

An Online Student's Survival Guide

Rich Stillman

Online training is no longer the wave of the future. Around the country, most colleges and universities provide some classes on the Internet, and a few schools provide whole degree programs online. The Defense Acquisition University currently offers 22 online classes that are being provided to 4,000 acquisition professionals at any one time. In fiscal year 2003 alone, DAU enrolled a total of 57,171 online students who completed 1.47 million hours of online instructional time. That represents an 83-fold increase in just five years.

Most students find non-resident courses flexible, convenient, and enjoyable. They set their own pace online, taking lessons when it's convenient in an environment that works for them. Gone are the snippy instructors with endless, hard-to-read vugraphs and monotonous voices. It's a brave new training world.

Unfortunately, however, not all students are ready to make the leap from the classroom environment to the Internet. They miss the direct contact with their instructor, the interface with the other students, and the focused classroom setting. They become distracted, frustrated, and lost. Their results fall short of their expectations.

This article is designed to help students new to distance learning get a positive start in their training and online veterans to get more out of the learning experience. A word of caution is needed up front. Students are all endowed with dif-

ferent skills, temperaments, attitudes, and needs. All of the suggestions may not apply to a single student, but some of the suggestions should apply to all of the students.

Understand the basics

Are you a night owl or an early bird? E-learning can accommodate either preference. Plan on working on the course when your mind is clear and your energy level is high. That is when you learn best. It will take you longer to complete a lesson if you are fatigued. So working on the course in the early morning may be best for the early risers. Evening work may work best for the night people.

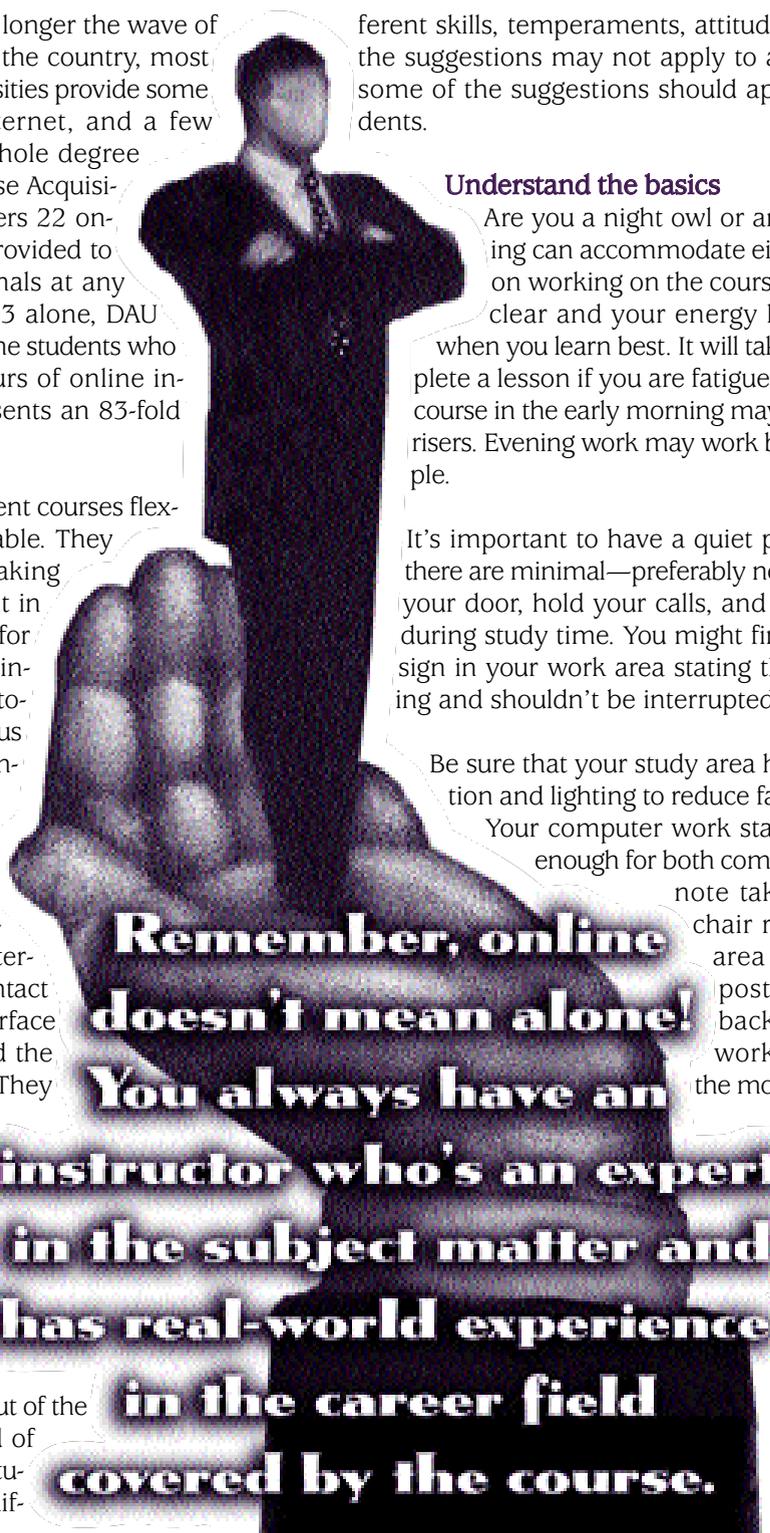
It's important to have a quiet place to study where there are minimal—preferably no—distractions. Close your door, hold your calls, and schedule no visitors during study time. You might find it helps to place a sign in your work area stating that you're in e-training and shouldn't be interrupted.

