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ONLINE LEARNING: SOME STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

GLYNIS BRADFIELD

The COVID-19 pandemic catapulted all levels of education into varied changes in delivery systems, including remote and e-learning. Both teachers and students are challenged to reflect and train on how online and face-to-face education differ in order to use online pedagogy and digital tools effectively.

In-person classes conducted by educators from elementary through graduate level in schools around the world have been disrupted because of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Students and teachers alike experienced transition challenges as a vast array of tools were quickly introduced to continue learning at a safe distance. Where Internet made e-learning possible, study pivoted for many to virtual communications through computers, tablets, and smartphones, using software and apps to structure learning activities and video conferencing. Perhaps your online learning experience has you reflecting on these changes and exploring new ways of pursuing personal and professional development.

Or maybe you're a pro at online learning but you've observed your friends floundering through unexpected changes, and wonder: *How does a student best prepare for higher education in today's digital world? What common mistakes do new online students need to avoid? What makes a learner successful in online study?* Before we get to these questions, let's step back to the history of distance learning, noting the role it has played in Christianity and in Adventist education. Learning at a distance has occurred ever since people first needed to create ways to communicate when separated physically. For example, the apostle Paul continued teaching the churches he had established by writing to them as he traveled throughout the Roman

Empire, and even while imprisoned in his prison cell in the imperial capital.

In Adventism, Frederick Griggs established The Fireside Correspondence School in 1909 to reach out to students who had no access to an Adventist campus. Learning materials were shipped out to families; completed lessons were mailed back, sometimes taking weeks to make the turn-around due to complex global mailing systems. Nearly one-half million students, from preschool through graduate level, accessed Adventist education remotely through this educational mission, later renamed Home Study Institute, and still later called Griggs University and International Academy. “People from all walks of life discovered that private correspondence (and later online study) helped develop self-reliance, independent thinking, and responsibility.”¹ The Griggs educational experience emphasized personal touch in remote teacher-student relationships, giving students the necessary guidance and tutoring through correspondence, and later through e-mail and phone contacts.

Radio and television have reached millions as effective remote teaching tools. Adventist World Radio, Hope Channel, and many other media ministries continue the teaching ministry of Jesus through innovations in digital radio and television. Audio and video recordings in various formats have taken education and ministry to isolated places, and through free Internet access, made education more accessible transnationally. In the 21st century, increasing access to the Internet, educational technology, and research on how people learn have led to the creation of digital tools to enhance education in multiple formats.

PREPARING FOR ONLINE LEARNING

Virtual study allows all students to participate in online discussions as students can take their own time to make meaningful contributions. Deep, integrative, and critical thinking is better achieved when studying at one’s own pace; for many, time alone increases reflection and focused and productive study.

Consider the following questions to learn how to get the most out of online learning:

1. Do you believe that quality learning can happen virtually? Mindset is a powerful instrument. A student who feels that living on campus and attending class face-to-face is preferable probably won’t be happy studying online. Considering all your options, if online learning is the best fit for now, shift from the shock of this new reality to accepting and embracing the change. Choose to develop new skills through e-learning, seizing opportunities that unfold in this new mode of study. Spend time alone with God, and seek His guid-

ance. Consult mentors and seriously consider following their wise advice. Choosing a growth mindset,² fully engage in the new learning environment.

2. Are you a proficient reader? Online study requires careful attention to detail and following written instructions, so be prepared to read more than you did while attending class lectures. Visual learners find online learning easier than auditory or tactile learners.³ If you’re an auditory learner, read directions and assignments aloud, use tools to read textbooks, and watch lectures and videos several times. Taking notes and creating a list of tasks to do each day are effective study skills, particularly for kinesthetic learners.

3. Are you comfortable communicating mostly in writing? As most communication occurs in written form in online learning, use a free typing tutor (e.g., typing.com) to increase your typing speed and accuracy. Strengthen your writing skills⁴ so you can more successfully participate in informal discussions and compose cohesive paragraphs and full essays. While type-to-text tools are built into Google Docs, Apple’s Siri and Microsoft’s Cortana, you can also find other options. But all of them require good writing and editing skills to communicate what you have learned, or to get help in the process of learning.

