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Debunking the Myths of Online Education



❖ INTRODUCTION

The first task of this text is to ensure that students have a realistic understanding of what it means to be an online learner. It is not unusual for students new to online education to feel uncertain regarding what lies ahead. There may be an initial apprehension about the quality of online education, the relationships that will be developed with instructors and fellow students, or the difficulty of learning the technologies or maintaining the discipline necessary to be successful. At the other extreme are those who walk in with inaccurate beliefs about the ease of online education and as a result do not dedicate enough time to their coursework. Research has shown that students who know what to expect of their online classes are more likely to be successful in their studies.¹ This chapter therefore aims to help you get your bearings as you first begin your online schooling by addressing eight common myths:

- Taking online courses is “settling” for a lesser-quality education.
- I am feeling overwhelmed; online learning must not be for me.

- I don't know my way around a computer: I can't do this!
- With online education, I am "going it alone."
- I am online all the time: This will be easy!
- Online learning requires less time than traditional education.
- Since this is an online course, I can complete the coursework whenever I want.
- My online coursework will not be respected by others.

❖ **MYTH #1: TAKING ONLINE COURSES IS "SETTLING" FOR A LESSER-QUALITY EDUCATION**

Many students enroll in online classes due to necessity rather than choice. They may live in a rural area and therefore have difficulty accessing a brick-and-mortar campus, or may have to undergo medical treatments that preclude their ability to travel to campus to attend class at a set time each week. Those who are struggling to balance multiple obligations, from single moms to the active military, may find themselves in an online classroom because they feel that it is their only reasonable option for pursuing a degree. Those whose first choice would be to travel to a physical campus may feel an initial disappointment at the need to "settle" for online classes.

Still, the growing consensus is that online learning can rival, or in some cases surpass, the levels of quality and student satisfaction found on brick-and-mortar campuses. The content of the online curriculum is often quite comparable to that found in face-to-face classrooms in terms of assignments and material covered, but the online platform facilitates a broader array of delivery styles and a greater level of interaction among students.

Between the uncompromised quality and the ease and flexibility inherent to being able to access the "classroom" from anywhere with a stable Internet connection, students are increasingly turning to online education by choice rather than necessity. A number of studies have indicated that students feel they receive a higher quality of education or learned more in the online format than in their traditional courses.² Some studies comparing students enrolled in the same class in face-to-face relative to online format have found "a greater degree of satisfaction with the delivery of online courses"³ as a result of these benefits.

❖ MYTH #2: I AM FEELING OVERWHELMED; ONLINE LEARNING MUST NOT BE FOR ME

Many students initially feel a bit apprehensive as they enter their first term of online classes, experiencing some combination of fear and excitement.⁴ Those who are returning after an extended period of time away from formal education, or those who plan to juggle their schooling with other responsibilities, may be particularly nervous. They may have concerns about navigating the online classroom, keeping up with the workload, or dedicating the necessary time to their coursework. The good news is that this initial apprehension is entirely normal. It is not unusual to feel uncertainty when adjusting to something new, just as with starting a new job, moving to a new town, or any other new venture.

The apprehension that may surround your first weeks in the online classroom should be embraced as a natural part of taking on a new challenge—simply a stage to work through on the way to achieving academic goals. You have likely used good reasoning in registering for online courses. Perhaps you hoped to improve your computer literacy, find a way to balance your schooling with other obligations, or avoid a costly and lengthy commute. Those who are willing to persevere through these early weeks will reap rewards in the flexibility of the online format and the reduced or eliminated need to travel to a campus.⁵

To ease your transition, take advantage of any orientation materials provided by your school, and take some time to explore the other resources at your disposal, including your school's Web site (see additional guidance in Chapter 2). Understand that it will take some time to adjust to the workload and integrate your schooling with your other responsibilities, but this transition period will pass. Before you know it, you will be feeling at ease in your new environment, and it will have been worth the effort.

Learning Tip: As you acclimate to online learning, take things one at a time, and don't be afraid to use the resources available to you.

❖ MYTH #3: I DON'T KNOW MY WAY AROUND A COMPUTER: I CAN'T DO THIS!