Be sure that your study area has adequate ventilation and lighting to reduce fatigue and eye strain.

Your computer work station should be large enough for both computer equipment and note taking. A comfortable chair rounds out the work area by improving your posture and reducing back stress. An efficient work place can help set the mood and improve your attitude for taking an online course.

Watch the watch

Everyone has many roles and responsibilities, from professional lives to personal commitments to spiritual obligations, all of which



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require time and energy. So for many online students, there is a constant struggle to balance other obligations and still complete their courses.

All the DAU online courses come with a defined time limit within which students must finish the lesson materials and take all the tests. (Most classes allow 60 days to finish; some allow more or less time.) Many students struggle with completing their online courses on time; pleas for more time are among the requests most frequently received by DAU instructors.

Part of the problem is that students underestimate the time and effort it takes to complete a course, or they may be unclear on what is expected. Be sure you know how many modules or lessons are in the course, what type of material is in each module, and how the examinations function. Most instructors agree that new students should log into the course quickly and try a lesson or two to get a generalized feel for the total time that the course might take.

You also need to consider what is the best time of the day to be on the Internet. Depending upon the amount of traffic, certain times of the day provide faster download times than others. You may need to try different times and adjust your routine accordingly.

Noises, interruptions, and other distractions break concentration and increase the online study time. To fix that problem, some organizations authorize students to use computers in libraries or e-learning centers so that they get away from the hustle and bustle of the office. See if your organization has this arrangement. As a last resort, some students choose to work on their online classes from home, during their own time.

Seek professional help

Remember, online doesn't mean alone! You always have an instructor who's an expert in the subject matter and has real-world experience in the career field covered by the course. Your instructor can assist you in understanding the lesson material and take you beyond the online information by helping you connect the dots between theory and real workplace events.

DAU instructors are also responsible for helping students through administrative problems. Get to know your instructor early, and don't hesitate to contact him or her if you're having difficulty, need advice, or have questions. I usually encourage my students to send me an e-mail about why they are taking the class and their expectations. That opens up the communications channels and improves the experience. Interactivity with the instructor is often the key to a successful online program. It allows the instructor to share ideas, to suggest improvements, and to provide meaningful feedback. Contact your

instructor regularly, especially when you are having trouble.

Another source of help is only a phone call or an e-mail away—the DAU help desk (1-866-568-6924, DSN 655-3459, or dauhelp@dau.mil). The technical wizards at the help desk can assist you in solving computer, connectivity, and Internet access issues. They often work with your local computer support folks to resolve security and firewall blocks. If you're technology-challenged or not computer savvy, the good folks at the help desk can help get you started. They'll assess your computer, Internet connection, bandwidth, and plug-in requirements, and they can direct you to other student support products, like a glossary, online library, or frequently asked questions.

There may be times when nothing seems to work right and you get frustrated. If that happens, please remember that the Internet is a public place. When communicating with your instructor or the help desk, watch how you express your frustrations. Speak and behave as you were in a traditional classroom. You'll find that a little courtesy goes a long way when seeking assistance.

Make sure your support group is ... supportive

To be successful in an e-learning event, you need the support and understanding of your supervisor, co-workers, friends, and family. Your supervisor needs to know when you plan to study so that he or she can help in keeping your study time free of interruptions. DAU always sends supervisors a welcome e-mail when students start a new online course to alert them to the tasks ahead of their employees and to solicit their support.

Co-workers, friends, and family members are often the cause of interruptions. They want to see you. They compete for your attention. Yes, they are important people, but they may need a gentle reminder that you require quiet time to work on your course material. You may have to negotiate some consideration rules of the road to ensure online success. And since consideration goes both ways, you also need to be thoughtful of those around you. For example, if you are taking a course that uses audio feed, don't violate their air space with the sounds of your course. Use headphones.

Student-to-student interaction is an important social aspect of learning. Many students need to feel that connectivity with other people in any class, even online. If you are one of those learners, you might try to form a local study group. Depending upon the course, your instructor may even be able to help you locate people in your work setting who are also taking your course. The more interaction you have with other students, the better. Participating in an informal study group can extend your learning and increase your retention. If you're unfamiliar with the information being presented in class,

someone in the study group may have a good answer for you. (Keep in mind, however, that all your test attempts must be individual, unaided efforts.)

Get in sync with async

Most online training is done in the asynchronous mode. Literally, that means “not at the same time,” and its significance to you is that you can be working on lessons and taking tests even when your instructor is unavailable. It’s very convenient to have access to the course materials at any time of the day or night, and the flexibility of asynchronous interaction allows for reflective time.

