
Becoming a virtual student

COLLEGE COURSE WORK AND THE INTERNET

by Mary Cordell

Can distance education provide early childhood educators with the opportunity to take college courses? Yes!

Is it possible to work on a degree when family and work responsibilities limit the time available to travel to the college classroom? Yes!

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Distance education has become a practical option for students challenged by geography, time constraints, professional responsibilities, family considerations, and similar obstacles (Smith, Jordan, and Corbett, 1999). Combined with Web-based instruction, online course curriculum is quality education (Smith, Smith, and Boone, 2000). It may provide as much benefit for the distance-education student as for a face-to-face student in a traditionally delivered course (Sujo de Montes and Gonzales, 2000).

Students with regular, dependable access to a computer and the Internet at home or at work can complete college courses.



Many colleges offer online courses

In Fall 2002, the Child Development and Early Childhood program of Navarro College in Corsicana, Texas, set the goal of offering its first online course, Children with Special Needs. The goal came about through our participation in Texas Natural Allies (see page 25). This group focused on the need to enhance the preparation of community college students to work with infants, toddlers and preschool children of diverse abilities and their families in inclusive community settings.

Our first Children with Special Needs online course in Spring 2003 was successful. The course was repeated in Spring 2004 with 70 students enrolled. My experience as the instructor and the experiences of students from this class and other online child development and early childhood courses have contributed to this article.

Many community colleges offer child development and early childhood courses online. They are available statewide through a program known as the Virtual College of Texas (VCT). The VCT site, www.vct.org/, lists course offerings and contact information. Students work with counselors at their local community college to register for credit and non-credit distance-learning courses from other colleges. Course credit is recorded on the student's home college transcript, eliminating multiple transcripts.

Through VCT, the student's local college:

- enrolls the student locally to take courses from course-provider colleges statewide, and
- awards course credit on its own transcripts.

Through VCT, the provider college:

- provides instructors who direct all class activities, including assignments and tests, and award final grades.

Tips for a successful online semester

Most online courses are organized through a course site on the Internet. Just as in a traditional face-to-face class, the instructor will be the guide. Locating the course site and following the instructor's directions are essential to a good beginning.

Before the class starts

For local online classes, read the college's printed schedule for instructions on how to contact the instructor or to locate the course site.

For VCT class listings, go to the VCT Web site, www.vct.org/. Click on the class title for instructions on how to contact the instructor or how to locate the course site. Search for a home page for the provider campus. Follow instructions for beginning online courses. Look for a link to a page for the department offering the course.

- Do not try to begin the course early or expect the instructor to contact students before the course begins.
- Do not put off locating instructions or following them.

After the class begins

The instructor will provide a course syllabus and instructions for assignments. The instructor may provide additional instructions through e-mail or on the announcements page of the course site. In all distance learning, the students must take responsibility for their own success. Only the student can do the following:

- Print out a hard copy of the syllabus. Refer to it and all additional instructions and e-mails the instructor provides. Consult the syllabus before asking the instructor about course procedures.
- Use a calendar to set a work schedule. Work ahead of schedule when possible.
- Assume something will go wrong on the day before an assignment is due.
- Approach online assignments as you would any other in-class assignments.
- After re-reading the syllabus and all instructions, ask questions about work that you don't understand and ask for help when you need it. If the instructor is local, schedule a conference during office hours.

Texas Natural Allies

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs recently awarded the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center of the University of North Carolina a grant to support states in preparing personnel to work with young children (birth to age 5) in inclusive community settings. See the project's Web site at www.fpg.unc.edu/~scpp/nat_allies/index.cfm.

The project has two teams, each made up of four states. One team consists of Texas, Oklahoma, Iowa, and Pennsylvania. The Texas group members are 22 early childhood educators from Texas community colleges and state agencies.

All the work in an online class is done outside the classroom, so you trade class time for study time. When planning your study time, follow these recommendations:

- Be committed to your studies.
- Be realistic about the time available.
- Study every day at a regular time.
- Don't overestimate your concentration limits.
- Set realistic goals.
- Make time to review your work before submitting it.
- Use the calendar to pace yourself and check off assignments.

Successful communication with your instructor

Online courses depend on lots of e-mail communication between the student and instructor. The instructor may receive more than a hundred e-mails a day from 200-300 students in both traditional and online courses.

Using e-mail, the instructor and student cannot see each other's face or hear each other's voice. You lose the facial expression and voice tones that help in face-to-face communication. To make e-mail communication work, use the guidelines below. This list is long, but each of these tips is important to make communication with your instructor successful.

- In the subject line include your full name, the course name, and the section. Example: Mary Smith, CDEC 1359.01, Children with Special Needs (online or M/W 9:00). Use your official name as registered. You may not get credit on an assignment if there is confusion. Do not add content such as "help, reply now."

