjoy writing, and one even mentioned that written discussion was a nice change of pace for him because his stuttering problem had inhibited him during traditional oral discussions in other courses. Again, professors can ease the transition. For example, I use e-mail to respond to every student's first writing assignment, noting strengths and areas for improvement. I then periodically respond to later assignments throughout the semester.

## A Personal Touch

Although online courses in many ways force students to work more independently, they also require a greater effort to connect with other people. "The only adverse part of this course," one student lamented, "is that you don't know me and I don't know you. Voices only. When teaching any class, I think the passion and professor's actions communicate a lot about what he or she is attempting to teach. With an online class you miss that." Another student pointed out: "In the classroom, a professor is able to pass on to his students any personal experiences and knowledge that he has encountered in his career. Unfortunately, students in an online course do not have this extra insight that a professor can add to a class."

A human being with feelings, experiences, and maybe even a knack for performing, a professor in a traditional classroom can bring material alive simply by being alive. Furthermore, by connecting with students on a human level, a professor can help a student remain interested and actively engaged in a course, especially when personal pressures may threaten the student's success. Without a personal presence in the classroom, online students should make an extra effort to connect with their professors and classmates. Professors can facilitate connections in a number of ways. At the beginning of my online courses, I invite students to visit my personal Web pages, where they can find news about my family, home, and interests. I also ask them to introduce themselves to me and to each other by submitting a brief note to the online forum. Of course, such electronic connections cannot fully substitute for personal interaction, which professors can encourage by inviting students to visit them during their office hours. More ambitious professors may want to schedule optional or mandatory gatherings to explore library resources, view a videotape or an art exhibit, or simply eat lunch in the school cafeteria and talk. (See Article Seven for additional information on helping students make personal connections in the online classroom.)

## Conclusion

The recent trend in education has been toward the student-centered classroom. Rather than listen to a professor lecture for virtually all of every class, students have become accustomed to seeking, synthesizing, and articulating

knowledge in the classroom. With their emphasis on independent learning, online courses are the culmination of this trend. Professors of these courses can do a tremendous service to their students by helping them learn to take initiative and responsibility—two qualities that will serve them well in their other courses as well as in the rest of their lives.

## Reference

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