

# Chapter 21

## A Student's Perspective—What Makes a Good Online Student?



Penelope Lovegrove

**Abstract** There is an absence of literature from a student's perspective on the experience of online education. With the increasing popularity of online courses, their rising costs, and the increasing prevalence of higher level courses, a deeper understanding of the online student experience is vital for achieving high-quality educational experiences and outcomes. Being old enough to have experienced an array of study modes, including studying by correspondence before the Internet became a household utility, as well as traditional on-campus learning and now online learning, I feel I am well-placed to provide an online learning student's perspective. Online learning has made tertiary education feasible for people living remotely, those with disabilities, people with parenting or caring responsibilities, or having to remain in employment while studying. For me, this flexibility meant I could pursue my career dreams without compromising my parental responsibilities. This chapter provides a student's perspective of online tertiary study, highlighting three components that I believe are necessary for success: organisation, engagement and support. While these components are requisites for all learning modes, they take on further meaning when applied to online learning.

### 21.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe through the lens of my experience the importance of having a good online environment, how organisation and planning help to make studying less stressful, and how flexibility is the key to success for students with competing demands. I will also discuss from a student's perspective the pros and cons of synchronous and asynchronous learning, discussion forums, unmoderated chat rooms, and social media pages, as well as the value of personalised support. The chapter is intended to serve as a guide for current and future online students on how to make the most of their online learning experience, as well as offer a glimpse of what it is like to be an online student to educators and educational institutions.

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P. Lovegrove (✉)  
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia  
e-mail: [pjlovegrove@hotmail.com](mailto:pjlovegrove@hotmail.com)

## 21.2 Organisation

In my experience across various platforms of remote learning, the essential attribute that is needed to make online education successful is good organisation. For an Institution offering online courses good organisation is needed to create an excellent online environment. For the online student, the online environment becomes your campus, replacing the classroom, library, research lab and lecturer's office. Perhaps even the study hall or student lounge. University campuses are notorious for being difficult to get around. Having worked or studied on-campus at five different universities, I know I am not alone when I say I have been thoroughly lost on at least one occasion on all five of them. A good online environment circumvents this problem and offers advantages over on-campus learning—no need to wander up and down hallways looking for lecture theatres or wasting time trekking between the library and the lab. All are now at your fingertips, or at least it could be if the Institution has invested in their online environment, and taken the time to tailor it to the specific needs of their students. It can be time-consuming having to click through multiple files and buttons to get to the information you need. Having quick access buttons to things like due dates, library resources, student notices, and links to the virtual classroom make navigating the online campus so much easier. For me, I had small, very rigid windows of time within which I could study, which meant that when I sat down to learn the last thing I needed was to waste time looking for the information I required.

For the online lecturer, good organisation means ensuring all materials are up to date and available before the course commences and knowing what is required of the student and when. It is beneficial if the lecturer conveys an understanding of where the trouble spots may be throughout the term and provide suggestions for how students may manage this. For example, if Week 4 has an unusually long list of required readings, it helps to let students know this so they can better manage their time. Some of the best lecturers I have had were the ones who also coordinated the unit because they knew the material intimately. They knew exactly what they were asking their students to do and how much time they would need to commit to do well.

In my experience, even with the most careful planning, children can be sick or need us in many other ways, usually about the time the assignment is due. It is useful knowing exactly what you need to do and have all the primary resources at your fingertips during these times so that you can use what time you have to at least pass. Marking rubrics shone like beacons in the dark of night when they were introduced. Online lecturers should provide all the material the student needs to do well in their assignments and should let them know that they can complete the tasks using those resources alone. Links for further resources should be provided for students who want to do extra well. You may think this is 'spoon feeding' students rather than getting them to do any heavy lifting, and in some sense it is. However, life can be unpredictable at the best of times.

