Editor’s Note:
So what are the positive aspects of online learning as perceived by the learners? This chapter was created through a series of individually conducted open-ended interviews with the authors - three adult learners - who have participated in a variety of different online classes offered by different institutions. The focus of the interviews was on those qualities of online learning that they valued and should be incorporated in an online class. The following are their words. To help organize their responses, eight categories were defined after the interviews were completed. Statements were then grouped under the categories to provide an organizational framework for the chapter.

Having a Sense of Autonomy

An online learner is an adult who can and should take control of his/her own learning. A viable online class not only permits the learner to have this sense of control but also is structured so that the individual’s personal development is allowed and nurtured. Individuality is encouraged.

“Distance education has lived up to the expectation I have had for it. My first distance education experience was in 1996, and done entirely via e-mail. The class had a syllabus, texts and assignments, with papers submitted electronically and grades received electronically. My experience with this class was wonderful. I loved the opportunity to sit at my desk and communicate with my instructor. I loved not having to drive somewhere to attend class.”

“In distance education you need to be self-motivated to persist. You need good time management skills.”

“Distance education classes really treat the learner as an adult. You can do it within the other aspects of your life - you can still...
live your life recognizing you have this responsibility but you never have to forego anything in your life because of your class assignments. You can always adjust the time when you do your classwork. You can do it in the middle of the night if necessary. That is a tremendous positive aspect of online learning.”

“Probably the most exciting aspect of distance education for me is the autonomy and freedom that I have. I like being able to find out what I wish to find out when I want to do it.”

“In an online class I find that the intention often is focused on learning and developing throughout the course your ideas and your thinking. It isn’t just focused on passing the examination at the end of the course.”

“As I began to consider switching to an online degree program, the sense of freedom felt great! I felt much less constricted, because I could attend class at home or at work, and on my time. I knew, even before the program started, that being a distance education learner was going to be an excellent way for me to learn.”

**Being Accountable to Each Other**

Taking an online course is not just a private and individual matter. There is a sense of responsibility to help each other through the course. Working together with other learners and having a strong sense of community can make the online course very powerful.

“Getting to help somebody to solve their problem was a very powerful and positive part of the online learning experience.”

“The idea of people dealing with each other’s concerns and questions is a very exciting part of the online learning experience. It means that everyone has to commit themselves to something which then makes it possible for others in the group to respond substantively to each other. In the online learning situation each person says something and makes a contribution to the dialogue.”

“I like online learning when I have the opportunity to explore my own interests in an environment when everyone is doing similar exploration of their interests. The class serves as the meeting place where we can each share our ideas, concerns and problems. In an asynchronous online learning situation you have the chance to think about your concern and the concerns of others in the class throughout the week as you continue to sign on to the class and share your ideas. Learning is more
continuous. In online learning there is a much greater chance that learning will become integrated with your daily life.”

“In an online class where there is a very large group of students I find that I can’t be accountable to the other students - the class is too large. And, this idea of being accountable to the others in my class is so very important for learning. I really like an online class that has no more than 5 or 6 students since I feel that I can get to know the other students and be accountable to each of them. Large online classes can be overwhelming to the learner.”

“Because not everyone is as enthusiastic about the benefits of distance education, it helps me as a learner to be surrounded by other learners who are like me. Those who remain in a distance education program seem to be self-selected learners who thrive in the environment, are positive about it, and motivated to learn.”

“The thing that was most exciting or energizing for me was the interaction with the other students. Every student contributed a piece of their work and described the struggle they were having. And then, the next day, you would find a number of different people had responded to you with ideas from their perspective of how to deal with the problem you had identified.”

Allowing Me To Set a Flexible Schedule

Organizing your “learning time” in your own way, to fit your own schedule and demands, is a wonderful aspect of online learning. It is a demand that is very different than what is expected in a face-to-face class. However, it does demand a degree of self-discipline to do it well. Flexible scheduling can allow learning to occur when you, the learner, are most receptive.

“I love the idea that the course that I was in allowed me to work on course projects when I had opportunities in my own schedule, as opposed to having to be ready to learn at exactly the time that the face-to-face class meets.”

“Flexibility is one of the biggest pluses of a distance education course. Being able to set your own time and place is really great. With three children I know I can babysit and do my class work at the same time. I can even assist them with their homework while I’m doing my own homework. For me, learning is not the highest priority. My family is my highest priority and so online learning fits me very well.”

“I ‘go to class’ when it works into my schedule. Usually I have to be online at least once per day. But, that time can be early in the morning before work, during the day, or late at night. I no
longer have to work my life and that of my family around a set class time in a distant city. And, if I have to miss a day online, there isn’t a penalty; I just make sure I catch up the next day.”

“In being an online learner, it is important to set up a routine for participating. I find it essential to check into the discussion board daily, in order to stay with the flow of the class. There’s usually a lot of text interaction, and it can be difficult to catch up if you fall behind. I read the threaded discussions several times a day - at set times such as my lunch hour and after work - and I usually post my own thoughts either at lunch or in the evening. Threaded discussion is an important tool in the online environment, replicating the class discussion in a face-to-face classroom. It is where the dynamic give and take of ideas happens.”

