

# Confessions of an Online Instructor:

## *What You Need to Know about Online Courses*

By Jo Dervan



**M**any of us are the products of traditional undergraduate and graduate courses. By that I mean that you attended a class in one location with a group of other students and were instructed by a teacher. Some of you may even have taken correspondence courses where coursework was delivered by mail. Others may have taken courses where the lectures were delivered via television (remember *Sunrise Semester*?) and written assignments were mailed to an instructor to grade.

### Online Classes

The Internet has heralded a new form of instruction: the online class. In this instructional mode, most learning is done via the Internet and e-mail. Usually, such courses use Web pages that only registered students may access and that contain objectives, goals, and course work. These pages may be augmented by a text, but often all required materials are available online. Some courses require you to attend an initial face-to-face session with the rest of the class. Others have no residency requirements, requiring you to do all of the work online using your browser and an e-mail program. These courses usually have formal start and end dates.

This latter type of course—the totally online course—is the one that I explore here. This type of course can be taken anywhere in the world where students have Internet access. Work is done at the students' convenience within the time restrictions set up by the instructor. These courses have been a boon to

busy professionals who don't have the time to attend a traditional, face-to-face class. Also, for people in remote locations, such courses have created opportunities to upgrade their professional skills or learn new ones. In some cases, groups of students may take advanced classes in subjects not offered at their local educational institution.

The advantages of these classes are many. Student don't have to commute to class and can fit in course activities during their free time, either at home or at work. Because of the low cost of delivery, such courses are often cheaper than traditional classes.

### The Down Side

Online courses have some disadvantages, as well, however. Students must be self-motivated and able to work without direct personal contact with the instructor. There are often large amounts of e-mail correspondence to read and digest. There can be more work than in a traditional class. If you are an inexperienced Internet user, technical problems may develop and become overwhelming. Finally, there is no human contact with other students, only e-mail contact.

Before you decide to take an online course you should check the goals, objectives, assignments, and technical requirements to ensure that you have the self-motivation and commitment to complete the course. Many schools don't give full refunds to students who "drop out."

Another potential problem with online courses, just as with conventional classes, is the quality of the course itself—all online courses are not created equal. Their quality can vary as widely as the quality of traditional courses.

### Do Your Homework

Before logging onto—and paying for—an online course, prospective students should do some research. There are several indicators of a high-quality course.

A good course should be associated with a college or university program. Its instructors should have some sort of online curriculum vitae; determine the instructor's qualifications before signing up. Knowledgeable online professors should have taken at least one course online themselves. This guarantees that the instructor has some idea of the

obstacles you may face and will be able to guide you through to a solution.

Ask for information about the goals and objectives of the course, so that you can make sure that they meet your needs. Courses titles can be deceiving, and it isn't unusual to discover a few weeks into a course that it isn't what you expected or even wanted. If you have questions, don't hesitate to ask the contact person or the instructor.

Make sure that there's some way to contact the instructor or school by phone or fax if there is some sort of technical problem or emergency. The better schools usually have a technical assistance desk to consult if the instructor cannot solve your problem. If you are not a computer wiz it is helpful to have a friend or co-worker who is. They will be available to help when you encounter glitches.

Find out what methods of communication will be used during the course. Will communication be synchronous (in real time) or asynchronous (available online at any time) or a combination of both? Will you use only e-mail? Will you be asked to use a chat room and a discussion board? If so, are these communication tools going to require

downloads or are they available on the course Web pages?

### Be an "A" Student

Once you've made the decision to register for an online course there are several things that you must do to ensure your successful completion of the course.

▶ *Be honest about your aptitude.* If a course requires intermediate or advanced knowledge and you're a novice, it will be difficult for you to keep up with the rest of the class. Conversely, if you have advanced understanding in a field, but many of the other students are beginners, your wealth of knowledge might frustrate them, and you might end up being bored.

▶ *Make sure that you have the minimum technology necessary to complete the course.* If you don't own a computer, you should have access to one at work. Trying to complete a course using an Internet café or a public access computer may become very frustrating and/or expensive. A reliable PC with sufficient memory, a modem, a printer, a browser (Netscape or Internet Explorer), and at least dial-up access are the bare minimum requirements. Make sure that you have access to any plug-ins and programs (e.g., Adobe Acrobat Reader for PDF files) that may be required.

▶ *Check intermediate deadlines to ensure that they're acceptable.* If you know that you won't be able to complete a course on time, get prior approval from the instructor. Some courses allow for extensions but others are less flexible. Don't assume that it's acceptable to continue to submit assignments after the official deadline.

▶ *Try to register for a course along with another friend or coworker.* You will be able to support each other and work cooperatively if the course allows it.

▶ *Read, save, and possibly print out all Help messages.* This will save you a lot of headaches in the long run.

▶ *Set up your e-mail program with special folders for all incoming class messages.* This will prevent the deletion of important work and make it easier to find things. Most e-mail programs have instructions on how to install folders.

▶ *Once the course has started allow sufficient time each day to check your e-mail.* At the beginning of online courses there's usually a flurry of administrative and help memos. Even after the start-up bustle has slowed, you'll be receiving administrative e-mails, readings, discussions, and assignments to e-mail to the facilitator.

This article is based on my experiences as both an online student and an online instructor/facilitator. I've taken three online courses over a span of three years, and I teach a graduate online course for the University of Northern Iowa. The course deals with the establishment and implementation of an online Professional Development course.

Each semester for the past two years, I've logged onto my computer from New Jersey and communicated with students in the U.S. and around the world. Some of our students are American teachers who are stationed abroad in American schools in embassies, military bases, and foreign capitals. They have access to American college courses only during summers. But UNI also offers fully accredited courses that are available online in the fall, spring, and summer of each year. Students here and abroad can accrue credits for salary increments, advanced standing, and their own professional knowledge.

Most of our online students are enthusiastic supporters of this mode of course delivery. Despite the possible down sides I mentioned above, for many students the advantages of online courses far outweigh the disadvantages. Many take more than one course and some, like myself, become online instructors in the program. Try it! You may like it! **LT**

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#### Heritage Online

many courses for K-12 teachers  
<[www.hol.edu](http://www.hol.edu)>

#### University of Northern Iowa

professional development courses  
<[www.uni.edu](http://www.uni.edu)>

#### Nova Southeastern University

online master's degree for teachers  
<[www.fcae.nova.edu/gtep/online/degreeprograms.htm](http://www.fcae.nova.edu/gtep/online/degreeprograms.htm)>

#### Teachers College Columbia

online courses for educators  
<<http://dlp.tc.columbia.edu>>

#### Pepperdine University

Master's of Teaching with Technology degree  
<[gsep.pepperdine.edu/programs/MAET/omet/set\\_main.html](http://gsep.pepperdine.edu/programs/MAET/omet/set_main.html)>

#### University of North Texas

Master's of Library or Information Science degree in school librarianship or youth services  
<[www.unt.edu/slis](http://www.unt.edu/slis)>