Students who are new to computers may feel particularly nervous about their foray into online education. Becoming a successful online learner involves not only an adjustment to the nature of college

coursework but also the ability to navigate the necessary technology, as well as the classroom Web site.⁶ Basic skills, such as the ability to conduct searches on the Internet, perform basic computer maintenance, and create, format, and save new documents, will be necessary to stay involved in online courses.

Being new to something is no reason to give up; in fact, it should serve as extra motivation. Basic computer skills are a prerequisite for many positions in the current workforce; by taking some time to learn basic computer skills, you can improve your job marketability before you even complete your first online course. There are plenty of tools available to support those who are new to computers. First, use your contacts—reach out to other students or your main contact at the school to ask whether school-specific materials are available to help you become familiar with the necessary technology. If one of those individuals is willing to walk you through navigation of the online classroom, take them up on the offer, and take lots of notes to facilitate your ability to follow those steps on your own. Also be sure to secure the contact information for technical support.

There are also publicly available resources available to assist those who are new to computers. Local job centers or community colleges may offer computer classes that are free or low-cost. Online tools are also available. If you aren't familiar with how to navigate the Internet, ask someone—perhaps a friend or a librarian at your local library—for assistance in visiting the following sites:

- <http://tech.tln.lib.mi.us/tutor>—This tutorial covers how to use a mouse for those who are entirely new to computers.
- <http://www.gcflearnfree.org>—This site provides free online tutorials on computer basics including how to perform computer maintenance, navigate the Windows operating system, and use Internet, e-mail, and common programs such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel.

❖ **MYTH #4: WITH ONLINE EDUCATION, I AM “GOING IT ALONE”**

As of fall 2007, nearly 4 million students were taking college courses in the United States alone.⁷ As an online student, you are part of a growing academic community of those who consider turning on a computer to be an integral part of “attending class.” Still, as you sit down in the

Figure 1.1 Goodwill Offers Free Online Computer Classes

The screenshot displays the GCF LearnFree.org website interface. At the top left is the GCF LearnFree.org logo. To its right is a testimonial: "I really learned a lot in this course! I knew a little about Excel, but this course has definitely enhanced my skills and will definitely increase my productivity at work." attributed to "-Ollie Learner Memphis, Tennessee". On the top right is the Goodwill Community Foundation International logo and a "Sign In" link. Below the header is a breadcrumb trail: "Home > Computer Training". The main content area is titled "Computer Training" and includes a sub-header "Free Online Classes" with a link to "View our complete list of classes and learn with the help of an online instructor." Below this is an illustration of a person at a computer. The main content is organized into three columns: "Getting Started" (listing Computer Basics, Windows, Internet Basics, Email Basics, Internet Safety, Mozilla Firefox, and Facebook 101), "Using Office Software" (listing Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access, Office, OpenOffice.org, Outlook 2003, and Publisher 2003), and "Exploring Life" (promoting the Work & Career Section). At the bottom, there is a footer with navigation links: "Our Story | Site Map | Terms of Use | Accessibility | Privacy | Support | Spanish | Blog | Donate" and a copyright notice: "©1998-2009 Goodwill Community Foundation, Inc. All rights reserved."

silence of your living room, click into your classroom, and unlike a traditional class see no face aside from, perhaps, your own reflection on the computer screen, it is easy to feel a sense of isolation. If you are surrounded by others who are not in school, you may also feel as though nobody else grasps the extent of the responsibilities on your shoulders, or the stress of meeting academic deadlines.

The truth is that as an online student, you are not alone by any measure. Investing some initial time in clicking around the classroom and other parts of the school Web site will reveal a robust network of resources in place to support you. First and foremost are instructors, whose contact information can typically be located in the classroom or other course-related communications such as e-mails. Instructors are familiar with the learning curve experienced by students new to online learning and are often happy to assist; don't hesitate to reach out to them with questions. Most schools will offer a multitude of other

resources as well; while the specifics will vary by institution, they may include mentors, tutors, and/or technical support. Take note of this contact information, and use it to your advantage!

