

Student Preparation for Online Learning

This series of articles has explored several components necessary to the successful implementation of online learning. These articles have addressed the topics of choosing to provide instruction online to solve an existing problem, choosing a Learning Management System to meet instructional needs, the preparation of instructors for online learning, and elements of good instructional design. There is an additional component that eDOT addresses in this article. That topic is student preparation for online learning.

To begin the discussion, a question must be posed: is online learning for everybody? The short answer is no. Online courses are not suitable for every student. Simply put, some students will thrive in the online learning environment and other students will fail online. This may not always be attributed as a failure of instructional design, but of student preparation. This article serves to help ministries distinguish the different types of students and decide what to do with those groups, i.e., how to prepare each of these groups for the online learning experience. This article also goes into detail about ways to assess the potential students and what the ministry can provide to help the potential students reach the level of preparation they need in order to successfully complete online learning courses.

Preparing Students for Online Learning

Preparing students for successful completion of online courses requires assessment and then preparatory training for those students who need assistance. As the ministry implements online learning, this stage ensures that students are able to successfully complete online courses.¹

- **What benefit does online readiness assessment provide?** For both the students and the ministry there are benefits to having a readiness assessment. For students, an online readiness assessment provides a preview of what skills are needed for successful completion of online courses. Students may receive encouragement of skills that they already possess or suggestions of improvements that they need to make in their study/technical skills to complete online courses. Students may discover that online

¹ By “successful” we mean that students are transformed by the learning experience and not just that they complete the learning experience.

learning is well suited to their skill sets, or they may determine that they would be better suited to seek other educational opportunities. The assessment may give students confidence when it is demonstrated that they possess the skills needed for online learning. Alternatively, the assessment may provide students with knowledge of the skills that they need to develop and how those skills will impact their online learning experience.

The ministry receives benefit through the knowledge of the skills that potential students already possess or, conversely, the skills that potential students need to develop.

Knowing the needs of students assists the ministry as it seeks to provide the best possible educational experience for the students. A ministry should not be afraid to suggest that a student seek educational experiences other than online learning. It is far better for a student to seek other educational experiences than to be miserable in the online learning experience. A single student who is experiencing difficulties in the online learning experience can be a detriment to an entire learning cohort. There is great benefit in identifying and assisting students who need skill improvement **prior** to taking online courses.

- **How does a ministry assess student readiness for online learning?** This is the fundamental question facing a ministry as a potential student considers taking online courses. A ministry can greatly improve student completion rates in online courses by developing and implementing an assessment tool that determines student readiness in areas of motivation, time management, written expression of ideas, and technical skills. Before any student is enrolled in an online learning course, that student should be given an online learning readiness assessment.² Ideally, such an assessment should provide instantaneous feedback for the potential student. Some examples of online assessments are included in the resources section at the end of this article. A quick Internet search for *online readiness assessment* will return a host of assessments used by various schools to

² A possible exception to this need would be a student who has prior **positive** experience with online learning environments. A student who has demonstrated previous **good** experience with online learning need not be subjected to a readiness assessment.

determine a potential student's preparedness for learning in the online environment.³ The following questions can assist the ministry in the development and implementation of an assessment tool for potential students.

- **What requirements should a student possess to successfully complete online education?** This is a difficult question to answer for the simple reason that it depends on the course and the ministry. The ministry must identify the abilities, skills, and access to technology that each potential student will need in order to successfully accomplish the goals of the courses being offered. From the beginning of this article series we have encouraged ministries to consider the educational needs and technical abilities of potential students, so this should not be an unexpected or unknown set of information. In the previous article entitled "Instructional Design for Online Learning," the ministry assessed learner needs and how the ministry would address those needs. That analysis should provide insights to the ministry about the abilities, skills, and technical expertise a successful student will need for the online courses.

Because each ministry seeks to meet different educational needs for its audience, there is no single assessment that perfectly matches every ministry. A course that uses video lectures has a higher technical requirement (higher bandwidth and processing power) that should be explored in the assessment. An online course that relies on discussion- and chat-based interactions may have different technical requirements. Another assessment example is the nature and frequency of assignments. If the courses require assignment submissions on a daily or every-other-day basis as opposed to a once- or twice-per-course basis, then the self-motivation of the student is vastly different. Once the skill requirements for the online courses have been decided, the next step is to create the self-assessment tool.

³ Some of these assessment tools allow any user to receive generic (and moderately helpful) feedback about readiness for online learning. Other tools are institution specific, requiring log-in credentials. A ministry may want to survey what is available and make choices either to use existing assessments or to build a ministry-specific assessment that includes ministry-specific feedback for the potential student based on the student's responses to the assessment.

