Chapter 2

"You Can Do it in Your Jammies" and Other Things We Should *Never* say about Learning Online

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I'm getting married and going on a two-week honeymoon during this course. I won't have internet while I'm gone. That's not a problem, is it?

Faculty and students often think about things differently. When faculty think about teaching online (especially those who have never done it), they often think about how teaching online is harder, takes longer, and involves more work.[1] However, when students, especially first time online students, think about learning online, they tend to think of things like:

- Not having to go to campus to attend a class,
- Working on their coursework in their jammies,
- Coursework not getting in the way of their busy lives,
- Working on their coursework (only) when it's convenient,
- Completing their coursework at their own pace, and
- Not working that hard to receive a good grade.

Now there are exceptions to this. And many might argue that some of the ways students think about online learning—such as the first and second point above—aren't necessarily bad outcomes of participating in an online course. We argue however in this chapter that thinking of online learning in these terms leads to student expectations about the online-course experience that are over-simplified and inaccurate. Let's face it—often online courses do get in the way of busy lives, aren't convenient, offer very little choice in terms of pacing, and are just as difficult *if not more* difficult than an on-campus course.

Online education grew out of the correspondence tradition of distance education, which was characterized by things like the faculty and the student being separated by space and time or the student progressing through the course at his/her own pace. Therefore, it is not surprising that certain defining characteristics of early forms of distance education have stuck with us over the years.

To be fair, students haven't derived this inaccurate view and expectation of online education on their own. One—if not the central—reason why students continue to think of online courses as easier, convenient, malleable, and so on is directly related to how colleges and universities, both for profit and non-profit, market their online programs. In other words, the way postsecondary institutions promote their programs

[1] Faculty who have extensive experience teaching online, though, are quick to dispute this point. Teaching online doesn't have to be harder, take longer, and involve more work (see Dunlap, 2007). But in our experience often this is how faculty think about and talk about teaching online.

set expectations about the online learning course experience that may be very different than what students will actually experience once enrolled.

Take for instance the following quotes that come from various college and university website descriptions of the online-learning experience they offer to students:

- …The classroom is wherever you are. The class schedule adjusts to fit your schedule.
- …Learning experience that's both customized and flexible, so you can study on your schedule, on your terms.
- The only difference [between the on-campus and online experience] is that as an online student, you can study 24/7 from home, the office, or an Internet café—anywhere you can find a connection.
- Finish your degree without leaving your job or other responsibilities.
- Access course content at your convenience—24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- …The credit and education are the same, even the professors and faculty are the same. The only difference is that it's online, on your terms… allowing you the freedom to spend time on what matters most to you.
- We offer *real* degrees designed to fit into your *real* life. Our … multiple start dates allow you to start when the time is right for *you*. The convenience of 100% online classes is ideal for the adult learner, particularly for those who work full-time, have families and are unable to get to a traditional campus. You really can live your life while completing your bachelor's degree or earning your master's degree.

What makes these marketing statements even more incongruent with reality is that the same institutions also claim that their online courses and programs provide students with *cutting-edge curriculum, [where students] will gain the real-world experience [they] need to succeed in today's global marketplace*, using *a collaborative learning environment* in which they *interact with classmates from around the world* leading to *immediate, real-world application* of their coursework—all outcomes that cannot be effectively achieved if the online coursework is individually paced and so flexible that it seamlessly fits into each student's busy schedule. Still not convinced of the false expectations of the online-learning experience promoted by postsecondary institutions, then watch the following video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OISn3TXFxlI

We could go on, but we suspect you get the point. This type of language should be familiar to most. In the following paragraphs, we argue why this type of language is problematic and how it places constraints on faculty and instructional designers in colleges and universities across the country, and finally conclude with what we should do about it!

How the Message Shapes Students' Perceptions and Expectations

Language is intricately connected to thought and shapes how we think and what we do (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). The way we use language to inform and communicate influences perception and expectations (White & Lowenthal, 2009, 2011). Therefore, postsecondary institutions need to carefully consider the language used to market and describe online learning.

The following themes can be identified in the examples listed in the previous section:

- Immediate—begin when you want; 24/7
- Convenient—take courses when you want; fits your schedule
- You can do it all—busy life, no problem; online learning can fit right in
- Same as on-campus programs—online courses are no different

These themes present in many postsecondary online-program marketing materials send a very strong message of what students should expect from an online-learning experience. Although catchy and enticing, they are very harmful in their inaccuracy; these messages set both students and faculty up for failure as they navigate two very different sets of expectations about the online-course experience.

Immediate

Because of my work schedule, I will be working on my online coursework after 10pm each night. You're available to answer questions then, right?

Students begin online programs with an expectation that everything is going to be 24/7. For better or for worse, the modern university is far from being a 24/7 environment. While some universities do a better job than others with being responsive to students' needs, there is not a single university that we know of that can truly be described as 24/7. Sure, Universities are each trying to automate as much as possible and to put everything they can "online" in some form. The bottom line, though, is that from the library to the registrar to advising, they all have some time each day in which a live person is not available to answer students' questions. But it doesn't just stop there. The problem is exasperated when students with these 24/7 expectations begin taking online courses.