In addition to school resources, students can provide a solid network of support for one another. Interestingly, online students may actually have *more* interaction with their classmates than face-to-face students. Unlike traditional courses, which are often run in lecture format, the “heart and soul” of most online classrooms is the discussion board, where all students are expected to make frequent contributions. Some schools also host a separate area of the classroom explicitly intended to support socialization among students, sometimes referred to as a “virtual cafe” or “student lounge.” As students become familiar with one another through the communication tools in the classroom, they often form informal support networks outside of the classroom by sharing contact information such as instant messaging names and e-mail addresses. Such out-of-class communications among students can provide much-needed support when dealing with deadlines, technical issues, or other school-related stressors.⁸

There is another important way in which students are not alone in their education. Online students often find that those around them serve as a source of support during their education. For those physically isolated from their instructor and fellow students, the support garnered from friends and loved ones takes on added significance. Many online students find that their friends and relatives come to play a critical role in providing moral support as they work through the ups and downs of their schooling.

Unfortunately, if you have roommates or live with family members, you may occasionally encounter frustration if the other members of the household fail to respect your need to study. (While this author was attempting to complete her take-home comprehensive exams for her doctoral program, her roommate relaxed in the next room and watched the *Family Guy* at a tempting volume, which did not help her feel supported in her academic endeavors!) It may be necessary to set up “house rules” for certain times each day that are set aside for schoolwork. The television and telephone ringer may need to be off at certain times. It is also a good idea to establish a study space where others know not to interrupt you if the door is closed.

If you encounter an initial sense of isolation as an online student, take some time to appreciate that you can now attend class in your pajamas with your favorite drink or snack close at hand. You can complete your coursework from the comfort of your own home or some

other favorite Internet “hot spot” of your choosing (see Chapter 3 for tips on finding suitable workspaces). You can play the radio if it helps you work, without worrying about disrupting the class; similarly, you need not worry about disruptive classmates rendering you unable to hear the instructor. As you enjoy these thoughts, rest assured that these benefits do not truly come at the cost of being alone. Welcome to the large and growing community of online learners!

Learning Tip: If you live with others, set up “house rules” that will support you in your schooling.

❖ **MYTH #5: I AM ONLINE ALL THE TIME: THIS WILL BE EASY!**

While some students may be apprehensive because they are new to the online environment, others may feel quite confident based on their level of comfort with technology. The “at-your-fingertips” convenience of online education may contribute to its inaccurate reputation in some circles as an “easy” alternative to traditional coursework, with convenience mistaken by some as an indicator of ease. It is true that an online education is *logistically* easier to access than a physical classroom, particularly for those comfortable with computers; even students who live on campus may be tempted to enroll in an online class or two when the alternative is to trudge to a face-to-face class through the hot sun, torrential rain, or blowing snow.

Still, the myth that being online all the time will make online learning easier has only a small grain of truth to it. If you are online frequently, it likely means that you have a solid Internet connection, which will be helpful as you work through your courses. It may also mean that you have strong computer literacy skills (that you can easily find your way around a Web page), which will also help ease your transition to online education. That being said, technological competence in itself is not enough to carry you through schooling. The difficulty of online classes can vary as widely as it would in a traditional setting. A 12-page paper on the implications of postmodern thought, or a final exam on organizational theory, will not be rendered any easier due to fluency in an online environment. This means that regardless of your comfort level with technology, it is important to budget sufficient time to focus on your schooling—a detail that leads nicely into the next myth.

❖ MYTH #6: ONLINE LEARNING REQUIRES LESS TIME THAN TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

Because of the flexibility of online education, students may take for granted that their online coursework can easily fit into their typical schedule. Some online programs claim that students can earn a degree in their spare time, which perpetuates the myth that students need not allocate any structured time to work on their courses. Students who already know themselves to spend evenings on the computer may envision themselves earning a degree as they simultaneously peruse the Internet and check e-mails, while others with packed schedules may anticipate easily fitting their schooling around other obligations.

There is some truth to the belief that online schooling can save time relative to traditional coursework, but this “time saved” is limited to the elimination of a commute. Online students do not need to concern themselves with traffic jams, slippery roads, or public transit delays, nor account for the significant time that may be required to find a good parking spot near a brick-and-mortar campus. To show up for a face-to-face class at a given time might entail a commute of an hour or longer; to meet with others online may require only five minutes of preparation to make sure that the computer is on and an Internet connection established.