4. Do you have regular access to a computer and Internet service? Check with your program of study for required software and technical specifications for the computer or other device(s) needed for your studies. At a minimum, the device should support current browsers, and include audio and video capabilities. Broadband or high-speed Internet will be required to view videos and participate in video-conferencing class meetings. Research the availability and cost of tools you need before you commit to online learning.

MISTAKES TO AVOID AS A NEW ONLINE STUDENT

Perhaps you have already discovered that moving from in-person to online study is not as easy as it sounds. The *Online Student’s Manual for Success*⁵ suggests eight common mistakes to avoid as a new online student:

1. Assuming online study will be easier than in-person study. Online studies can conveniently flex around life commitments, and they do not require face-to-face interaction such as in class. But online classes are designed to require the same level of learning as on campus classes. In fact, online classes may take more, not less, study time than in-person classes. Plan to spend 45 study hours for each semester credit hour at the undergraduate level, and more for graduate-level classes.

2. Ignoring technical requirements. Beyond social media and e-mailing, online classes can require a range of technologies that will take time to master in order to do well online. Expect to invest time in setting up required digital tools and learning to use them efficiently.

3. Not creating a dedicated study space. While it is possible to study on a commute to work, at home in bed or at a desk, or any other location with computer and Internet, students often do their best work in a space where study materials are organized and distractions minimized. Create a space that is conducive to focused learning.

4. Procrastinating on assignments. When not required to attend classes in-person, it is easy to let real-life demands crowd out the time for study. With more flexibility comes more responsibility to self-direct. To balance study, work, family, and community commitments, learn to identify time wasters, to focus on one thing at a time, and to break large projects into smaller, more-manageable tasks.⁶

5. Believing you are alone. Although you are located in a different place from your professors and peers, online learning programs will cultivate regular engagement opportunities through discussion forums, group projects, video conferencing, e-mails, and other planned and self-initiated interactions. Online tutors and student services are designed to support you wherever you study. Approach your learning tasks with prayer. Use the Visual Valet⁷ to think Christianly about your study themes. Discuss big ideas with trusted Christian friends who will help build bridges to biblical foundations and deeper friendships.

6. Thinking you'll get away with cheating. It may seem easier to copy from the Internet or other people's work, but learning-management systems use increasingly sophisticated tools to identify cheating. Proactively ask questions to be sure you understand the expectations in each class. Read the university's guidelines for academic integrity, recognizing that your past experience in another education system may differ from what is expected in this institution. Complete any orientation on how to avoid plagiarism, and don't be afraid to seek help from your professor.

7. Not engaging actively in class. You might think you can hide in an online class. On the contrary, every student is often required to participate in discussion assignments, reading what peers write. More students may be required to participate in this way than in a normal class. Begin by deciding to fully engage in required interactive assignments, then consider inviting classmates to a weekly chat using WhatsApp or meeting with students who live in your area. "Whatever you do, do well" (Ecclesiastes 9:10, NLT).⁸

8. Losing motivation. To students juggling personal and professional commitments, staying motivated may be a struggle. Rather than dwelling on these feelings, keep the end in mind. Surround yourself with people who will remind you of and support you through to achieving your educational goals. Envision your success, and keep your schedule in front of your study space to help you verify that you are on track. Keeping a prayer journal, in which you write specific needs, then looking back at how God has provided, can encourage and motivate you through discouragement.



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ONLINE LEARNING SUCCESS STRATEGIES

So, you're prepared. You are now aware of the challenges involved in studying online. But what makes a learner successful in online study? What strategies can you use to get the most out of online learning? Here are five keys to success:

1. Attend class with purpose. On-campus class attendance involves the priority of going to the physical location of the class and actively engaging in study. Online, attending class means showing up at the times you schedule, with a commitment to complete learning activities outlined in your course space in a systematic way. Try out technology required for an assignment ahead of time, so you can ask for help if needed before the deadline. Keep the purpose for taking

the class clearly in mind, and look for connections between previous, current, and future units. Enrich your learning by thinking critically about biblical principles that frame or relate to the key concepts.