While faculty strive to be as responsive as possible, they are never available 24/7; it is not uncommon for students to wait 24 – 48 hours before hearing back from faculty. This can become maddening to a student who is expecting an immediate answer to his or her question.

Convenient

I will just work on my online coursework when I have time…in between the cracks. That'll be OK, right?

In addition to being 24/7, students also are led to believe that online learning is convenient. This propagates a myth that students can complete their coursework when they want to, when in fact, most online courses have a specific sequence and structure (often using a week-by-week format); and schedule with specific deadlines for activities, homework, and projects. Further, because of this myth students are led to believe that they do not have to do anything that is inconvenient for them. For instance, students are often bothered when they find out that in many courses they might be expected to login and take part in online discussions 3-4 times in a given week, or that they need to participate in a synchronous activity at particular time on a particular day. Unfortunately, students' negative reactions to these unexpected activities may lead faculty to avoid otherwise appropriate instructional strategies.

You Can Do It All

I work 50+ hours a week, travel a lot for work, and coach my two daughters' soccer teams on the weekend. Taking two online courses won't be a problem, right?…

Much of the online-program marketing campaigns lead students to believe that even if they have busy lives, they can still find time to fit in college—on their own time. The reality is that completing a college degree takes significant time and effort, regardless of the delivery format. For instance, a 3-credit 15-week long online graduate course will often require anywhere from 9-12 hours of time each week. This breaks down to about two hours a night five days a week. If a student is taking two graduate-level online courses, then the workload is four hours a night five days a week. While it is true that most online courses are asynchronous and enable students to complete the coursework at any time of the day during a given week, there is only so much time in a day. If students work full time and have families then that means they will be spending almost all of their free time on their coursework. This is tough but this is the nature of being a full-time student with a full-time job. We need to help students understand the commitment it takes to be online students—especially online students with busy lives.

Same as On-Campus Programs

If my online program is the same as the one on-campus, then all I have to do is show up in the course shell once a week and listen to a lecture, do a few activities, and take a quiz. I know how that works, so no big deal…right?

Related to this theme, students actually get two messages. The first is that online courses are no different than on-campus courses. When postsecondary institutions share this message in their marketing materials what they mean is that students can expect the same program plan and courses (e.g., same learning objectives) leading to the same degree. Sometimes it also means that students will be taught by the same faculty teaching the on-campus version of courses. But, it rarely means that students will experience the same pacing or instructional activities. Although there are more and more synchronous communication tools available (e.g., Adobe Connect) that allow for the real-time interactions students are used to in on-campus courses, text-based asynchronous communication tools (e.g., threaded discussion forums) are still the primary tool used for student-instructor and student-student interaction and communication in online courses. Due to the very nature of these tools (i.e., text-based and asynchronous), online courses have very different pacing and use very different

instructional strategies than on-campus courses (although, faculty are increasingly using these types of tools in their on-campus courses to provide additional support and learning opportunities to students in-between on-campus class meetings).

The other message students get from the "same as on-campus programs" theme is that they do not need to be concerned about their technology and internet access and skills. Because of this message, some students may not realize the need for constant and consistent access to an internet-capable (and connected) computer, and that they need to already possess intermediate computer and internet skills.

Conclusion / Implications

So where does this leave us? Many of you might feel that there isn't much you can do about how your college or university markets online programs. While this is likely true to some extent, it is important that those on the front lines help administrators and marketing personnel accurately promote online programs. This involves learning about each program and the nuances of the programs. (For examples of marketing materials that establish more accurate student expectations, see http://cps.regis.edu/online-degree-rightforyou.php or http://www.jiu.edu/about/e-learning/online-learning-quiz).

But even more importantly this calls for effectively communicating expectations for your online courses to students, ideally before courses start. To be successful, students need clear information on what is expected of them and how they can be successful in your online courses:

- Provide them with a complete reading and assignment due date schedule at the start of the course. This gives them an opportunity in the first week of class to map course deadlines to their work and family calendars.
- Provide them with a general formula for the number of hours they should anticipate spending on coursework each week.
- Provide detailed weekly agendas that indicate what they need to complete and when they need to complete it.
- Make sure they know when you are available for questions, and how they may reach you. If it takes you 24 hours to respond to posts and emails, or you have a policy of not responding to posts and emails on a certain day (e.g., Sunday), make sure they know your schedule.
- Don't assume that students—even those under the age of 25—know how to use technology or how to use it to support academic and professional endeavors. Be prepared to provide them with resources (e.g., tutorials) and support.

Online courses and programs are an important part of a full-service postsecondary institution's offerings. Students who would otherwise not be able to pursue a degree can now do so because of online courses and programs. Sometimes colleges and universities get caught up in the excitement of what it means to help people achieve their goals via online programs, and oversell their online programs in their enthusiasm (and, sometimes they do this as well because they are building a market for the programs or are considering how to compete with the marketing messages of competitors).

Ultimately, this overselling hurts not only students but also faculty and staff. Faculty and staff are regularly challenged with realigning misperceptions and inaccurate expectations as well as overcoming initial confusion, disappointment, and frustration that students often begin online programs with. But, with adjustments to marketing messages, and clear up-front communication at the program and course level, online

learning can be a highly effective—and engaging—experience for students. And, sometimes—although let's keep it a secret initially—students can even do some their online coursework in their jammies.

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Bio

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