Aside from commuting time, online students have reported that they actually dedicate more time to online courses each week than traditional courses.⁹ This may be due to the high expectation for active participation that is common to online courses, or the additional demands of learning course material without the benefit of live meeting times. A quality education entails not only exposure to new information but also taking the time to critically examine that information and ultimately draw meaningful conclusions regarding what has been learned. This process cannot entirely take place while your primary attention is focused on your friends, family, or work, so the successful completion of online courses will require a time commitment.

For those with busy schedules, this is no reason to panic. The good news here—and there is good news!—is that it *is* easier to work online education into one’s daily schedule. Online courses do offer a great deal of flexibility, and the time management tips provided in Chapter 3 will support even the busiest of students in taking on their studies full-force. It is simply important to recognize that online courses do require a time commitment, so that students can avoid the trap of “double-booking” themselves.

When tasks seem flexible, it can be easy to fail to allocate specific amounts of time toward those tasks. For example, people who need to send e-mails, conduct research for a class, and take an online quiz may think: "I'll complete those tasks tonight after work," failing to take into account how doing so might conflict with their need to prepare dinner, run errands, and put their children to bed. By the time they sit down to get to work, they may realize that the e-mails take them an hour, the quiz takes a half hour, and the research takes them a full one or two hours (or longer) to complete. Before they know what happened, it is the middle of the night, and they are surprised to still be working on tasks that they expected to complete much earlier in the evening.

As you plan your day, it is important to realize that having more flexibility in *structuring* your time is not the same as actually taking *less* of your time. Regardless of whether you find that you work best in the early hours, late at night, or perhaps during your lunch hour, you will need to find time that you can purely dedicate to your coursework. In the early weeks of your online courses, pay attention to how long it realistically takes to complete various tasks, and plan your schedule accordingly. (See Chapter 3 for time management ideas.)

Learning Tip: Allocate sufficient time in your schedule to focus on your schooling.

❖ **MYTH #7: SINCE THIS IS AN ONLINE COURSE, I CAN COMPLETE THE COURSEWORK WHENEVER I WANT**

Some students enroll in online courses with the misunderstanding that such courses are always self-paced, and that the material can be completed any time before the end of the semester without penalty. In most cases, this is not true; most online courses will require students to log in a certain number of times each week, and/or to submit materials by specific deadlines spread throughout the term. While this may be an initial disappointment to those who were hoping to have complete control over the structure of their schooling, this format is actually in place for the benefit of the student. Keeping a class moving through the material at a similar pace fosters a sense of community as students focus on the same discussion questions or embark on the same assignments in tandem. This structure also enables instructors to

better focus their efforts as they guide students through the complex concepts in each unit.

Distributing deadlines throughout the course also helps to pace those who may otherwise procrastinate until the final days of the term, as well as those who might be tempted to rush through the course at a faster pace than would effectively support an understanding of the material. Particularly in courses that contain cumulative content—where each unit builds on the knowledge gained in the prior unit—this pacing can serve as a safeguard to ensure that students fully understand the concepts from each unit before moving on to more complex material. Because most online courses are not self-paced, it is important to check the classroom carefully for deadlines, and to e-mail the instructor with any questions regarding when work is due. Instructors may be willing to grant extensions for specific assignments if warranted by extenuating circumstances (see Chapter 5 for a full discussion), but in other cases late work may be subject to a penalty, or may not be accepted at all.

Figure 1.2 Sample Calendar for Deadlines

September 2010						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1	2	3	3
5	6	7	8	9	10 Unit 8 Discussion Board Postings Due	11
12	13	14	15 Algebra Worksheet Due	16	17 Unit 9 Discussion Board Postings Due	18
19	20	21 Business Comm. Final Due	22	23	24 Unit 10 Discussion Board Postings Due	25
26	27	28	29	30		

❖ **MYTH #8: MY ONLINE COURSEWORK WILL NOT BE RESPECTED BY OTHERS**

Even as students come to realize the rigor of their own online coursework, they may fear that such courses will receive less respect from prospective employers or graduate schools than those taken in a traditional format. There is a history of stigmatization among online schools; traditional colleges had been slow to explore online education, and traditional educators initially viewed the for-profit institutions that dominated the market with a fair amount of circumspection. With time, though, this stigma has dissipated significantly, with the reputation of schools no longer as closely tied to their instructional modalities.

