

Chapter 12

A Guide for the Distance Education Learner

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This chapter is a bit different – it is written to the distance education learner and not the educator. It focuses on four areas that are essential to the learner for a successful distance education experience: personal commitment and motivation, familiarity and attitude toward technology, communication skills and preferences, and personal support systems. Also included are ideas about the role of student services and the importance of assessing the institution's commitment to the distance learner. It has been included in this book to provide the educator with a clear view of those skills and competencies that the learner must possess in order to be successful.

Overview

So you've decided to take a distance education course. It's just another course, right? Well, not exactly. Distance education can be an exciting and wonderful way to learn, especially if time and location constraints dictate your life. There are, however, a number of things you should consider before taking a distance education course or enrolling in a program. The following discussion is intended to provide you with a set of questions and tools you can use to assess your understanding of distance education, the meaning of learning at a distance and some other key considerations.

We as learners sometimes fail to recognize our own immense responsibility and commitment required for the learning process to take place. It is easy to place the responsibility for learning on the instructor, the environment, or the institution. What this accomplishes, however, is giving up control over our own learning. In order to have a successful learning experience, it is critical you retain control and take ownership over your learning experience. It is important that you truly understand your own learning objectives, style, and expectations, as well as take steps to address any potential concerns. No one can be better equipped to evaluate your own learning process than you.

With this understanding as background, there are four questions that will form the basis for this Guide. These questions are:

- *What do I need to know before deciding on a distance education course or program?*
- *What set of personal skills do I need to be successful as a distance learner?*
- *What support services should I expect from my institution?*
- *How can I further develop my skills as a distance learner?*

What is Distance Education?

Distance education or distance learning can be any type of instruction that is centered on bridging time and/or location limitations via the use of technology. It is important to define what type of distance education course or program you are taking, as this defining will greatly determine how you approach your learning experience. There are a variety of delivery methods used. The most common are interactive television courses, satellite, audio conferencing, Internet and telecourses. Your instructor may also opt to use a combination of these technologies and will structure the course or program in a synchronous or asynchronous format or may select a combination of delivery formats.

It is important to understand the differences between asynchronous and synchronous formats from the standpoint of your expectations and responsibilities as a learner. If your course or program is being offered synchronously, the instructor is assuming that he or she and all learners will be available to interact together at the same time. With this format you will be expected to be somewhere, whether it be in an actual classroom or on-line, at the appointed time for your class-at-a-distance. On the other hand, asynchronous learning assumes learners are available for instruction only at times that are convenient to each individual. Learners are able to study, send, and receive information on their own time schedule. Whenever you have available time for participating in the course, you are able to participate.

Make sure you know how the course will be delivered to ensure you know ahead of time what will be expected of you. You may assume that because it is a distance education course there, will be no specific time or location requirements placed on you – an asynchronous course. Look again. In some cases, courses offered as distance education use technology for certain portions of the course and then also require students to meet on-site on specific days and times for seminar discussions. Take the time to find out in advance how the course will be offered and what will be expected of you. Most importantly, evaluate whether the course format will realistically fit into your own schedule.

Personal Commitment and Motivation

- Why am I taking this class?
- What really motivates me?
- Are my time management skills strong?
- What is my level of commitment to learning?

To ensure a successful distance education experience, one of the very first things you need to explore is your motivation and commitment to learning. Similar to any other formal learning experience, self-discipline and self-direction are essential, but learning at a distance will emphasize these skills even further. For the most part, you are in a situation where you and you alone manage and budget your time. It is essential you understand the relevance of these skills and are able to recognize your level of commitment to the process. Without self-discipline and self-direction skills you may find that a distance education course is an inappropriate learning activity for you.

There are a whole host of reasons why individuals participate in programs that allow them to learn at a distance. Most of them center on specific time and location constraints. Many

individuals believe that distance education will save time. To an extent it does. You may not be required to spend several hours driving to arrive at a specific location or perhaps you won't have to leave work early to ensure you will arrive at class on time. These are all very valid reasons. However, check your thinking, especially if you believe distance education in and of itself will save you time. In many cases, distance education courses tend to take up more time than a traditional on-site or in-person class.

Some individuals take a course or program by distance education with the belief that it will require less time and commitment or that it will somehow be easier than a traditional face-to-face course or program. Quite the contrary! Not that the material will be any less or more difficult, but it will require you to stay committed and schedule your time accordingly. You will be amazed at the amount of reading you are expected to do and the amount of interaction you will have with both your instructor and classmates. Please don't make the mistake of thinking you won't have to work hard. Your instructor and classmates will have certain expectations of you, and you will be expected to fulfill them.

