

Strategies for Success in Online Courses

Students may feel some apprehension about taking an online course, but it is possible to succeed in online learning environments. To set yourself up for success, it is helpful to have realistic expectations about online learning and to put into practice some skills that research has shown support students' achievement in online courses. Remember, just as in a face-to-face environment, an online course is an educational community of inquiry in which students are expected to actively participate in the learning process.

Overcoming Challenges

We do know from the research literature on online learning that there are some key challenges which may make online learning more difficult for some students. However, there are a number of strategies that you can apply to manage these challenges.

Motivation

Motivation is a key factor for student success; it is the force that drives us to accomplish things. When students are expected to work independently and structure their own online learning time, if they lack motivation for the course, they may find it difficult to stay on track and they may more easily become distracted by other things. Motivation is affected by both internal and external drivers. Internal motivators are things like a desire to learn or a personal sense of accomplishment. External motivators include things such as grades, earning your degree, or affirmation from other people.

To enhance motivation, here are some strategies you can implement.

- Goal setting and rewards:
 - Set SMART goals for yourself. These are Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-based goals that can help you break down bigger tasks into manageable pieces. For example, instead of thinking, "I have to read four readings for my online course this week," try breaking it down into smaller tasks: "On Monday, I will do the first reading. On Tuesday, I'll do the second reading" and so on. Then as you complete each component, reward yourself with something proportionate to the accomplishment (like coffee with a friend or watching an episode of your favourite show).
 - Try using our [Goal Setting Worksheet](#) to break down your tasks.
- Make learning meaningful:
 - Motivation is also enhanced when you create meaningful connections between what you are learning in your online course and your life. If you are not loving online learning, try to think about how course content will be beneficial to you by connecting it to other things you've learned or think about how it may relate to your daily life. You can also think about the skills that you are developing by engaging in the course itself. For example, if you have to write discussion posts, you are practicing the transferable skill of communication in online environments.

- Metacognition and self-efficacy:
 - Metacognition is your awareness of both what you need to learn and whether you are learning what you think you are learning. It is a process of reflection and assessment of your own learning. Self-efficacy is your ability to put into place the conditions you need to be successful. Both of these play large roles in student success. When you believe in your ability to learn, you are more motivated to work through challenges, and this can lead to positive outcomes (Dweck, 2007).
 - For more information, see our [Metacognition handout](#).

Time Management

Time management can be challenging in online courses because of the high level of self-regulation required. Shivevts (2011) notes that there is research to support the idea that students who use time management tools experience both improved motivation and use of resources, which then leads to better learning outcomes.

There are a variety of [time management resources](#) available, and we recommend a three-part scheduling approach:

- Term schedule: plot all due dates for the semester to get the big picture.
- Weekly schedule: block off time for every class you attend including time for your online course. Then you can plan reading, study, and assignment time throughout the week based on upcoming due dates.
- Daily task list: keep track of what needs to be done on a daily basis to help you prioritize your time.

Creating Community

Shivevts (2011) also describes a study that found that one of the biggest struggles for e-learners is a lack of a sense of community. Feeling connected to the learning environment and to a network of support can improve learning outcomes. The more interactive you are with your online classmates and instructor, the better supported you may feel in your learning. To help foster a sense of community and improve your learning, try to find ways to construct knowledge through your active engagement in the course's online tools for participation:

- Class discussion boards are useful for general questions and information sharing.
- Check for "Groups" for break-out discussions that may count for marks.
- Determine how your professor prefers to be contacted (@wlu.ca or MyLS email) to ensure prompt responses.
- Online instructors still have office hours – they may be scheduled or by appointment and may be online or in-person.
- Check the "Dropbox" for feedback on your assignments.

References

- Dweck, C. (2007). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Ballantine Books.
- Shivevts, C. (2011). E-learning and blended learning: The importance of the learner: A research literature review. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 10(3), 331-337.