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## ABSTRACT

World Wide Web-based college courses offer opportunities for adult students to continue their education and earn a degree if they so desire. The flexibility of this technology allows students to log on and learn whenever they have the time, and the format is often more interactive than traditional classes. Teaching a Web-based class requires instructors to learn along with their students, be very organized, and respond to students' inquiries in a timely manner. For the most part, students are enthusiastic about using the Internet for learning, and even traditional college students living on campuses are requesting Web-based courses. This method of distance learning clearly will play a greater part in education in the future. (KC)

# Organization, support and interaction for adult students in Web courses

a paper presented at the

## Technology for Education and Training International Conference

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**Abstract:**

Using the Web is different than traditional in-person teaching. On the Web the focus is on learning. The teacher cannot "lecture" at students, especially adults; learners must be involved. Web-based instructors "...treat us as equals and maintain that we are a team, each member an integral part, and what happens to one affects us all." (Student)

Effective Web courses must include acceptable Instructional Design components. Interaction, often the missing component for both in-person and Web courses is essential. Supporting the learner through the Web sites, other technologies, and even in-person contact make successful Web courses.

This paper addresses these components with examples provided from ongoing Web courses accessed from the conference. Use of a live "Chat" room will include comments and answers to audience questions.

**Characteristics of adult students:**

"Life gets in the way"—a statement I often use to describe adult students. Over the age of 25 years with a job, family and "life's responsibilities"—these are adult students. Changing careers for the second or seventh time are other characteristics, as well as going to college for the first time and being the first one in their family to ever attend college, and lastly, some are using computers and accessing the Internet for the very first time, while others are experienced users.

The most useful characteristics of adult students for me is that they are diverse, motivated, and supportive. The diversity is derived from a variety of work experiences, some owning companies, others from the military; most with some technical or occupational work experience, and importantly skill in using computers and accessing the Internet ranges from never to experts. For teachers of adults unprepared for this diversity and the challenge of teaching adults, one must know about their learners. Add to this diversity the challenge of solely using the Web and a serious problem could occur if the teacher is not committed to the learners.

Motivated they are, feeling a sense of time "rushing past" or of college graduation "unattainable". If retiring from the military they come with a detailed plan and are task oriented. Others (again the diversity) are not sure what they want to do "when they grow up", but right now they want to teach. They have decided to teach as a second or later career, and make the conscious decision without parental recommendation—parents may be deceased or retired. Since they are motivated it is incumbent upon us to help them "survive the educational system", as system in most educational settings focusing on the full-time resident and young student.

From an adult learner:

“Faculty need to understand that adult learners are not freshman. We want to be in school, and do not like to be treated or talked to as if we do not know anything. they need to understand that we bring with us more baggage and responsibilities than most students. We are also much more driven to succeed than other students.”

(DH, spring 1998)

Adult learners are supportive if that is modeled in courses, by the teacher and within the grading system for the course. The perspective adults have of college is large classes, little if any participation, lack of identity, and competition for grades, usually decided upon by examinations (which by the way adults do not like). Not only does the course syllabus have to include support but the teacher has to demonstrate a supportive environment also. In-person or on the Web, a supportive environment can be achieved, but it takes a deep commitment from the teacher and real examples of it in the course.

Teaching adult learners can be summarized by the following prose:

**One starfish at a time...**

“A starfish gets washed up on the beach stranded,  
with no means of getting back to the sea,  
except by tide or accident.  
We all know this story.

The same is true of students.  
Goals are identified and life flounders them.  
They become stranded on a beach  
or stuck on a sandbar,  
with no apparent way of achieving their goals  
and improving their lives.

They can't get back to sea;  
there is no returning tide and no accident.  
There is only you and me.

That's why I have to help and so do you--  
it is important to each person.  
We can't afford to leave them stranded on the beach.  
It makes a difference to the starfish--you know.

That's what teachers are really--starfish savers.  
So, I'll be here on the beach searching,  
picking them up, and carrying them back to sea...  
one starfish at a time.”

Larry Hudson

### **Distance learning:**

Although most readers will have an idea of distance learning, a brief overview is presented. From correspondence courses, using mail delivery to homebound students, to the sophisticated technologies today, distance learning has been described (<http://www.pbs.org/adultlearning/als/dlweek/>). Distance learning has primarily been an access question, providing greater access for those unable to, or by choice prefer, to complete an education non-traditionally. The research on “No significant differences” has consistently shown that the use of distance learning has been equal to or better than traditional classroom teaching.

