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Teaching Tips:

Some Subtle Advantages of Online Learning

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Increasingly, both learners and teachers of psychology and human development turn to online learning to supplement traditional teaching environments. If you ask why, many will cite practical reasons such as: 24/7 access to a course; efficiency in distribution of materials and collection of assessments; consistency in responsiveness to all learners; and ease in record-keeping of assignments and grades. It is helpful to go to one online template and find all of the learner dialogues, the assignments, and your posted interactions with learners.

Online environments, we therefore admit, perhaps begrudgingly, do have practical benefits. Because we associate computers with mechanics, procedures, and well, computations, we expect computers to handle those facets of teaching well. Additionally, novice teachers and learners in the online environment are particularly aware of these practical aspects since procedures and routines must be learned just to get started. However, having developed and taught online psychology and human development courses for eight years (managing an online program for a State University of New York college and overseeing the development of twenty-five courses), I also increasingly respect the ways that the electronic interface augments deep learning, even in the domain of human behavior, which is particularly associated with face-to-face teaching. I am particularly impressed with four ways that online learning augments adult learning: 1) critical and empathic *reflection* with others; 2) *integration* of new ideas with prior personal experience; 3) effective *communication* of one's ideas with others; and 4) personal *responsibility* for one's own learning.

Reflection: The very aspects of online learning that differ most from the face-to-face environment - separation of the student in time and space from the instructor and the class – can be used to increase both critical and empathic reflection. Critical reflection requires exposure to new ways of viewing one's life independently and also to viewing one's life from multiple perspectives over time. The extended online opportunity to write one's thoughts for personal and group reflection, to respond to written feedback from both the instructor and the class (depending on the structure of the assignment), and to carefully cite references (clearly distinguishing one's own ideas from those of others) can all contribute to deeper articulation of one's perspectives. The role of the instructor, rather than being diminished, can actually be heightened by the opportunity to closely

respond to the unique path of each student's reasoning. Thoughts that would otherwise be internal are made manifest and can be reflected upon through online exchanges

Integration: Erikson was right (Erikson, 1980/1994): the desire to integrate different aspects of our lives is strong, increasing as we age, and is frequently a compelling reason for returning to school as an adult learner. This may be particularly true of students in human development, who come willing to weave past experiences with new learning; who desire to have richer relationships with their families and peers; and who want to learn about learning so they can teach others more effectively. The online environment encourages constructive integration by being accessible to the adult learner who could otherwise not be a student, by the required thoughtful nature of online exchanges, where one's words are reviewed again and again, and by the continued availability of all that one has written across a term.

Communication: Online courses offer opportunities in our current world to experience some of the advantages of journaling and letter-writing afforded to reflective souls in earlier ages, but with responses to reflections sent potentially as quickly as instant messages. The exchanges of insights, visuals, videos, and voice plus the discipline of the academic framework potentially bring clear statements of the problems of the world and articulated possibilities for their solutions to our fingertips. Many blogs take the classroom format of communicator/participants/idea- exchange from the online classroom to the world-wide web. The opportunities to make use of skills learned in online environments are exploding.

Responsibility: In an online environment, all learners typically respond to all discussions and assignments. In a sense, they are all "called on" for all aspects of the class. Potentially, learners may create their own discussion topics, model their own assignments, and even negotiate to revise the direction or level of expectations; but once these commitments are made, the responses to the expectations they have set are visible to both themselves and their instructor. This is useful for both responsible learners who can assure themselves that they have met expectations and for learning-to-be-responsible learners who get natural feedback on ways to improve, moving all students towards intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning.

There is no upper age limit in online learning, and, indeed, an advantage to learning online is that one's physical self becomes secondary to one's learning goals and contributions. Much generative mentoring does occur, particularly in the human development field, between learners with experiences to share (both younger and older) and other learners who can 'listen' online carefully. Many of the attributes of online learning provide an advantage for adult learners. The online opportunity can be a petri dish for compassion for others at different life stages, within different family constellations, and having different social and political attitudes. Online education has moved from being dismissed with disdain to being regarded as a formidable and promising vehicle for learning for practical reasons – and increasingly for pedagogical reasons as well.

References

Erikson, E. H. (1980/1994). *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

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