

Online learning: Fundamentally part of the 21st century digital era

Issued by [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#)

23 Feb 2021

As the Covid-19 pandemic swept across the globe forcing governments to implement lockdowns and self-isolation for months on end to contain the spread of the virus, this subsequently led to cessation of face-to-face classroom interactions as we knew it. Online learning has become the 'new normal', but how can both learners and instructors make a success of it?



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Virtual classrooms have over the past year become the 'new normal' as global Covid-19 lockdowns limited physical classroom interactions. A lot of academic institutions fast-tracked the implementation of online learning as they tried to continue with life under the 'new normal' circumstances. While some learners who are more familiar with physical classroom interactions may find the complete transition to online learning somewhat intimidating, there are several benefits it offers. The use of technology can help optimise learning to improve learner engagement and achieve their learning outcomes. Adult learners often find themselves struggling to balance formal class attendance in the face of increasing work-related and personal pressures; online learning provides a flexible environment where they can login and learn at their own time and pace. This article aims to equip both learners and instructors on how to make a success of online learning.

Online learning: The 'new normal' in education

Signifying trends of a 21st century digital era

The Covid-19 pandemic saw academic institutions around the world transition from traditional face-to-face learning and/or blended learning and hybrid learning, to which most adult learners have been exposed, to complete online learning where electronic devices turned into virtual classrooms. Blended learning involves learning within a traditional physical classroom that incorporates approximately 25% of web-based learning, while hybrid learning is composed of a 50/50 combination of physical classroom learning and online learning. Some

adult learners may have previously been exposed to blended and hybrid learning, but a complete switch to online learning may prove a daunting task.

Online learning has proven beneficial for life-long learning among adult learners, provided the design and implementation of the online courses is conducive to an engaged learning process. The flexible nature of online learning often means the learners can connect and learn as and when they have availability in their busy schedule. This type of learning also fosters independent learning as instructors take on more of a facilitation or coaching role, which ultimately empowers learners to take charge of their learning and become less dependent on course instructors.

Expected outcomes of online learning

Employers are always looking for potential employees who do not only have theoretical knowledge, but also a hybrid of skills and competencies learnt in conjunction with the academic programme, and this is where online learning provides an advantage. These include, among others, engaged learning through online discussion forums, exposing learners to real-life workplace simulations and enhancing the learners' technological skills and competencies.

Online learners - roles and responsibilities

Learner engagement

Online learning can be a catalyst in the development of leadership qualities among learners as they take on a more proactive and independent role in their life-long learning, which provides an advantage for career advancement. The feeling of intimidation some experience when it comes to online learning can have a positive impact as learners can learn organisational skills and be encouraged to be involved in civic engagement and global citizenship. Learners can also learn to be empathetic towards fellow students. For instance, technical glitches may happen to anyone trying to access online classes or tutorials through e-learning platforms and students who may have experienced the same on previous occasions are more likely to be more understanding and or willing to exercise patience as their fellow counterpart tries to resolve the issue.

Recommended attributes of an online learner

As frustrating as online learning can be for adult learners, it should not be used as a 'scapegoat' for shortcomings resulting from a learner's study approach. Some introspection on the learner's side is required to make a success of online learning. Online learning serves as an equaliser for all learners, it bolsters collaborative efforts and innovative thinking; and adult learners can use skills acquired in previous learning to correctly apply instructions and recommendations from instructors. On the other hand, it is essential that learners partaking in online learning have some form of minimum required knowledge within their field of study since this will minimise frustrations and increase their success rates due to their ability to logically organise their thinking at field-specific advanced levels; otherwise learners may find it challenging to progress in their studies. Success at online learning will also require learners to have a sense of purpose and to make intentional efforts in the use of learning material to achieve their goals.

Learners' expectations

While instructors may design and ensure the online learning environment is well maintained as per learner expectations and the module for which they registered, there needs to be acknowledgement that learners may find the online learning environment intimidating and may feel discouraged due to technological or logistical issues. Virtual classrooms present a challenge of offering learners a limited opportunity for personal interaction with instructors. Thus, it would be a fair expectation for learners to request online courses to be more comprehensive and stipulate clear aims of the expected course outcomes, including grading and exam

specifications, as well as course dates and timelines.

Instructors/lecturers – roles responsibilities

Instructor engagement

Online learning does not equate distance learning where learners are expected to undertake studies on their own and completely independent of instructors. Instructors are still expected to use various academic methodologies to facilitate learning that promotes learner engagement. For instance, instructors could prepare live online pop quizzes where students can log in at the end of a lecture, which will enable the instructor to gauge how well the learners grasped the learning material.

Online learning as an interactive process

Instructors should be deliberate about engaging learners in a dynamic learning environment that will promote both individual and group learning. For example, online breakroom sessions can be organised to allow learners to have group discussions and the instructor can briefly join the individual groups to further facilitate the discussions. This interactive online learning process will promote learner engagement from a social, cognitive, behavioural, collaborative and emotional perspective.

Creating conditions for success

Online tuition will require instructors to create conditions that are conducive to learner success through further research of study material that will ensure assignments and other assessments further optimise the learners' learning experience. Measures that can enhance an optimise online learning include good communication with learners, providing clarity concerning aims and outcomes of study units, ensuring there's proper access to resources and student engagement, showing mutual respect and providing tasks that stimulate intellectual development. Learners should also be offered support structures through study guides, including clear instructions and contact details, that will be available during their study time. Such a support structure could perhaps be in the form of a discussion forum that is regularly monitored by instructors to respond to any course-related queries that may be raised by learners.

The way forward

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced academic institutions to make a fast and total switch to online learning in a world where adult learners were getting better acquainted with blended and hybrid learning. Granted, the total switch might not be a permanent scenario, but as technology continues to advance and evolve, education institutions must adapt and continue to guide learners through this unfamiliar territory of online learning as this might be a preferred learning method in the foreseeable future.

Tips to succeed with online learning

- Do not procrastinate.
- Remember why you signed up for the study programme.
- Achieving the minimum required to pass, is not enough.
- Seek assistance in good time.
- Record and honour submission dates and deadlines.
- Organise documents effectively.
- Exercise good time management to balance work, studies and socialisation.
- Reconsider study techniques.
- Take instructors' feedback seriously.

Tips for educational institutions

- Online learning may be intimidating.
- Traditional classroom environments cannot simply be converted for online application.
- It might be necessary to adjust syllabi.
- Accommodate learners with physical impairments.
- Provide clear means of communication and interaction.
- Allow opportunity to negotiate deadlines.
- Reconsider teaching methods.

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