This may seem like rudimentary advice—and it is—but many students have chosen online study because it fits around other commitments, such as work or parenting. This is not to say that on-campus students are not also managing juggling acts, but it is more likely that the majority of online students need a really well-organised study unit and a lecturer who understands that the study load is exponentially important. Personally, knowing important dates and busy periods in advance so that I can submit assignments on time and still attend my son's solo performance at the school concert is paramount. On one occasion, when exam dates kept changing and materials were uploaded only the week before, I struggled to keep all the balls in the air. The resulting guilt of letting my family down weighed heavily on my shoulders; I didn't study well and turned in assignments I was ashamed of—they were far from my best work. I spent weeks worried that this would impact on the mark required for post-graduate study. Other online students may be working around important, immovable deadlines for client projects or the end of the financial year. These commitments are, without doubt, equally as stressful—particularly if one's income is tied to meeting these deadlines. So, rudimentary as it is, if forgotten these fundamentals can have big consequences.

Likewise, studying online may require more organisation on the part of the student for the reasons mentioned above. The online study schedule may need to be more flexible and have contingencies built in to accommodate life's little catastrophes. Mapping out the academic term alongside competing demands is an excellent start. One online student I met completed their assignment three weeks early because the due date fell at the busiest time of the year for them. However, this sort of flexibility may not be achievable in every circumstance, so it is worthwhile for online students to speak to the lecturer at the beginning of the unit to see if due dates can be changed.

## **21.3 Engagement**

### ***21.3.1 Asynchronous Study***

Before the advent of the Internet, asynchronous study was all that could be offered to those unable to attend classes on campus. If you were lucky, the distance education pack came to you with a grainy video tape of your lecturer reading verbatim from the prescribed text. We have come a long way since then, and asynchronous study has become much more engaging, often incorporating links to online videos, taped lectures, virtual libraries, and YouTube vignettes, all of which help to reinforce the teachings.

Asynchronous study is still largely a passive experience and does not suit all personalities and learning styles. The flexibility of learning anywhere, anytime and anyhow is not for everyone. It requires a great deal of self-motivation and discipline. If you are the type of person who is easily distracted by housework, day-time television (or night-time Netflix), text messages, emails and cat videos then you may struggle to

complete online modules on time. Ask yourself honestly—are you the type of person who prefers working in groups, or do you do your best work by yourself? Personally, I am somewhere in between. I prefer to work on my own and can be highly motivated if the task interests me. At the same time, it is astounding how clean the house can be when I'm procrastinating. I've since learned to recognise these moments and take myself to a café with my laptop and noise-cancelling headphones. It took a concerted effort over some time to get into a good study routine, but I would say that teaching myself to be self-motivated contributed significantly to my success as an online student.

Studying asynchronously also leaves us vulnerable to misunderstanding. Have you ever misinterpreted an email or text message? It is easily done. I saw a cartoon once, which showed a teacher at the front of the classroom, advising students to 'Take a seat'. One student can be seen walking out the door with a seat folded up under his arm. On the one hand, this kind of open-minded thinking is to be encouraged, but on the other, students could waste an awful lot of time figuring out the lesson, or worse, fail the unit. I unwittingly fell subject to this pitfall myself, managing to complete an entire undergraduate course online with an incorrect understanding of a particular statistical concept. I discovered my error during a video conference with my fourth-year supervisor. Luckily it was not a critical concept for my course. I never knew I had misinterpreted the teaching, so I never knew to ask for clarification. To this day, I wonder if there were other things I misunderstood. I believe that this would have been less likely to occur had I been in a physical classroom with fellow students. Do not underestimate the value of those snippets of conversation before and after class where perspectives are shared and, in my case, concepts are clarified!