In very recent years even the term has been changed to “distributed learning” or other terms attempting to more closely describe the teaching and delivery. More students who live on or near campuses are using the technologies for access or convenience. In a facetious moment one could propose that it now be termed “access learning”. The larger picture is that other more traditional students are requesting and even demanding the use of so-called “distance learning” technologies. Oddly enough, only recently has the term distance learning been recognized by the general public and now we change to a new name?

Methods of delivery used for distance learning have included paper, audio cassettes, video tapes, e-mail, computer conferencing, television, and now the Internet and World Wide Web. Depending upon the infrastructure of the school, individual homes, businesses, and countries as a whole, the use of “advanced” technologies is limited.

In the USA technologies for distance learning are prevalent. One cannot assume however that every adult learner has the newest computer and fastest internet connection. In many cases these adult students are buying their first computer—for the whole family.

The Web is the fastest growing area for education. As teachers, we have to think of the Web as a business area, for the commerce of learning. When we do that we also begin to think as entrepreneurs using the Web, or “Webpreneurs”. Common elements of successful Webpreneurs include:

1. “combined the Net with an existing interest or entity...
2. ...folks who saw the Web as a new channel, and applying business savvy, scouted opportunities, and selected the one they thought had the best fit.
3. Selling goods on the web is about one thing: relationships.”

(p. xiv, Easton, J. (1999). Striking it rich.com New York, McGraw-Hill.)

It is with different thinking that courses and programs will be successful via the Web—we have to become sellers of products and service.

The students' comments support these statements:

“Enrolling in Web courses lets you manage the time you spend on learning along with your everyday schedule and therefore gives you a flexibility that isn't there with most classes.”

“I discipline myself to at least two hours a day/evening at the computer doing the assignments and answering other students in this class on the forums and posting my replies, then my time is my own.”

“If you are not a self-motivated person, you might not be successful in Web-based courses.”

“I can work on my class any time I want without being tied down to a certain time period. I can have career, family, and an education at the same time.”

### **Web course organization**

Just as for any course to be successful, it must be organized. In a fully Web course organization is not only essential it is lifesaving for the teacher and students alike. Everyone has to know up-front and continually how the course is organized, where the “buttons” are located, when items are due, and how grading occurs. In teaching courses on the Web for adult learners follow this motto—“The best surprise is no surprise.” This means that both teacher and all students in the course are informed of the overall organization and all changes that occur. One does not wish to have 200 e-mail messages a day just for “help”.

To teach on the Web requires extra commitment from the teacher. The teacher should be:

1. student centered
2. log-in daily
3. provide timely return of graded work
4. revise activities impromptu (some HTML skills)
5. accept new roles for the teacher

Organization is necessary. An outline followed in our courses is as follows:

Preview

Student objectives or competencies

Presentation by the teacher

Description of the activity

Scoring criteria

Method of sending to teacher

References and additional Web sites (if not interspersed in narrative above)

Examples of Web course using this outline can be accessed at:

<http://reach.ucf.edu/~voced>

While each faculty has a slightly different variation the concept of providing information up-front so that all are informed and that there are no surprises later.

### **Support of adult learners in Web courses**

“The care and feeding” of a Web course while the course is progressing can be other wise described as supporting the learner. This occurs at the onset of information- gathering, followed by registration.

Registration occurs in the following steps:

1. access our Program Web page
2. click on “Schedule”
3. select the course (s) of choice
4. print the pages
5. fax the completed forms to Continuing Education
6. send payment to Cashier

Upon registration the student is:

1. sent a follow-up postcards
2. asked to send E-mail to teacher

An on-site Orientation is scheduled at the beginning of every semester. This includes:

1. hands-on practice in computer labs
2. one full day per semester on Saturday
3. in Orlando at UCF

Concurrently, other support is provided:

1. a CD-ROM developed by our Distributed Learning office,
2. the faculty during the course,
3. peer assistance through a “Help” Forum,
4. PALs on-line,
5. teaching intern,
6. paid graduate assistant

While not every course includes all staff listed above, being “Webpreneurial” is a key to acquiring the support necessary for student and teacher success.

Student comments related to support include:

“Support to be a successful Web student comes from family, friends, co-workers, and other Web students. Web courses are time-consuming.”

“Instead of having a hard drive to school, I use my hard drive for school.”

“positive reinforcement that I continually got while I was going through the transition of a newbie to...whatever I'm called now”

“the encouragement I get from my peers in this class is immeasurable”

“my children have told me... ‘Go for it Mom!’”

Related to on-line assistance the students offer:

“During the first one, I was overwhelmed and questioned my sanity for even being there and taking these Web courses”

“We only have to ask, and the answers are given.”

“Students are generous with help.”