- **What are some general characteristics that a ministry should assess to determine student readiness for online learning?** An online learning readiness assessment should measure several components of a potential student’s abilities. These abilities include the areas of internal motivation, reading and communication skills, time management, learning preferences, technological skills, and access to appropriate computer equipment and Internet bandwidth. While these skills are certainly needed in any educational setting, students in online learning environments need to have confidence in their skills and possess a higher sense of internal motivation and ability to self-manage their learning. Some assessments might include the need for online learning while other assessments might not include this need in the evaluation tool (e.g., a full-time executive may have a greater “need” for online learning than a full-time student).

The assessment questions should be crafted so potential students receive ideas about the nature of the online course from the questions. Because students will be learning outside of a brick-and-mortar classroom, questions in the assessment should probe the students’ ability to work independently and to express ideas in writing without immediate feedback. Crafting the questions in this way results in the students receiving a clearer picture of their responsibilities in an online course, and this knowledge enables them to respond appropriately to the assessment questions. The assessment questions should be crafted so students are able to choose their strength for a given skill. A three- to five-point scale is more effective than a yes or no question.⁴ Using a three- to five-point scale allows for more clarity in determining how well students will perform in online courses.

- **What feedback should the ministry provide after a student assessment?** Ideally, students should receive immediate, personalized feedback upon completion of a readiness

⁴ A sample question for assessing skill with word-processing programs: I am confident using the most common creation and editing tools of Microsoft Word. Responses: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. A sample question assessing self-motivation using a three-point response: I am known as someone who a) Often completes tasks ahead of time; b) Needs reminders to complete tasks on time; c) Puts completion of tasks off until the last minute or fails to complete tasks.

assessment.⁵ This feedback should praise any online learning skills that the students already possess and should suggest improvements for online learning skills that the students need to pursue. This feedback assists students in making a final decision about participating in an online course and gives the ministry some guidance on how best to assist students who may need help with online learning.

- **What occurs as a result of the assessment?** As a result of the assessment, potential students should be ranked into groups based on skills and abilities. We suggest three groups that are ranked according to skill level from highest to lowest. These three groups reflect a student's overall preparedness to begin online learning. Students scoring well in all areas of the readiness assessment (self-motivation, time management, reading comprehension and writing composition, learning preferences, and technology skills) would be grouped in the first category. Students scoring in the middle (possibly having some areas of strength and other areas of weakness) would be grouped in a second category. Students scoring poorly in all areas of the readiness assessment would be grouped in a third category.
- **How should the ministry guide students based on the assessment?** Students in the first group, who score well in all areas of the assessment, should be encouraged to participate in online courses. These students generally may not need much guidance or skill development to do well in online courses. Students in this group are likely to seek out guidance either through online sources or through the ministry as they encounter problems and difficulties. These students may also be able and willing to assist other students throughout the online learning process. Encourage these students that they are well suited and equipped to learn through online courses, but also that help is available should they need it.

⁵ A simple method to obtain instantaneous feedback is to build or utilize a web-based assessment tool. These assessment tools tally the responses of students in several skill categories and provide immediate, personalized feedback upon submission of the form. This feedback gives improvement suggestions for each skill category included in the assessment and provides guidance for the institution to use in further assisting students with online learning. eDOT lists several online readiness assessment tools in the resources section at the end of this article. Several of these tools may be used anonymously. It is beyond the scope of this article series for eDOT to specify how to implement such an online readiness tool. The examples provided should give a web programmer enough data to implement a customized solution should the ministry desire to develop an online learning readiness assessment.

Students in the second category may have some areas of strength and other areas of weakness. Students in this category may do well in online courses once they have strengthened their skills in their areas of need. These students should be encouraged to obtain help and implement the suggestions based on the assessment. The ministry should now consult its initial investigation and exploration of online learning for ideas and suggestions on how it intends to assist students taking online courses. The ministry may need to rely on outside sources to assist students in this category, or it may need to develop internal methods and resources to assist students.

Students in the third category should be encouraged to postpone participating in or taking online courses until they have either developed the skills necessary for online learning or made significant improvements in the necessary skills. The assessment should help the students discover for themselves that online learning requires skills that they currently lack or need to improve significantly. Depending on the educational need and the resources available, these students may need to consider other educational options and be guided away from online learning environments. If the ministry has both online and traditional classroom courses, students scoring in this category may need to pursue classroom-based courses rather than online courses. Students in this category also may benefit from an introductory online course that suggests methods to strengthen the skills needed to successfully complete online courses.