### **21.3.2 Synchronous Study**

Synchronous study, including live-streaming lectures, chat rooms and real-time discussion forums, provide instant feedback and, as I discovered, can be vital for students checking their interpretations of their lessons. Live-streaming lectures can be just as beneficial as face-to-face lectures, if not more so, given your lecturer is not likely to be obscured by another student's head or be far away because you were forced to sit at the back of the auditorium. Likewise, your lecturer's sage advice can be delivered to you undisturbed via headphones. If asynchronous study is a monologue, then synchronous study is a dialogue. It's a chance to reinforce the reading material and ask questions. It enables students to engage real time, providing depth to the learning material by sparking discourse and debate. I need to receive information in several ways (e.g. reading an article, listening to my lecturer and watching a visual presentation) before I really grasp a theory. Having the opportunity to describe an idea, as I understand it, or listen to a fellow student grapple with a concept can solidify my learnings.

However, you can provide all the tools for a rich, synchronised online learning experience, but not all students will use them. On the continuum of engagement,

I experienced the two extremes and rarely the perfect middle ground (you know the one, that cohort of students that switch on their mics and webcams, log on to all lectures, share articles in the group documents, and regularly post topics on the discussion boards).

### **21.3.2.1 The Vacant Classroom**

One online learning extreme is the vacant virtual classroom. A list of student names never to be seen beyond the welcome lecture. This is not just a problem for the online lecturer and Institution. On more than one occasion, I found myself the sole student logged on for the live lecture, which doesn't always make for a great discussion. Given the competing schedules of most online students, I guess this is bound to happen from time to time. Yet, there was always at least one student who appeared to be enrolled, but you never heard from them. They are the 'Claytons' student (to use an older, colloquial Australian phrase) or, in other words, the student who is not really a student. Heaven forbid you were assigned a group task with them. In one instance, after I expressed my concern to my lecturer, she disclosed that the student appeared to be completing the weekly modules but they had never attended a lecture or answered emails. What was I to do? What could she do? They ended up appearing suddenly three days before the project's due date without explanation.

Perhaps it's just a manner of different learning styles or personality types, and there will always be students who will engage less than others. Some students loathe studying and just want the perfunctory certification to quickly move ahead with their career, while others enjoy a richer learning experience. I speculate that online study attracts more introverted personalities, and as a result, students who are less likely to overtly engage.

The online lectures that had me logging on early were the ones that created that fear of missing out, or FOMO. A lively recap of the takeaway lessons from last week's online lecture, or thanking a student for their insightful comments made during the live discussion makes me wonder what I missed out on. Likewise, participating in the live chat that is going on in the corner box while you teach makes it feel like a real classroom—engage with the students, and they are more likely to engage with you.

### **21.3.2.2 Chat Rooms and Social Media**

The other online learning extreme is not necessarily too much, but perhaps just inappropriate, engagement. I'm talking about unmoderated chat rooms and social media pages. This is when students establish a private, online 'study group' on a social media platform, such as Facebook or Messenger, away from the eyes of the lecturer or educational facility. Now the fact they appeared in literally every unit I studied suggests that many students get enormous benefit from them. However, I

cannot say that I ever did and after joining one or two, I quickly discovered they were not for me for two fairly significant reasons.

The first reason why inappropriate student engagement can be a problem is that I found they at best served as a distraction to my studies and at worst undermined my confidence. Often students will post their assessment marks, but of course, only those who did well. So if you happened to not do as well as others, it could give you the illusion that you are somehow failing. I remember in one chat room there was a student boasting they received a high distinction only to discover later when chatting to the lecturer about my own mark that the highest marks awarded were distinctions. So to my fellow pupils beware the boastful student, ignore the marks of others and speak to your lecturer if you are concerned about yours.

The second reason why inappropriate student engagement is a problem is far more serious—the risk of collusion. What may have been an innocent post clarifying the assignment question can suddenly look like collusion if a person responds with their answer for it. It's interesting because those snippets of conversation before and after on-campus lectures I discussed earlier may also contain similar discussions, but somehow in writing it feels much more sinister. I had invested too much time and money to risk being thrown out of a course, so when I saw these blurry lines, I left the group and never joined another. I believe these groups are susceptible to collusion. Just because a bunch of students are doing it one way does not mean they are right. Find the answer for yourself—it makes that high distinction much more rewarding.