Expressing Myself in Writing

Online learning is clearly based on the ability to read and write with ease. Being able to clearly express yourself in written form allows you to fully participate in an online learning class. The sharing of ideas between and among the participants is an important and essential characteristic of an online class

“I realize that if I wasn’t so comfortable reading and writing I wouldn’t be nearly as comfortable in an online situation. If I wasn’t a good writer I would be terrified because everyone would quickly see that in me. I think online learning is absolutely oriented toward students who are highly literate, with excellent writing and speaking skills.”

“Since I communicate well both verbally and in writing, this type of class discussion is easy for me. I am not afraid to put my ideas in writing or to share them. It's one of the things, I believe, that makes me well-suited to be a learner in the online classroom. Being able to express yourself in writing, and not being afraid to be involved in discussion, are important concepts for successful participation in online education. It also helps if the online learner is confident in his/her abilities. I believe these characteristics have a direct impact on the quality and rigor of the educational experience.”

“I’m more apprehensive when I write things in an online class. Maybe it’s because I’m very accountable. My ideas are there, in black and white, for others to read. So I’m much more nervous regarding how I should say something. In a face-to-face situation I can phrase things in such a way that my co-learners know that I’m not attacking them - I’m sharing some additional thoughts. However, being critical online is very different. When I am asked to critique my fellow students I am very uncomfortable.”
“In the early part of an online course things seem to be very structured. Comments are very formal. You spend a lot of time checking and rechecking your comments before you post them. However, after awhile you begin to send your thoughts online without going over them. You become a lot more spontaneous in your communication. You don’t read things over 3 or 4 times before posting them. You become more relaxed. At the beginning you assume that since your comments are always available on the online website that your fellow students will be continually going back and reviewing what you have said. However, because of the pressure of the course no one ever has the time to go back and reread things that are posted. This builds over time and you become a lot more spontaneous once you settle down in the online course.”

Interacting With Other Learners

The sense of “group” helps to energize the online learning experience. Interacting with other learners provides an essential form of learning feedback and helps to strengthen the crucial interpersonal aspect of online learning. The opportunity to share your ideas with other learners makes the learning experience very dynamic.

“Writing a major paper online, where everyone - instructor and students alike - can all see what you are doing and provide feedback is incredibly helpful. By the time you are finished writing the paper, with all of the feedback you have received along the way, you have created an excellent paper. Plus, you are able to see the feedback that other students are receiving and what they are able to do with the feedback. You are more willing to accept the feedback from the instructor because you see familiar feedback being given to others in the class. The process is very public in an online learning situation and this can be very helpful to the learner.”

“It’s very frustrating having to read twenty essays written by the students in your online course and then having to comment on each of them. If you have that large a class it makes more sense to group students into small groups so each person can read and provide substantive feedback to three or four others. Small groups in online courses also allow you to develop a stronger relationship with some of the students.”

“Though I enjoy face-to-face learning, having other learners around me for interaction is not an essential ingredient for me to learn. I am an independent learner. I can learn successfully on my own or from others electronically in my courses. I find that devices such as electronic threaded discussions, e-mail interaction, and reading of posted papers works the same for me as actually being in the same room with fellow-learners. I'm not
a person who must be able to see my classmates to feel that I can know them or can learn from and with them.”

“The only thing I have found so far that I do not care for in an online class situation is doing ‘group work’. It's fairly easy to accomplish a group task in a face-to-face classroom, to accomplish it in a timely manner, and to make necessary adjustments if someone isn’t holding up their part. It is more difficult when the course is online and the ‘group’ may consist of learners in different parts of the world and in different time zones.”

Learning to Live With the Technology

The challenge in online learning is to become comfortable enough with the technical components, the medium of instruction, so that it fades into the background. Once the technical part of participating in an online class is no longer a concern it is possible to really get involved with the content. The technical side of online learning should not interfere with the content.

“Using computers for online learning was not a problem for me, as I am not scared by technology. I enjoy "hands on" learning. Also, I use computers daily in my job, and so I just jumped in and tried things - learning by doing. I did have the luxury of "growing with" the system, having started using computers in my work a number of years ago. Therefore, I've learned about using a Windows platform, how to e-mail, how to use "chat," etc. over time, rather than having to learn it all at once.”

“One of the frustrations with online learning is having technical problems. I have had situations where I have written an extensive reply and then accidentally hit a wrong key and it has disappeared forcing me to have to try and rewrite it.”

“In my case it was different. I was already familiar with many of the technical things that might be found in distance education (teleconferencing, online discussions, interactive television). That gave me a lot of comfort prior to starting the class. I was sure what I was getting into before the fact.”

“I have found that I enjoy learning new things, and enjoy using the computer to do it. I'm not a great engineering mind - I don't always understand how something really works - but I do enjoy using the technology.”

