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## Chapter XV

# The Orientation and Disorientation of E-Learners

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### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter, we will explore how students may be orientated and disorientated to online learning, examining some of the methods that can be implanted to make life easier for the student and facilitate learning, and also some of the pitfalls to be avoided if students are to study effectively in an online learning environment. The argument is also presented that the disorientation experienced by students in online learning is part of a positive transformative experience leading to greater learner independence.*

### INTRODUCTION

There are many common elements between online and traditional classes; both have lecturers, student cohorts, course materials and assessments. One of my teaching colleagues recently remarked that the use of web-based materials makes life too easy for students. I would suggest that making learning easier for students is desirable, but although an online environment may offer more flexibility, it also requires more self-direction and self-discipline from the students. The course timetable is often more loosely defined in an online course and students must manage their own learning schedule. There will still be deadlines for assessments but study time will be self managed. Many of the nonverbal mechanisms that teachers use to determine whether students understand the concepts and issues, or if they are having problems such as

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confusion or frustration, are not available to the online tutor. Therefore, to be successful, online students need to be highly motivated in their studies, and we must consider approaches and mechanisms that will facilitate successful online study and lead to course completion for those students who find the medium more challenging.

Online study can be more demanding of time and energy than traditionally taught classes and demands more specialised study skills. The ability to communicate effectively in writing is crucial, as currently this is the primary medium for communication. Basic computer and more particularly web skills are also important and resolving problems at a distance without the normal support mechanisms that exist in a college or University presents challenges. Online students also need good time management and basic research skills in order to use their study time effectively and find information quickly. They also need to be assertive in order to make their needs known, as again there will be no non-verbal cues for the tutor. As online classes often involve group activity, the ability to work with others is another important skill. Lastly, the ability to be flexible and remain open minded is a key area as adaptability and flexibility are important for online learning, as students are likely to be exposed to some novel, threatening or, at the least, uncomfortable experiences.

Therefore it is essential that designers of online courses take account of these human performance factors and implement appropriate mechanisms that will help students become orientated to this new “virtual” environment. We must pay more attention to this aspect in our course design, as not only do we need to orientate students to new academic material, but also a new way of studying for most of them.

In this chapter, we will explore how students may be orientated and disorientated to online learning, examining some of the methods that can be implanted to make life easier for the student and facilitate learning, and also some of the pitfalls to be avoided if students are to study effectively in an online learning environment.

## **ENGENDERING STUDENT PARTICIPATION**

### **Motivation**

It is possible that the greatest challenge to online learning has nothing to do with technology or the subject involved, but with motivating students. Even with the advantages that learning over the Internet provides, including flexibility with study time and location, those same advantages can provide students with the opportunity for procrastination. Online learning requires self-motivation and independence above and beyond what is required in a traditionally taught course.

Motivation is commonly considered under two categories: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Wlodkowski, 1985). Extrinsic motivation involves external driving factors. Typically these include rewards or penalties, such as the results of summative assessment, eligibility for employment, increased pay or grading, or changed contractual status. Intrinsic motivation is the internal drive to learn: the student’s personal desire to learn or acquire new knowledge, skills or attitudes. Internally motivated students enjoy learning and achieving results, and participating in the learning process itself. Currently most learners in the context of online learning are intrinsically motivated (Stelzer & Vogelzangs, 2001), although there may be extrinsic factors present as well. Mosley (1984) suggests that most students initially are enthusiastic about computers but that this may

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