“Web PALs (Peer Assisted Learners) is a good idea”

“I had days of ‘Oh! This is awful, I’ll never get through this’, to days of ‘I love this, it is too cool. Yeah! I can handle this”

### **Providing interaction in Web courses**

Interaction is the “glue” that bonds Web-based learners together. As students have mentioned:

“If you fall behind in the class, you can become electronically ‘buried.’”

“The more you communicate on the class forums, the more involved you become in your class, and thus the more you learn.”

“I know I am less apprehensive in making comments to questions that are posted on the Web. On the course forums all you have to do is ask for information or place an idea to debate with others.”

“I feel that I have learned more in one Web class than I have in all my years in school. The information I have learned will really help me out in the real world, right from the start.”

“Being a part time learner is my advantage, because it is MY part time that I am using. I get to pick and choose the time.”

“The nice thing about this class is no one knows if I’m a minority.”

This is actually not much different than interaction SHOULD BE in a traditional classroom.



### **Comments from students**

Although comments from students have been interspersed throughout this section is entirely quotes from students in our Web courses. The comments are provided as summary statements.

“I feel closer to my on-line classmates than I have ever felt to my "live" classmates. My instructor is there for us at any time of the day to answer questions or help with assignments.” (JK)

“Had I not taken these Web courses I would have missed the opportunity to become more adept at searching the Web and mastering my computer skills which are a must in today's teaching environment. I would have missed the camaraderie of classmates who are there anytime day or night, not just during "live classroom hours", my instructor included. I feel I have learned more this way than through the traditional classroom environment” (CH)

“I am a single-parent of one three-year-old child who is the center of my life. I work full-time as an instructor at a vocational-technical center. I have no family living in this state. I am a highly organized, high-initiative type person who has much self-discipline to successfully complete a web-based course while still being able to ‘keep one eye’ my child, stop to hug him for a bit, then return to my course work.” (HW)

“I was totally Web illiterate prior to taking my first online course. Fortunately, the course is constructed with all sorts of support systems, including a very understanding instructor, readily available (peer) assistants, and a vast amount of helpful information from fellow students.” (KH)

“It is in my opinion, that without the Web based Classes, I would never feel that a degree was attainable. I have learned more through this interactive program than I ever learned in a traditional program. I get to see the "real" person in each of my classmates. It is NOT lonely! Far from it. We are on continuously. I know these people better than I ever knew my other classmates in traditional settings. I know their true opinions, rather than the ‘made up so I sound intelligent’ opinions people tend to do in regular classes. We are not afraid to express our feelings, and I think I support my classmates when I say, we are challenged to provide backup to our arguments.” (RM)

“I have had the opportunity to take graduate level college classes in both a web-based and a traditional classroom environment. As I compare the learning that occurred in each setting, my highest marks go to the distance learning method.... First, in a classroom environment I found that the instructor spent the majority of the time regurgitating the textbook information that I was able to digest for myself. At a master's level, I was looking for practical application of textbook theory and was disappointed with the results I received. Second, there was little

interaction between students primarily because of the lack of any formal means by which we could compare notes and draw from each other's professional experiences.

In the web-based learning environment, I have found that practical experience forms the basis for the majority of the knowledge that is shared. Through on-line discussions, I am able to pose questions to fellow students and receive information that has direct relevancy to my educational objectives. Independent thinking and self-sufficiency in locating research sources is encouraged to the point that it is a primary source of grading criteria." (TD)

"Students help each other out more & offer practical experience information. to each other because it is so readily available & encouraged. Everyone seems so caring & sincerely willing to help out." (SR)

"Web courses fill a niche and I hope they are here to stay." (MR)

"The ability to participate in upper division courses while working full time and not have the burden of driving each evening to the main campus proved to be time and cost effective. The Web provided me with the ability to 'sign on' and obtain information at my leisure. Any adult learner can relate to the challenge of trying to balance work, family and college classes. The web simply makes the balancing a little easier due to its unlimited access." (JB)

"My initial response was that I disliked the Web course and I thought there could no true learning this way. I had been a graduate teaching assistant at my university and taught graduate level education theory classes. That was my paradigm when I began this web course and I was stuck in the "traditional" classroom.

However, now that this experience is closing I have learned more than I expected. Not only have I learned the content of the class, but I have also learned about technologies and resources that I would never had gained in a traditional classes. Being put in a position to use the technology and resources has taught me how to really use it and now I feel confident that I can teach my students more effectively.

Though I tend to avoid discussions, because of my personal disposition, I thoroughly enjoy reading the forums. I learn more from my peers and colleagues than I ever did as an undergraduate or graduate student. The ease of having the conversation over the Web has encouraged me to be more involved than I would have been in a traditional classroom. I can read the entry, take the time to think and reflect, and then make a response. In a traditional classroom as a student I would not have that luxury and would be discouraged to speak up.