“I was quite apprehensive because I'm not a computer person. I find it a necessary evil. I assumed that you had to be very savvy and loved to use the computer and had to be highly technical. I think when people of my generation return to school they're not comfortable with all of that technical stuff. I did find that the course didn’t require an exceptional knowledge of computers -
you only had to do certain basic things. Things that were required were very simple. My fear of technology really wasn’t actualized. I think it’s important to make that clear to a person before taking an online course.”

“It is important to be aware that technology should not take "center stage," but should take a back-seat to the content of what is being learned. The focus is not the technology, but the learning. The technology enables the learning, and should become "invisible" to the learner once he or she has mastered it.”

**Giving Structure To the Learning Experience**

Being at a distance from the instructor presents the potential for learners to become lost or removed from the progress of the course. It is important for the instructor, ahead of time, to carefully think through the structure that is needed to guarantee that all learners will be able to move through the course at a similar pace with no one being left behind. Appropriate structure is essential in distance education to help compensate for the separation between the learner and the instructor.

“I like having some degree of time pressure. If I am too relaxed, if the course is too flexible, I won’t accomplish as much. There must be a balance between flexibility and structure.”

“I do think it is important for a distance education course to have structure. I have a high degree of internal motivation, and can pace myself to finish course work by the end of the time period allotted for the course. There should be a syllabus, due dates, course expectations. However, the course structure should be broad enough not to replace the opportunity for the learner to incorporate his/her own internal structure. I think this is why distance education courses/programs that are asynchronous are the ones that appeal to me.”

“It was very positive to have a syllabus that went from week to week with very clear assignments along the way. If I missed the deadlines I would be out of the loop. I felt very responsible to the others in the group to not get out of the loop and to be there to carry my own weight in the course. The instructor’s role was a matter of consistency. He made sure that the online course continued on in a very steady and purposive way. It was then up to us, the students, to make sure we stayed up with the course and to add our substantive input.”

“I liked the idea that the course had a combination of specific structure (deadlines) and also lots of flexibility. I knew that I had to complete my assignment prior to Monday - when the new topic would be introduced. I could be flexible all week long but I
had to be finished with the topic and ready for the new topic on Monday. Otherwise I would be terribly behind in the conversation that was going on in the class. And, in an online class I couldn’t hide - everyone would know I was behind and hadn’t done the assignment. If that happened my learning would drop and I would feel very uncomfortable. This kept me very motivated. It was up to me. The instructor didn’t have to penalize me - I would end up penalizing myself.”

Valuing the Role of the Teacher

Online learning does not replace the instructor. Though the technology is powerful, the role of the instructor is still essential – maybe even more than in a face-to-face class. A good instructor can make the online course a success.

“The instructor tried to make the dialogue more viable. He responded immediately. He was very affirming of whatever the students would say. He was quick to tell students their ideas were good. He worked to try and make it like a conversation. Nevertheless, maybe because of the fact that it was asynchronous and had a time delay, it simply never happened - it never became very spontaneous with the students really contributing their full thoughts.”

“When the instructor clearly loves teaching and loves the material that he is teaching - that comes through very clearly. It is very obvious when the instructor knows the material really well.”

“As an adult you are always looking for insights into how to use ideas - how to apply the learning. Online learning should help to open doors for us. We are not just learning as an intellectual exercise. We are trying to better our life and that should be recognized by the online instructor. The instructor should be ready for those questions that always come toward the end of the course - what am I going to do with this information.”

“The instructor was always very quick to respond to comments that I made - he was very positive. He gave very specific instructions. It was clear what we were supposed to do.”

“I like the way instructors provide a variety of online links that allow you to pursue topics outside of class. The instructor in an online class is able to provide links to learning resources that allow you to explore and to go to places where you have never been. This is very exciting.

“I have found a lot of concern and genuineness on the part of the instructor in my online classes - wanting us to learn. I didn’t
feel like he was just doing a job. That type of feeling is really important for the learner to have in an online situation.”

**Conclusion**

From the words and comments made in this chapter, turning to the learner for insight into how to create a powerful online course seems to be a most logical thing to do. Then, why do we so seldom turn to the learner for such insight? The student is often overlooked, or at best, the last component in the teaching-learning environment that is called on to make input. The eight categories that emerged from these interviews all share a common element – they emerged from a desire on the part of these learners to share what it **feels like** to participate in a powerful and well organized online learning experience. Interestingly, these categories are not defined in terms of specific strategies and techniques that should be done to make an online course effective. Instead they are written in terms of the learner’s feelings associated with his/her meaningful and valued participation in an online environment. There is no prescription included that specifies how the educator should proceed. The challenge to the distance educator is to understand the **feelings** expressed by these learners – having a sense of autonomy, being accountable to each other, allowing me to set a flexible schedule, expressing myself in writing, etc – and then creating a distance education learning environment that allows such feelings to flourish.