There are three developments that have contributed significantly to the increased respect given to online courses. First, the line between traditional and online education has blurred substantially. There is no longer a sharp distinction between receiving an “online” versus a “traditional” education. Large online schools such as University of Phoenix and Kaplan University offer courses at a number of brick-and-mortar locations, while traditional schools such as Harvard University and the University of California at Los Angeles are starting to carry online course offerings. Instructors from traditional schools are increasingly serving students online. Even individual classes may not be clearly delineated as “online” versus “traditional,” with a number of courses now offered in blended or hybrid formats that entail both online and face-to-face components.

Second, with the sheer growth of online education, more people are gaining an understanding of the rigors of online coursework through personal experience. It is simply becoming more likely that human resource representatives and members of admissions or hiring committees have either personally taken online courses or witnessed friends and loved ones working through the same. Over time, this should continue to chip away at any stigma that might still remain surrounding an online education.

Finally, school administrators are beginning to recognize the power and versatility of the technological tools that support online learning, sometimes beyond what would be possible within a traditional classroom. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, most online courses offer, at a minimum, a discussion area, grade book, and mechanism for electronically submitting assignments; increasingly, though, schools are experimenting with tools that allow more engaging and accessible delivery of course content. Podcasts, live online meetings

with audio and/or video components and the use of electronic “whiteboards” that resemble the look and function of dry erase boards are gaining respect and acceptance.

❖ CONCLUSION

Online learning appears to be the new wave of education. More people and organizations are starting to recognize the potential for students to receive a solid education online—one that, by some measures, may actually surpass conventional mediums. Students who are entering the online classroom for the first time should be prepared for the challenges that lie ahead but should also find motivation in the knowledge that they are entering a vibrant academic community without having to compromise work-from-home flexibility and convenience.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What do you see as the benefits of taking online classes?
2. What concerns do you have about your ability to succeed in online classes, and how might you address those concerns?
3. What beliefs do you hold regarding online education, and how do they compare to the information presented in this chapter?
4. Describe an experience that you have had that you initially approached with some apprehension. What did you learn from that experience that you might apply to your schooling?

CHAPTER CHECKLIST

- Explore whether your school provides orientation materials; if so, locate and review them.
- Reflect on whether you need additional computer training to be successful; if so, locate resources accordingly.
- Identify a support system that you can rely upon as you begin your schooling.
- If you live with others, establish “house rules” that will facilitate your success.
- Examine your schedule, and identify specific times each day that you can dedicate to your studies.

RELATED RESOURCES

Basic Computer Tutorials	www.gcflearnfree.org
Help With Using a Mouse	tech.tln.lib.mi.us/tu

❖ NOTES

1. See review in Stanford-Bowers, D. E. (2008). Persistence in online classes: A study of perceptions among community college stakeholders. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 4(1), 37–50.

2. For example, Dobbs, R. R., Waid, C. A., & del Carmen, A. (2009). Students' perceptions of online courses: The effect of online course experience. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 10(1), 9–26. See also Hannay, M., & Newvine, T. (2006). Perceptions of distance learning: A comparison of online and traditional learning. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 2(1), 1–11.

3. Page 326 of Roach, V., & Lemasters, L. (2006). Satisfaction with online learning: A comparative descriptive study. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 5(3), 317–332.

4. Conrad, D. L. (2002). Engagement, excitement, anxiety, and fear: Learners' experiences of starting an online course. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 16(4), 205–226.

5. See, for example, Rodriguez, M. C., Ooms, A., & Montanez, M. (2008). Students' perceptions of online-learning quality given comfort, motivation, satisfaction, and experience. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 7(2), 105–125. See also Tesone, D. V., & Ricci, P. (2008). Student perceptions of Web-based instruction: A comparative analysis. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 4(3), 317–324.

6. Tyler-Smith, K. (2006). Early attrition among first time learners: A review of factors that contribute to drop-out, withdrawal and non-completion rates of adult learners undertaking elearning programmes. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 2(2), 73–85.

7. Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2008). Staying the course: Online education in the United States, 2008. Sloan-C: United States. http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/staying_the_course.pdf

8. See, for example, Sparks, P. (2006). Electronic note passing: Enriching online learning with new communications tools. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 2(4), 268–274.

9. Hannay, M., & Newvine, T. (2006). Perceptions of distance learning: A comparison of online and traditional learning. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 2(1), 1–11.