### **21.3.2.3 Discussion Forums**

Online discussion forums are, in theory, great ways to generate debate and feel connected with fellow students—if they participate. I need to be honest here and admit to never posting on a discussion forum. Being time-poor, I focused on the activities that gave me marks or added learning value. I never experienced a discussion forum that worked as a forum for discussion. They were either not used at all, or used to ask questions about assignments. My experience is similar with moderated chat rooms—students quickly left for the unmoderated ones! However, a friend of mine, also studying online, was mandated to write one post and one response to a post to pass each module. She said she loathed it at the time, but in hindsight learnt quite a bit from other students posting their insights. She described how it helped her to feel less isolated, encouraged group cohesion, helped her to stay on track and introduced her to new resources and interesting links to further information. I now regret not trying to encourage this sort of exchange of thoughts in my studies; I think it would have brought out my passion for the subject matter! So my advice to students is to go ahead, engage in forums (the moderated ones), particularly if you find yourself among a lively cohort.

## 21.4 Support

Student support is vital for all modes of study. I have not visited a tertiary campus yet that is not wallpapered with posters offering support for all manner of challenges. Support is possibly even more important for the online student given their increased likelihood of social isolation, competing demands, or perhaps disability, all of which may impact on academic performance. In the absence of poster boards, the online student typically has scrolling advertisements for support services in their browser side bars, emails introducing them to services and usually an orientation module which provides information and contact numbers.

However, Monash University went one step further—they had Steve. Steve was my personal support person who was there to help me with any question I had. Steve would check in periodically to see how I was doing. When I mentioned I was nervous about returning to study after a long break he gave me a list of study resources and where I could find them online. When I had trouble enrolling in a unit due to a technical glitch, he fixed it for me. When my little boy was sick and needed me right as the assignment was due, he listened patiently as I sobbed out of exhaustion and guilt and then we talked through some options. I loved Steve. Later on, I had Katrina, and she too became a life raft on many occasion. I just cannot emphasise enough how valuable this personal support was for me. I know that some universities are trialling artificial intelligence systems to help ease the demand on staff to provide student support. I have yet to experience this myself and so will reserve judgement, but if part of the challenge of online learning is overcoming isolation, then I am not sure if I would feel as connected to Siri or Alexa as I did with Steve and Katrina.

Finally, other little things are important too. Like ‘office hours’—a time when your lecturer is logged into the virtual classroom and available to chat with you, privately if you wish. Even if I did not have a particular question, I tried to attend the office hour as other students might ask a question I never thought of. It offers another point of connection and the chance to develop a rapport with your lecturer.

## 21.5 Recommendations and Reflections

Off-campus learning has come a long way and a rich, robust learning experience equal to, if not better than, traditional on-campus learning is now possible with online study. The main challenges of online learning are ensuring students have access to a range of learning materials, encouraging students to be active participants in their learning, and overcoming the problems associated with learning in isolation. These challenges are not necessarily unique to online learning, but the increasing popularity of this study mode has perhaps put a spotlight on the need for more innovative, web-based solutions to make online study more organised, engaging and supported—and this requires all parties to put in some effort.

The educational institution must invest in an excellent online platform and a strong student support system. The lecturer should upload materials well before we need them, use the classroom chatbox and office hours to engage with students, and strive to create that fear of missing out. For the student, invest in good technology, plan ahead and engage. Turn on the webcam, share an interesting article, and respond to someone else's post. Likewise, attend the office hours and send an email to your lecturer introducing yourself. Call student support. I promise you will have a better learning experience if you do.

Commencing my Masters in Clinical Psychology on-campus, it is clear that not all courses are yet able to transition to the online format. However, I would not hesitate for even a minute to study online again. I believe all courses could benefit from having some sort of online component, for the more ways information can be taught to me, the greater my understanding. If for no other reason, at least I don't have to get out of my pyjamas....

**Penelope Lovegrove** is a graduate of the fully online Graduate Diploma of Psychology Advanced course at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.