

A Survey of Prerequisite Resources to Maximize Distance Learning Courses

Ann Fife, Philip Wu, and Richard Lamberski

Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to determine what prerequisite information a first-time student of a distance learning must be given in order to successfully participate in a distance learning course. A list of important items and a comparison grid were developed from an in-depth examination of current practices by major universities and an up-to-date literature review.

Overview

Distance Learning, sometimes referred to as 'eLearning', has become a very popular form of education and training that complements or is an alternative to the traditional classroom setting. Distance learning began as curriculum taught through media such as video cassettes, audiocassettes, books and workbooks that traditionally were sent via mail to students or delivered in a classroom-like setting. For decades, many universities have offered correspondence study programs or courses. Today, distance learning courses are based mostly on the Internet and its diverse capabilities for delivering materials, streaming video and audio, and providing instant feedback and assessments between the student and teacher.

In order to successfully complete a course taught by distance learning, a student must first have some prerequisite knowledge of the concept of distance learning, the type of media used, and the goals and objectives for delivering the educational material. The student must also ensure that they are equipped with the specific computer hardware and software that is required to properly complete the curriculum.

Objectives and Purposes

The purpose of this research was to survey and develop resources and activities to maximize awareness and readiness for first-time students of distance learning.

The objectives include:

1. Determine learner distance learning readiness by pre-assessment(s)
2. Enhance learner awareness of distance learning skill components through specific training
3. Develop terminology or concept awareness for distance learning environments
4. Conceptualize a learner toolbox into clusters of needs depending on increasing complexity of distance learning environments
5. Provide a job aide (such as a checklist) to assist learners in mastery and application of all objectives

Significance

While much research has been conducted and documented regarding techniques and strategies for gaining knowledge during distance learning, a collective survey of resources which could be brought to bear prior to taking, for the first time student, a distance learning course was perceived as being extremely beneficial. This toolbox of information, resources, and activities is meant to be a learning module and reference kit that will prepare students in order to maximize achievement in their future distance learning course(s).

Perspective or Theoretical Framework

This research study was conducted under an external grant received by Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). The Federal grant project was entitled SAIL (<http://coents14.coe.iup.edu/people.htm>). The authors were contracted to survey and develop a supportive resource listing which could be developed at the University to maximize entry-level students seeking distance learning courses.

Research Methods

The authors conducted three concurrent threads of investigation. One thread was to examine prerequisite resources given selected major universities noted for distance learning. The second thread was to survey professors of distance learning courses at the University (IUP) to determine resources that they have developed and used or needs that they have identified. The last thread was to examine both the print and electronic literature. A bibliography of all sources used can be found in [Appendix C](#) of this report.

Results or Expectations

The methodology of using three threads of investigation yielded a frequency listing of resources and strategies. Given the analysis of findings, we were able to derive a master grid for current and future University development of supportive products or information. This grid can be found in [Appendix B](#) of this report.

Implications for Practice

The research study with resulting findings has prompted an instructional design effort during the fall of 2003 to produce a prototyped orientation and training packet. The authors hope that sharing this prototype will encourage partnerships among attending presentation participants.

The SAIL Evaluation Team was asked to review the current literature and exemplary on-line institutions for possible Orientation Topics/Materials for on-line instruction. The SAIL Evaluation team was then to provide recommendations and supporting reference material for composition of a course material orientation packet. This orientation packet will be sent to students who enroll in the online course(s).

The detailed list of what we have found through our extensive research (literature review and a sampling of on-line institutions) as to what should be included in an orientation package for online learning can be found in [Appendix A](#) of this report. We also provided suggestions for supplemental materials that may also be included in an orientation package.

About the Authors

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Ms. Fife is currently working towards her Master of Arts in Adult Education and Communications Technology from Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). Previously, she graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science in Communications Media from IUP in 2003, and received an Associate in Applied Science in Executive Secretarial from Butler County Community College (BC3) in 1996. Ms. Fife has worked as a Research Associate in the Department of Communications Media at IUP since February of 2003 with Dr. Richard Lamberski (Professor – Communications Media) at IUP. She also was awarded a full Graduate Assistantship through the Department of Adult Education and Communication Technology in the fall of 2003.