Given this criteria, ask yourself how disciplined you feel you are. Do you generally tackle projects and immediately get things done before the deadline or do you have a tendency to wait around until the last minute and then scurry to get it done? Be careful. Make sure you are allotting appropriate amounts of time for your coursework, and you are doing it all along the way. Remember in a traditional classroom you may spend 3 to 4 hours in class per week and then an additional 6 to 8 hours outside of class reviewing the material presented and working on assigned projects and readings. This general time allotment doesn't change just because you are not physically sitting in a classroom at a prescribed time and place. You will spend 3-4 hours reading and familiarizing yourself with the initial content and then another 6-8 hours working toward a true understanding of the presented material.

Study habits and time management skills are not something you learn in a few hours. These skills take time and personal commitment to develop. Chances are you have spent many years developing these skills and continue to enhance and master them. Remember in a distance education environment, because in many cases you are not being asked to be anywhere at any specific time, it is easy to procrastinate. Don't let the lack of boundaries fool you. You will be expected to read what others have to say, comment on what they have said, and most importantly, to be prepared. If you are not prepared and do not keep up with the material, not only your instructor, but also others in the group will know it. Not only are you placing yourself at a disadvantage, you are doing a disservice to the others in the group. By not contributing and being prepared, you are reducing the exchange of ideas and diminishing the experience for everyone else in the course.

Although there are plenty of good reasons to take a class, probably the best reason is because you have a genuine interest in the material. By being genuinely interested, you will be more likely to concentrate on content rather than the mechanism by which it is being delivered. Chances are you will also be enthusiastic about exploring the many resources that will be available to you. For those less interested in the content, they may become distracted by the format and less enthusiastic about the actual content and the opportunity to learn. In fact, a real warning sign that a distance learner is losing interest in a course is when he or she becomes most concerned about the media or technology being used for delivering the course and much less concerned about the content. There are many, many benefits to learning at a distance, but learning at a distance requires discipline. You are way ahead of the game if you genuinely want to understand the material and see the format as simply a vehicle to transmit that information.

Technology

- Do I own or have access to the technology necessary for the course?
- Am I comfortable with my skill level?
- Do I have appropriate technical support?
- Do I have a positive attitude toward technology?

If you are enrolled in or planning to enroll in a course or program via distance education, your interaction with technology is about to increase. It is essential you have access to all the necessary equipment that will be required. Without it, you simply won't be participating in the course. Sounds rather logical, but sometimes we don't always think things through thoroughly before engaging in a new activity. For example, do you own a computer? If so, does it have all the necessary software needed for the class? If not, do you know where to purchase it and how to install it? What about access to the worldwide web? Do you have an Internet service provider? Will it be OK if you're tying up the phone line while on the Internet? Should you consider a second line? If you don't own your own computer, do you have convenient access to one that will serve your purpose? Most of the specific equipment is relatively easy to acquire or access, but the key is making sure these things are in place before you actually begin the course. It will be extremely frustrating if you are still working on your plan for accessing equipment while the other learners are moving forward with the course material and assignments.

Once you have enrolled in the course or program, make sure you understand the instructor's expectations. It is important you understand the basic elements of the technology that you will be using and possess basic computer skills. You won't be required to know all about the wires and cables and specifics about the hardware, so don't get unnecessarily concerned if you're not a technical genius, but do be sure you know how to use the technology. More than likely you will be expected to know how to send and open attachments, sign on to listservs, use basic word processing applications and be able to navigate the worldwide web with relative ease. If these are new skills for you, then plan on some practice beforehand.

Many learners in distance education environments comment on the importance of keeping up with the material. We have discussed this concept and will continue to discuss it in terms of your academic performance, but it is also important from a technical standpoint. Learners comment that they find that if they don't keep up with the required technical skills on a regular basis, they find that they may have forgotten how to use some of these skills when it is essential to their progress in the course. Remembering passwords, particular sets of directions for locating a special website, a sequence of actions needed to find a pre-set location on a DVD, or a program for a modem to dial a particular computer can all be skills that can be forgotten when not used. Learners find if they have waited too long in-between sessions, they may have to relearn certain skills. Practice with and using the technology often may not make you perfect, but it will certainly keep you proficient and will save time that can be used for learning content.

So what happens when you have technical problems? We all know that technology is a tool and can break down. Consider your reaction to basic technical problems you may encounter on a daily basis. When the VCR at home doesn't work correctly or the copier at the office jams, do you generally fix the problem or do you walk away in frustration and wait for someone else to fix it? Your reaction to common everyday technical frustrations can be a cue to how you might react while working with technology as a tool for learning. Frustration levels can increase dramatically

if you have an assignment due and you are having difficulty logging onto the worldwide web or you can't remember how to access the discussion page for your class. These things all happen, and although you may not be able to avoid the problem itself, you certainly can develop mechanisms that will help diminish the frustration you may feel.