2. Set a fixed time to engage in course work. Without classes at fixed hours, it's easy to put off studying. A routine is helpful; so insert study hours into your schedule, and treat these as your work. Self-discipline and consistency are key. Regular study periods form

habits that are easy to keep up. Share your schedule with family and colleagues, so they can support you by respecting these study times. Turn off your mobile phone and social media during your study sessions to maximize focus and minimize distractions.

3. Take time to ask questions and engage professors. Read e-mail and in-course messages at the start of each study period. Respond promptly and completely. Ask for help; your professors or their assistants care and can help solve problems you face. Open and proactive communication helps students and teachers alike.

4. Connect with others.

Participate in required and optional online discussion forums. Invite classmates to online group study sessions using WhatsApp or other free messaging and video-conferencing tools. Support one another. With Christian friends, pray together. Join in the opportunities your university, church, community, and family offer to thrive physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually.

5. Hold yourself accountable.

Connecting with family, friends, or classmates will help you keep life in balance as you juggle all commitments. Hold yourself accountable for meeting the deadlines you set at the beginning of the semester, as outlined in the class syllabus. "By being organized, proactive, and self-aware, you can get the most from your online class even when life outside of school becomes chaotic."⁹



CONCLUSION

Because of the flexibility and accessibility of online study, online education continues to expand, opening doors for continuing education locally and internationally while continuing personal and professional commitments. Students who are well-prepared and persistent, with a growth mindset open to new opportunities using new technologies, will be able to make the most of constantly improving forms of remote and online learning. 📖

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

1. <https://www.andrews.edu/distance/students/learning-remotely.html>. This Webpage provides academic support to Andrews University students who, due to COVID-19, recently shifted from face-to-face classes to learning remotely.
2. Ma, Victoria Almeda et al., "Comparing the Factors That Predict Completion and Grades Among For-credit and Open/MOOC Students in Online Learning," *Online Learning* 22:1 (March 2018): 1-18.
3. Mehmet Firat et al., "How E-Learning Engagement Time Affects Academic Achievement in A Large-Scale Study of Open and Distance Learners," *Open Praxis* 11:2 (2019): 129-141. doi:10.5944/openpraxis.11.2.920.
4. Krystle Phirangee and Alesia Malec, "Othering in Online Learning: An Examination of Social Presence, Identity, and Sense of Community," *Distance Education* 38:2 (2017): 160-172. doi:10.1080/01587919.2017.1322457.

5. Tanya Joosten and Rachel Cusatis, "A Cross-institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" *Online Learning* 23:4 (December 2019): 354-378. doi:10.24059/olj.v23i4.1432.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Andrews University School of Distance Learning, "Griggs History": <https://www.andrews.edu/distance/griggs/#collapse6>. In 2011, Griggs University merged with Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A., which owns and operates Griggs International Academy, a fully online K-12 school.
2. Learn about fixed and growth mindsets, why mindsets matter, and how Dr. Dweck's research into growth mindset changed education forever through the MindsetWorks Webpages here: <https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/Impact>.
3. Do this self-assessment to discover your learning style, with things you can do to learn more efficiently: <http://www.educationplanner.org/students/self-assessments/learning-styles.shtml>.
4. Consider using Grammarly, a quality digital tool to improve your writing. Start with Karen Hertzberg's article, *How to Improve Writing Skills in 15 Easy Steps* at the Grammerly Blog: <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/how-to-improve-writing-skills/>.
5. Adapted from *Online Student's Manual for Success* at <https://www.learnhowtobecome.org/career-resource-center/student-success-online-college/>.
6. Watch Brian Christian's TED-Ed video, "How to Manage Your Time More Effectively (According to Machines)" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDbdXTMnOmE&list=PLIMUwD2_qNdpZ-teWgjs2LBwrvRPBBZ0&index=13.
7. The Visual Valet, designed as a personal assistant for Christian thinkers and teachers, is available for download in many languages at <https://transformingteachers.org/en/component/tags/tag/visual-valet>.
8. Scripture text credited from NLT is from the *New Living Translation of the Bible*.
9. Shayna Joubert, Northeastern University: "How to Be a Successful Online Learner: Nine Tips and Strategies"(March 24, 2020): <https://www.northeastern.edu/bachelors-completion/news/successful-online-learning-strategies/>.