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Dr. Lamberski's research and consulting interests focus upon human performance and communication improvement in organizational environments. He specializes in media product design, development and delivery; training programs; product and program evaluation; organizational promotions; and survey and focus group research. His most recent professional efforts focus upon personal/organizational marketing, consulting practices, electronic portfolio development, technology infrastructure in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and Web page development in e-commerce and education.

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Presentation of Findings/Recommendations

- I. Information That Should be Included as Background Information**
 - A. Overview of the Institution/Program
 - B. Overview of Student Services (If Appropriate)
 - Academic Advising and Counseling
 - Financial Aid Information
 - Transfer Credit Information
 - Disability Services
 - C. Self-Test if Online Learning is Suitable
 - Description of What is Required in Being an Online Student
 - Online Learning Checklist

- II. Important Information Students Should Be Provided**
 - A. Overview of the Course
 - Course Description
 - Course Demonstration
 - Course Syllabus
 - Course Policies
 - Instructions for Getting a Login Name and Password for the Course
 - Frequently Asked Questions
 - How Will the Learning Be Assessed
 - How Are Assignments and Exams Handled
 - How Will the Student Interact With the Instructor(s) and Fellow Students
 - B. Diagnosing Your Computer
 - Minimum Hardware Configuration
 - Minimum Software Requirements
 - Explanation of Basic Computer Terminology and Technology
 - Discounted Software Purchase Information
 - C. Explanation of Basic Abilities (How To ...)
 - Use a Mouse (double click, block, drag, and drop)
 - Open, Close, and Move Windows
 - Use a Web Browser (Microsoft Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator)
 - Navigate the Internet
 - Use a Bulletin Board System
 - Use a Chat Room
 - Download Plug-Ins and Required Software
 - Access the Online Courses
 - Locate and Access Academic Resources
 - Print Out a Web Page
 - Open and Save a PDF File (Acrobat Reader)
 - Configure and Use Email
 - Use Email Software (Microsoft Outlook, Outlook Express, Netscape Navigator, Web Mail)
 - Reply To and Forward Emails
 - Attach Files to Email Messages

- Use Word Processing Software (Microsoft Word)
- Configure and Use Newsgroups
- Use Threaded Discussions
- How to Upload Assignments

III. Information that Could Be Useful to the Student

- A. Important Contact Information
- B. List of Dates to Remember (Either specific dates or better an open timeline)
- C. Technical Support Information
 - Trouble Shooting Information

IV. Suggestions for Optional Material – Not Necessary

- A. The “Netiquette” Rules that Govern Online Communication
- B. Course Related Web Addresses
- C. Resources for Help on Computer Use or Purchase and Furthering of Internet Skills
- D. Student Testimonials
- E. Feedback About the Orientation

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Summary Grid of Research

Topics Covered in Orientation Material (Mainly Online)	Penn State World Campus	Univ. of Wisconsin Colleges Online	Univ. of Phoenix Online	Capella University
Overview of the Institution/Program	X	X	X	X
Overview of Student Services	X		X	X
Academic Advising/Counseling	X	X	X	X
Technical Support Information	X	X	X	X
Financial Aid Information	X	X	X	
Transfer Credits		X		
Disability Services	X			
Important Contact Information	X	X	X	X
Student Testimonials		X	X	X
Course Demo				X
Trouble Shooting			X	
FAQ		X		
Feedback About the Orientation	X			
Self-Test if Online Learning is Suitable		X		X
Online Learning Checklist	X			
The "Netiquette" Rules That Govern Online Communication	X			
Discounted Software Purchase		X		
How Will the Learning Be Assessed	X		X	
How Are Assignments Handled	X		X	
How Does the Student Interact With Instructor(s) and Fellow Students	X		X	
Minimum Technical Skills Needed To Be Successful	X			
Minimum Hardware Configuration	X	X	X	X
Minimum Software Requirements	X	X	X	X
"Diagnose Your Computer" to Make Sure the Student's Computer Meets the Hardware/Software Requirements	X			
How to Access Online Courses	X	X	X	
How to Locate and Access Academic Resources	X		X	
How to Print Out a Web Page	X			
How to Open and Save a PDF File				X
How to Configure and Use Email Account		X	X	
How to Use Email Software Such as Microsoft Outlook			X	
How to Attach a File to an Email	X		X	
Using a Bulletin Board System	X			
Using Chat Rooms				
Using Newsgroups			X	
Using Threaded Discussion				

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