The last advantage is that I have felt a great deal of flexibility in this class. I have great access to you as an instructor, which may or may happen in a traditional setting. Also the flexibility to alter my class schedule when uncontrollable events occurred this summer was a tremendous blessing.” (MH)

“One year ago I was afraid of the mouse, and I was sure that I was going to damage the computer. I began by taking a computer class in a traditional classroom. Well, I did learn how to use the mouse and how to push the power button. I overcame some of my fear. I found the traditional classroom to be very awkward, as there were students who were so far advanced from me that I felt very dumb and not included. The class was large and I did not receive any individual attention. Well enough said about that experience.

Allow me to express the differences I found in taking this class: First I receive individual attention with a click of the mouse. I made friends from across Florida, and being fairly new to this area this is one of the most pleasing experiences afforded to students taking classes on the computer. Time was not an issue when it came to corresponding with fellow students. Like everyone else I am trying to balance family, work and taking classes. If this class had not been available to me, first I would not be Florida certified, and my stepdaughter would not have been able to spend the entire summer with us. I would have had to pay a baby-sitter; drive an hour and one half one way every day. I look at it this way, instead of spending time on the road traveling I am on the computer learning. I do mean learning, as I did not know how to copy and paste, I did not know how to work from one document to another. I certainly did not know how to post or what to do in forum. As you can see this class has not only been rewarding it has been a necessity for me.

In closing, the world is changing and teachers must change as well. The days of the traditional classroom, come in, be seated, read chapter 10 and complete the exercise at the end is long gone. I really cannot express the vast amount of knowledge I have acquired from taking this class, and I would most certainly take another one. I will also encourage my students to participate in an on-line course. The bottom line is, I feel more prepared to meet my students than ever before. Thanks for the opportunity to experience a new way of learning.” (PL)

“I can sit in my office and make errors and no one knows but me. If I don't know how to do something, I just send out a help message to one of my 50 classmates and someone will help. If I need to talk to the instructor I just send him a message and he responds. What could be simpler or better in this busy world we live in.” (GL)

“This course also enables me to be at home with my four teenagers. Taking four courses this summer has been tough with all that a family has to offer and I must say this course has helped me tremendously to be that good mom my kids deserve, or at least give it my best.” (JL)

“Web courses are yet another new and improved form of communication and education. The typical college student is no longer the 18-21 year old with no other responsibilities other and pursuing his education. Today, as a result of the burgeoning amount of information and need to know to keep up, students have jobs, are married, have children, are anywhere from 17 to 95 and need to be able to take and manage their learning in an atypical fashion. Web courses provide this variable access. They allow students to learn with their instructor, and their peers, with more interaction than perhaps a classroom setting would allow. They can learn 24 hours a day or only from 1 to 3 in the morning if that is the only time they can afford. The point is they can still learn.” (KE)

“Personally, I find Web learning very stimulating and challenging, I'm always afraid if I don't sign-on I'll miss something very important.” (MB)

“I started thinking about all the classes I have taken over the past five years and of those classes which ones did I truly learn something from. It is sad to say but in most of the classes I learned very little. Oh I got all A's in the classes but actual learning just didn't take place. Then a truly amazing thing happened. I signed up for this Web course and have learned more about computers, technology, other people, myself, teaching, resources, and how to communicate without turning red in the face than in any class that I have taken so far. It have been one of the most positive experiences with a college course yet.” (CP)

“The reality of higher education is the ‘it is a business’! We must look at the issue of offering Web classes in terms of a business decision and customer service. Never mind the benefit to society aspect, that's a given. Web classes are in response to the needs of our societal changes, both personal and professional. They are the niche that compliment the true nature of our ever-evolving world of work and hurried, information-packed society. Web classes meet the niche for those of us that "want our cake and want to eat it too"! We can stay informed via the web, meet/socialize via the web, improve our employment prospects and education levels via the web, purchase commodities, and securities via the Web. The question is not why we should justify web classes, rather, the question should be why it has taken so long for universities to implement them.” (SR)

## Summary

As proposed by Bill Gates, we are now in the “digital age”.

“In the digital age ‘connectivity’ takes on a broader meaning than simply putting two or more people in touch. The Internet creates a new universal space for information sharing, collaboration, & commerce. It provides a new medium that takes the immediacy & spontaneity of technologies such as the TV & phone & combines them with the depth & breadth inherent in paper communications.”  
(p.xvi, Gates, B. (1999). Business @the speed of thought. New York, Warner)

“In my opinion, Web-based learning is the best thing that ever happened; without it, I wouldn't be able to continue my education.” (student)

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