- **What resources can the ministry provide to students needing help with skills for online learning?** There are a variety of possibilities, and each depends on the ministry's capabilities and existing resources. These options range from help through existing admissions and student service departments to the development of an online course specifically designed to highlight and build on the skills needed to succeed in online learning environments. Some possibilities are summarized here; it is up to the ministry to decide which option or options make sense in its context and for its potential students.
 - o A sample online course. eDOT has found over the years that many people do not fully understand what constitutes an online course. The ministry should consider developing and implementing a short four- to six-week online course that introduces online learning and includes necessary study skills for all incoming

students. This course would give potential students firsthand experience with an online course. The ministry would be able to assess students based on their experience within this introductory course. By experiencing the type of online course that the student will encounter through the program of studies, both the potential student and the ministry should be able to better assess the individual student's readiness for online learning.

- o Self-study tools and texts. This option may be suitable for students who do well on the assessment but want some guidance, refreshment, and assurance of their study skills. Several texts that provide assistance with the development and improvement of study skills are listed in the resources section at the end of this article.
- o An orientation packet or program for online learning. Regardless of a student's outcome on the assessment, the student should be provided with an orientation to the ministry's online learning expectations. This may constitute materials on how to access the online program, how to reach tech support and the instructors outside of the course as needed, and the academic guidelines of the program. The orientation may be presented online (either via a website or through e-mail), or the ministry may require a short visit to the ministry campus to complete the orientation process.
- o A remedial study skills course. For students needing significant assistance with study skills, a remedial course may be necessary. Such a course teaches skills a student needs for online courses. Several texts that address this topic are given in the resources section. For added impact, this course may be offered online to demonstrate and reinforce the skills needed to succeed in online learning environments.
- o Development of a writing lab. Even students who score well on the assessment may need occasional assistance with writing projects. A writing lab exists to assist students in writing projects for a class. A writing lab functions best when

instructors provide clear assignment guidelines and expectations through the use of rubrics. For more information on the needs for and usage of rubrics, please consult the text *Introduction to Rubrics* listed in the resources section.

- o Use of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Ministry websites and promotional materials should include mention of the skills necessary for online learning environments. Additionally, each course could include FAQs and links to resources that offer assistance with study skills.
- o Clear course and assignment guidelines. Online learning environments often require more thorough instructions of assignments for students due to distance. The development of clear course and assignment guidelines, especially in the form of rubrics, will be of great assistance both to the students and any resource center used by students (e.g., writing lab, student services, etc.).

Conclusions

Preparing students for the online learning experience requires that the ministry both determines the existing skill levels of potential students and develops methods to support and assist students who lack or have weak study skills. Development and administration of an online learning readiness assessment enables the ministry to both assess and advise potential students of their skill levels in preparation for the online learning environment. A completed assessment allows the ministry and student to work together to determine the best course of action, so the student is well prepared for the online learning environment. A student may be assessed as: (1) being well prepared for the online learning environment; (2) needing some skill improvement in limited areas; or (3) needing significant improvement in many areas related to the online learning environment. This knowledge can then be used to provide resources for the student or to suggest other educational options.

Not all students will be equally well suited to the online learning environment. Having and using a readiness assessment gives the ministry a means to determine student readiness and to determine appropriate courses of action. Some students may need greater preparation, and a limited number of students may need to pursue other educational options.

The questions and suggestions presented in this article enable the ministry to develop methods to determine student readiness for online learning and resources to assist students needing additional skills or improvement of existing skills.

Things We Did Not Say

Written communication only allows for one-way communication: from author to audience. In this section eDOT desires to clarify some common misunderstandings given what has been said above.

- eDOT does not desire to communicate that every student can become a successful online student. A ministry may need to deny a student entrance into an online learning environment, in the same way that a ministry may need to deny general entrance to a student who fails to meet the minimum standards of the ministry. The simple fact is that some students are simply not a good fit for online learning. An online learning readiness assessment provides the ministry with the information necessary to make the determination about a student's preparedness for the online learning environment.
- eDOT does not desire to communicate that students who are assessed as being in the lowest ranked group are incapable of learning in the online learning environment. These assessments are guides and may suggest that a student performing poorly on the assessment may also perform poorly in an online learning environment. These students may be able to develop the skills, but they should be advised that the assessment indicated a lack of the skills deemed necessary to successfully complete online courses and that they would be advised to develop or improve certain skills prior to taking online courses.
- eDOT does not intend to communicate that rubrics are a panacea for assignments. The development of rubrics is a time-consuming task that forces instructors to clarify the intent of assignments and what constitutes successful completion of an assignment. The work is worth the effort, as the completed rubric gives students a clear picture of the assignment and the components that must be included within the assignment. Ultimately, the creation and use of rubrics saves the instructor time—time used repeating assignment instructions to students, either collectively or individually. Instructors who have created an assignment rubric may refer students to that rubric. If students lack clarity about the

assignment requirements after reading the rubric, then they may approach the instructor for further explanation, or they may be directed to any student services (writing lab, etc.) with a copy of the rubric for the assignment.