First and foremost, make sure you've given yourself ample time to complete work assignments. Second, make sure you are aware of the technical support available to you through your institution. Is there a toll free number (email address, online technical support material) you can use to reach a technical support person? Is the service available 24 hours a day or just during certain hours? Are the technicians specifically assigned to work with distance education learners or do they provide technical support for the entire institution? This last question is important to confirm. Sometimes technical support personnel are well trained in the use of computers and software but may not be trained to address the specific needs of the distance learner. Although useful and necessary, do not rely wholly on the technical support provided by your institution. Enlist a friend, co-worker, or family member to help out when you encounter technical problems. It is better to have a network of individuals who can provide you with information than to go it alone. And finally, don't let your inexperience with technology deter you from enrolling in a distance education course or program. Remember that technology is a tool and it can be mastered.

Communication Skills and Preferences

- Are my reading comprehension skills strong?
- Am I comfortable with others reading my work?
- Am I able to transfer my ideas into words fairly well?
- Do I like to learn by participating with others in a group?

Our ability to receive the ideas of others and to express our own ideas to others is essential if we are to be a good learner. In the distance education situation there are some very key limitations on how we receive and express ideas. It will be important to make sure that we are not constrained by these limitations. Sitting in a face-to-face learning situation – the regular classroom – is usually dependent upon our ability to listen and speak. Learning via distance education – the virtual classroom – is very different and we are dependent on our ability to read and write. At first this difference may not sound like a major shift. However, it can be very frustrating if we are not prepared for it.

A considerable amount of the coursework in a distance education program demands that you read it. Though we tend to think of distance education in terms of the technology that is used, the bottom line is that reading is usually the foundation of the course and the information we receive. And when we are not reading we are probably sharing our ideas by writing them to others. Yes, there are exceptions to this characterization such as conference call sessions, satellite video programs, or correspondence via compact disc recordings. However, even these exceptions rely heavily on printed material to support concepts that are presented and to provide needed structure to ensure that each learner stays clearly on track. Without good reading and writing skills you may find that the distance education course that you are taking is very frustrating and hard for you to maintain the pace.

It is always a good idea to do some testing of the water, that is, try some distance communicating before actually signing up for a course. Sure, you send emails back and forth like everyone else.

However, this time try to do some “academic” emailing. Find the email address for the instructor of a distance education course you might consider enrolling in. Compose an email that tells the instructor a bit about yourself and ask some key questions. Was it easy to compose the email? Difficult? Did you reread your email? Did it still make sense? How could you have improved your email? After you receive your reply, read the response carefully to see if all of your questions were answered. Does the instructor’s response make sense? Are there additional areas that you should respond to? Does the email you received make you want to take a course from this instructor? Why? Why not?

Another “academic” practice exercise can be similarly carried out with some other learners. Think of a person you know who has taken a distance education course. Instead of calling this person on the phone and asking about the experience, email him or her in the same way that is described above. You should again be able to get a good idea of how comfortable you are with using email for sharing information in a more formal or “academic” setting. You will be developing a good sense of what a distance education learning environment can feel like.

When communicating in a face-to-face situation, we have the advantage of being able to sense many different cues that let us know how our message is being received. These cues help us understand when we can trust the other person, when we feel we can share ideas more openly, and when it is important that we respond in certain ways. In the distance education situation these cues may be entirely absent. Without this form of feedback it becomes difficult to understand how to shape our messages. We run the risk of saying things that may get misinterpreted and misunderstood. Distance education demands a considerable amount of trust in the others with whom we are communicating. Trusting others in the class and developing comfort in having others read what you have to say can be a real key to your success as a distance learner.

The learning that goes on in a distance education course is often built on a reciprocal relationship. If we would like to receive feedback from the others in the class, it is important for us to reciprocate by responding with our feedback to their ideas. In a truly reciprocal relationship each person in the course is responsible for sending and receiving ideas, offering his or her thoughts and reflecting on the thoughts of others, providing constructive feedback to others and receiving feedback in a positive manner, and generally viewing the entire experience as a learning partnership that is built on the skills of reading and writing.

Personal Support Systems

Have I shared with my friends or family the idea that I may be taking a distance education class?

Do I understand when I may need the help of others to be successful in a distance education class?

Becoming involved in learning at a distance is going to force you to make some shifts in your life. They may be as simple as merely rearranging your schedule a bit or they may be very complex calling for you to end your involvement with certain activities and greatly reducing your commitment to others. In all of these decisions, it will be very comforting to know that your family and friends are supportive of what you are doing and willing to help, if called upon.