The other side of async, however, is that you may not get immediate responses when you have questions. Your instructor is a real person, not a computer programmed for instantaneous response. Depending upon when you send your e-mail, it’s possible that he or she won’t get back to you until the start of the next business day. Time zone differences and alternate work schedules can add to the delays. In addition, online instructors also teach classroom courses and are often away from the office on official travel. They do try to check their voicemail and e-mail even when they are traveling or otherwise busy, so please be patient and allow reasonable time for a response.

Be self-motivated

Learning in an asynchronous environment requires self discipline. You need to pace yourself, since the teacher won’t be setting the schedule. You don’t want to fall behind. It’s often helpful to make a plan of when you are going to work on the course, then stick to it as best as you can, whatever it is—every day, every other day, twice a week, or whatever. Just be sure that your plan is realistic. Balance is key: make sure it’s not so ambitious that you’ll burn out nor

so relaxed that you won’t finish the work within the course time limit.

Eat the elephant in small bytes

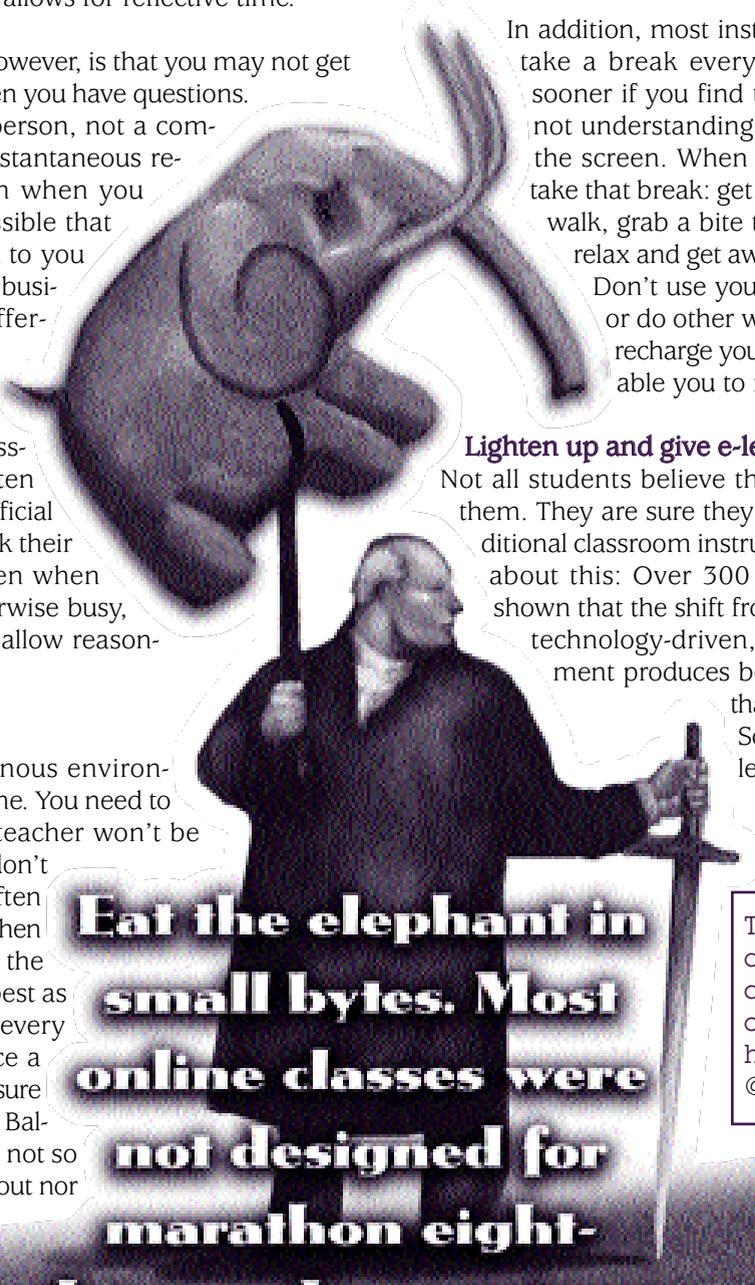
Most online classes were not designed for marathon eight-hour-a-day sessions, day after day. There’s just too much information to digest, and long, grueling sessions don’t support learning the information; instead they add to student fatigue and frustration. A couple of hours a day is generally all the online training that most students can absorb.

In addition, most instructors suggest that you take a break every 20 minutes or so—or sooner if you find that you are reading but not understanding or absorbing what’s on the screen. When you take a break, really take that break: get up, move around, take a walk, grab a bite to eat or a cup of coffee, relax and get away from your study area. Don’t use your break time to pay bills or do other work. A break is meant to recharge your mental abilities and enable you to refocus on the lesson.

Lighten up and give e-learning a chance

Not all students believe that online training is for them. They are sure they can learn only from traditional classroom instruction. If that’s you, think about this: Over 300 empirical studies have shown that the shift from classroom training to technology-driven, individualized environment produces better test scores in more than 98 percent of students. So give it a chance—online learning does work!

The author welcomes comments, questions, and new students for his online courses. Contact him at richard.stillman@dcu.mil.



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