Resources to Consider

Online Readiness Assessment Tools:

The following links were located using a Google search for the term *online readiness assessment*. These are intended to be only a guide to and a sampling of readiness assessments.

“Student self-assessment for online learning readiness.” *Penn State Learning Design Community Hub*. Pennsylvania State University. 14 May 2014. Web. 18 Aug. 2014 <http://ets.tlt.psu.edu/learningdesign/assessment/onlinecontent/online_readiness>. This assessment is useful for ministries to consider as it gives some background on the themes and categories of questions that are included in the assessment, as well as the instant feedback given to a student based on his/her score.

“Online Learning Readiness Questionnaire.” *ITS Teaching and Learning Interactive*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 14 May 2014. Web. 18 Aug. 2014. <<http://www.unc.edu/tlim/ser/>>. This site hosts a more up-to-date assessment based on the work of Penn State (it lists Windows 7 and Mac OS 10.6 as computer OS). This assessment also provides more targeted feedback in categories of self-direction, learning preferences, study habits, technology skills, and computer equipment capabilities. Additionally, the feedback contains links for students needing assistance in the areas of self-direction, learning preferences, study habits, and technology skills (although some of the links appear to be broken). These resources also may be helpful: <<http://learningcenter.unc.edu/handouts/>> and <<http://learningcenter.unc.edu/learning-links/>>.

“Is Distance Education Right for Me?” *UF Distance Learning*. University of Florida. Web. 21 May 2014. 18 Aug. 2014. <<http://www.distance.ufl.edu/self-assessment>>. This assessment example uses a three-point response scale. Upon completion the assessment provides a generic response and gives personalized feedback for each question.

“ToOLS: Test of Online Learning Success.” *University of Houston Distance Education*. University of Houston. 14 May 2014. Web. 18 Aug. 2014. <http://distance.uh.edu/online_learning.html>. This is based on the work of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Texas Wesleyan University. More information is available here: <<http://txwescetl.com/test-of-online-learning-success-tools/>>.

“How to Create Your Own Online Course: 100 Tools, Guides, and Resources.” Best Universities. Web. 21 May 2014. 18 Aug. 2014. <<http://www.bestuniversities.com/blog/2009/how-to-create-your-own-online-course-100-tools-guides-and-resources/>>. This site contains many resources for educators to develop and deliver online courses and materials.

Books:

Baker, Jason D. “Characteristics of Successful Online Students.” *Best Practices of Online*

Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education. Maddix, Mark A., James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe, eds. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2012. Print.

Ellis, David B. *Becoming a Master Student: Tools, Techniques, Hints, Ideas, Illustrations, Examples, Methods, Procedures, Processes, Skills, Resources, and Suggestions for Success*. 9th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print. This text provides suggestions for any student to improve his/her study skills, whether the application is for a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom or for an online learning environment. As of May 2014, this text is in its 15th edition and has become expensive. The benefits that a student may receive from a serious reading and application of the principles more than justify the cost. Students who need this text may want to consider rental options from larger book companies.

Hjorth, Linda Stevens. *Claiming Your Victories: A Concise Guide to College Success*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print. This text is concise, yet it is packed full of suggestions and methods to improve study skills for any educational endeavor.

Ko, Susan, and Steve Rossen. *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004. Print. For this topic chapter 9, entitled “Preparing Students for Online Learning,” may serve to spark additional ideas.

Lewis, Norman. *How to Read Better & Faster*. 4th ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1978. Print. This text covers the essential study skill of reading comprehension. The author presents a reading technique that will allow students to increase comprehension while increasing reading speed. This would be a valuable addition to the skill set of any student.

Palloff, Rena M., and Keith Pratt. *The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Working with Online Learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003. Print.

Stevens, Dannelle D., and Antonia J. Levi. *Introduction to Rubrics: An Assessment Tool to Save Grading Time, Convey Effective Feedback, and Promote Student Learning*. Sterling: Stylus Publishing, 2005. Print. Although this text may take some time to work through, it affords a valuable experience for the online educator seeking to provide clear guidance for assignments in the online learning environment. The appendices contain valuable

examples of rubrics and may be a good place to start. To further assist instructors and faculty in the development and implementation of rubrics, the authors have developed a website with examples of rubrics and templates. That information may be accessed at this web address (30 May 2014): <<http://www.introductiontorubrics.com/samples.html>>.

Wong, Linda. *Essential Study Skills*. 3rd ed. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print. This text is shorter than the one by Ellis, yet it provides essential study skills for any student.