If we are the only ones to be affected by these shifts, it would be fine. However, the reality is that

there are many others around us who will also be affected by our decision to take a distance education course. It will be important that these significant people in our lives understand and encourage the decision we are making. And the way to enlist their support is to involve them in your decision to learn at a distance at a very early time. From the very beginning it is wise to share your thinking with others. Do they think it is a good idea for you to try a distance education course? What cautions do they have for you? Have they had similar experiences that they could share with you? Do they know of others who you should speak with? Keeping your family and friends updated with your latest thinking is a good way to ensure their help later on when you may really need it.

Exactly what is a support system? A support system can be many things. For a learner, though, the most important thing that we hope that a support system can provide is the emotional support that will help us be successful in our learning endeavor. A viable support system consisting of family and friends will know when we need quiet time to work on assignments, telephone time to be online, or a friendly ear to hear about the things we are learning. A solid support system will give you a feeling of strength knowing that you are not standing alone at the end of a long distance communication network.

How can they help? A well functioning support system of family and friends will be able to give you the freedom to go about your learning agenda without feeling guilty about reducing your time with them. They will be available to encourage you when needed and to make suggestions for helping you past road blocks. Ideas of where to find local learning resources, advice on topics for a term paper or strategies for analyzing a problem, or reading the first draft of a paper you are working on can all be excellent functions for a support system.

Once we recognize the value of a support system in being successful at learning at a distance, it will also be important to recognize the need for the relationship to be mutual. To sustain our support system it must be a two-way street. Asking for a special favor of our family members is so much easier if we regularly look for ways to openly express our appreciation for their help. If we know that we will have to spend a number of evenings locked away with our CDs, books, and computer, we can balance ahead of time with evenings we spend with them. The distance education adventure can turn into a very consuming activity – consuming of time, friends, and relationships. So, be sure to nurture these relationships, so they will continue to be there for you long after the distance education experience.

Causes for Attrition and their Solutions

This topic is not enjoyable, but it has to be said! *The attrition rate – dropout rate – in distance education courses is considerably higher than in regular face-to-face courses.* Why? There are two key reasons why people drop out of distance education courses. One, they do not know what to expect when they enrolled in the course. Second, the anonymity that comes along with a distance education course lets them “sit in the back of the virtual classroom” and not participate.

Hopefully this guide will help you develop a stronger sense of exactly what will be expected of you in a distance education course. Carefully think through your decision. Sure, the distance education approach may be considerably more convenient for you. However, will your learning style work well with what is demanded by distance education? Do you sense that you have the personal commitment and motivation that is needed? Are you familiar with technology to the point that you can use it with ease? Are you comfortable communicating by reading and writing?

And do you have the support of friends and family to help you when needed? If you feel that you are able to effectively deal with these concerns, then you will have successfully avoided the first reason why people dropout – you really do know what to expect.

About anonymity, yes, sitting quietly in the back of the room can be very acceptable at certain times. However, in distance education courses it is important to carefully select those times. And during the other times, it is essential that you be active and fully participate in the class. No one will call out your name loudly to force you out of your anonymity. No, it will be up to you to step forward and to assume an active role. Try keeping a small diary, so you can jot down a few reflections after each segment of the distance education program. How did you do? Did you try to find at least one opportunity to send a question, share a thought, or respond to the ideas of some one else? If you didn't, what was holding you back? If a bulletin board is available for the class, have you been able to regularly read the postings of others and add your own thoughts? Becoming less anonymous takes a bit of work but is certainly achievable!

Assessing the Institution's Learning Environment

Now that we have discussed how critical it is to assess your personal style and have examined the personal responsibilities and level of commitment you need for a successful distance education experience, it is equally important to assess what your institution will do to help you be a successful distance learner. Institutions offer degrees and programs by distance education because they recognize that you, the learner, are insisting on more convenient formats that accommodate your schedule and lifestyle. They recognize that you are also insisting on quality. Your institution's level of commitment to quality will be reflected not only in the type of faculty or instructors teaching in the distance education environment, but also the type of services that are provided to you. It is amazing how many resources are available to learners particularly if they have taken classes in a more traditional format on a traditional campus. You have access to academic advisors, library services, career information, and financial aid. Many times it is easy to take these things for granted, until you are separated from these services by distance. The last thing you want to do is spend countless hours trying to take care of the operational details such as enrolling or getting your books. You want to have easily accessible services.

Not sure exactly what questions you should ask of your institution? The following is a suggested list of questions that you should consider asking. The key is to anticipate areas of concern, ask questions, and make sure you understand what is available to you.

How do I register? Is there a toll free number?

How do I pay my tuition bill?

What type of technical support exists?

What are the hours of all of the students services available to distance learners?

Is there an orientation I must attend?

How do I access library services?

How do I get my books?

What type of advising and/or counseling services are available?

What if I need a tutor?

Are there different costs for distance education courses?

What computer and/or software will I need?

Is there financial aid available specifically for distance learners?

Is there an institutional/departmental/program website available?