- Sign the message with your official first and last name, the class name, and section number. Some instructors require phone contact information. You can set up automatic signature files on some e-mail programs.
- Use correct grammar, punctuation, and capitalization. The written language of the e-mail makes an impression. Writing in all capitals is difficult to read.
- Do not use “emoticons” in formal e-mails, unless your instructor uses them first. I like the happy face, :-), and even use the sad face, :-(, when concerned about a student.
- Do not add your instructor to your mail lists. Your instructor will ask to be removed from them.
- Follow the instructions your instructor gives for sending assignments, either attaching your file to an e-mail or copying and pasting the assignment in the body of the e-mail.
- When you send an assignment, give your instructor time to reply before you send another e-mail asking if your assignment was received. Instructors usually click “Reply” and acknowledge they have received your e-mailed assignment. Make a copy of your e-mail in the event your e-mail gets lost or misplaced.
- Use your own e-mail box to write to the instructor. Asking the instructor to send a reply to a different e-mail box is confusing. Your message may

Terms to know

Automatic signature file — A file that automatically inserts a signature, with user name, course name and number, and all required contact information. The user first sets the e-mail program for this file.

Attach a file — A file outside the body of an e-mail but tagging along with it.

College transcript — The record kept by the college of all courses a student takes.

Copy and paste — Work that appears within the body of the e-mail message, using the “Copy” and “Paste” functions of a computer program.

Credit class — A class that earns college hours toward a certificate or degree.

Distance education — Courses in which the instructor and students are in different locations. This includes web-based instruction.

E-mail communication — The messages individuals (students and instructor) send and receive between their computers using the Internet.

E-mail program — The software your computer will use to manage your e-mail.

Emoticons — Invented keyboard shortcuts to speed up written communication and convey emotions; also known as “smileys.” Favorites include: :-), happy; :-(sad; and LOL, laugh out loud.

Face-to-face — Traditional instruction in the classroom in which student and instructor see and interact with each other in the same place and time. Also known as f2f.

File — Work that you do at the computer, which can be stored on the computer hard drive and on a disk.

Hard copy — A paper printout of work. Ideally in an online course, you make a hard copy of all work sent and received.

Home page — The main page of the Web site of an entity—in this case, a college.

Internet — A worldwide, online, computer network that provides a way for people to communicate with each other.

Link — A button on the home page that leads to other pages containing related information. Links on a college Web site will lead to other pages about different departments of the college and its activities.

Mail lists — A list of names and e-mail addresses that enables you to send the same message to many people at once.

Non-credit — A class that may be offered for continuing education hours, but not credit toward a college certificate or degree.

Virtual student — A student who is taking an online class.

Virtual College of Texas (VCT) — A collaborative of Texas’ 50 community college districts and the Texas State Technical College System.

Web-based instruction — A class that relies on a Web site and Internet communication between an instructor and students.

Provider college — A college that hosts or offers the online course.

Web site — The online location of a particular entity. A college Web site contains information about registration, course schedule, and how to contact instructors.

Syllabus — A document that contains instructor contact information, course description, goals and objectives, required texts and materials, assignments, grading procedures, course guidelines, and calendar. Ideally students will print a hard copy of the syllabus and refer to it often.

Subject line — The part of the e-mail that identifies what the message is about.

be overlooked, or the instructor may respond to the wrong e-mail box.

- Before you register for the course, create an e-mail account for course work. Use a name that identifies you and that reflects a professional image. Your course work and e-mails will be safe in your own e-mail account. Empty other e-mails and trash from this account so the instructor's e-mails are not bounced back to the instructor.
- Include enough specific information so that your instructor will know which assignment you are asking about. It is helpful to hit the "Reply" button so that the content of an ongoing e-mail is included. Change the subject to reflect your name, not the instructor's.
- Be friendly. Because we cannot see each other's face, there is always the possibility of miscommunication.

A useful skill

When taking an online course, the student learns skills that are more than the content area of the course. Learning to use the Internet as a learning tool and to communicate with others are skills that will be useful in all areas of employment and in daily living.

References

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- Sujo de Montes, Laura E., and Carmen L. Gonzales. 2000. Been there, done that: Reaching teachers through distance education. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education* 8(4): 351-71.
- Virtual College of Texas, www.vct.org.

About the author

Mary Cordell is instructor and coordinator of the Navarro College Child Development/Early Childhood Program in Corsicana, Texas. She is a member of Texas Natural Allies and has developed and taught online courses. She is completing studies toward a doctorate in elementary education at Texas A&M University-Commerce.

What students say

"At first, things were a little hectic, but I found a friend with the same online class and we e-mail each other if we are having a problem. If she can't help me, I just e-mail the teacher." **Tenecia**

"From experience, there are two key things to remember when starting an online course. First, absolutely do not procrastinate. Getting behind is the worst thing you could do. And second, good communication with the instructor will ultimately lead to success." **Christine**

"With a full-time job and two small children, it gives me the freedom to learn, study, and complete my assignments when I have the time. Although I am not a computer person, I have found that my online classes were really basic." **Bethany**

"At first, I had fears about malfunctions, but overall it has turned out to be a great experience. I have two children and I have little time without distractions, but I managed to get the work done." **Rena**

"Online classes can be a great thing if you are dedicated and keep your focus to do your assignments. I have been out of school for many years and find the course material and computer skill requirements within reach of anyone that desires the luxury of courses over the Internet." **Carrie**

"I wasn't really experienced on the computer and luckily I had a friend to show me the ropes. I would suggest getting with a friend before taking the class to get to know the program." **Alicia**

"I did do a little extra work because I did not read the syllabus carefully enough, but all in all it has been great and I would encourage everyone to try it." **Teresa**