

# Skills for succeeding in online graduate studies.

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## **Abstract**

**For online graduate learners, knowledge of practical skills that promote successful help seeking that go beyond simply suggesting that students ask their instructor for further direction, are invaluable. Skills for succeeding in online graduate health studies shaped from a student's perspective and data collected from an already published study are identified. The skills essential for succeeding in online graduate studies are enlisting help from family, friends and co-workers, recruiting others to proof read assignments, and creating discussion groups outside of the online setting.**

## **Introduction**

**Balancing the demands of full time employment, raising a family, and completing graduate studies online creates extraordinary challenges for health care professionals (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004). Few adult learners feel confident in reaching out for help within "normal" learning environments. Previous attempts to seek help may have resulted in peer and instructor perceptions of incompetence, negative instructor feedback, and feelings of self-doubt. Compounding the often-isolating experiences of learning online, students are commonly confused in the help seeking process. Institutional guidance for online graduate students may be limited to directions requiring them to seek help only from their instructors. Research related to how online graduate students can best seek help and the skills they need to use that help to succeed is limited, making further study essential. In this paper, three critical skills for succeeding in online graduate study programs are presented. These three skills are: (1) enlist help from family, friends, and co-workers, (2) submit assignments for proofreading, and (3) create discussion groups.**

**These skills were originally identified from data collected in a project reported elsewhere (Melrose, Shapiro, LaVallie, 2005 in press). The project was framed from a constructivist theoretical perspective (Peters, 2000) and a naturalistic action research design (Corey, 1949; Kemmis, 1990; Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993; Stringer & Genat, 2004). Data sources included fifteen responses from one question on a program satisfaction questionnaire, two focus groups of five participants and ten audio tape-recorded transcribed interviews with graduates who attended Convocation ceremonies at the Athabasca University campus in Athabasca, Alberta, Canada in June 2003 and June 2004. The researchers analyzed content from these data sources first independently and then collaboratively. The transcripts were thoroughly read and re-read and a systematic process of content analysis was developed (Loiselle et al, 2004) to create the categorization and coding scheme that led to the themes. The research approach was conceptualized from tools examining help-seeking within learning that were tested in an earlier project (Shapiro et al, 2003). Trustworthiness was established through ongoing interaction and member checking with participants to ensure authenticity. Full ethical approval was granted from the Athabasca University Ethics Committee.**

**The following question was included on the graduate satisfaction questionnaire and provided the structure for discussion in both the focus groups and the individual audiotape recorded transcribed interviews:**

Seeking help with learning can be difficult for online students at the graduate level. Please describe an incident when, even though you read the study guide, that you did not understand all the instructions and did not know what to do. As the course progressed, and other students began to work--what did you do? What kind of help did you need and who did you seek it from? What happened? Do you think other people in the class would do the same thing? Are there "unwritten rules" for getting help as an online graduate student? If you would be willing to describe your experience in more detail, please e-mail Sherri Melrose (sherrim@athabasca.ca).

**In the original project, the following four themes emerged from analyzing the data and represent key findings. The first theme was that self-help included reflection and rereading directions available within the course. The second theme was that a primary source of help was other students in the class. The third theme was that involving family, friends and co-workers provided important educational support. The fourth theme was that instructors' first message, involvement in weekly discussions and anecdotal comments were highly valued. This article expands on the third theme and elaborates on specific skills that students can implement to succeed in online graduate studies.**

**Findings revealed how enlisting help from others is essential. Given that online learning occurs in relative isolation, it is necessary to remain self-directed. WebCt is an asynchronistic, online learning environment that creates a virtual classroom affording graduate students the opportunity to work at their own pace. It offers forums for posting discussion regarding course content, a coffee room to create a supportive environment, and chat rooms for virtual synchronistic discourse. In spite of all the positives of WebCt that assist with successful online graduate studies, students find a number of challenges in comprehending content. As one participant identified, due to the flexibility of time in working on course content, working after everyone else has gone to bed is common. Few online resources are available at midnight or on the weekends. Another participant articulated the limitations in immediate discussion, due to the absence of a face-to-face classroom setting. Although the chat rooms are accessible, there is a lack of convenience in setting up the situation. Many participants echoed the feeling that using asynchronistic learning environments often creates a barrier to immediate assistance. Consequently, participants reported that they enlist help from family, friends, and co-workers, recruit others to proof read assignments, and create discussion groups outside of the online setting.**

## **Review of the Literature**

**A literature review revealed that the process of seeking help within an educational environment is a valuable and strategic resource for learners (Karabenic, 1999; Conrad, 2002; and Stokes, 2000). The ability to reach out to others to ask for help when it is necessary is an adaptive learning skill that promotes success. In the field of education, research into the experience of seeking help has been undertaken in primary and secondary schools (Bee-Gates, Howard-Pitney, LaFromboise, & Rowe, 2002; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; and Newman, 2000), in undergraduate university settings (Karabenick and Knapp, 1991; Karabenick & Sharma, 1994; and Bailey, 1997), in an undergraduate school of nursing (Price,**

2003), in an online undergraduate program (Taplin, Yum, Jegede, Fan, & Chan, 2001), and in an online graduate program (Melrose, Shapiro, & LaVallie, 2005, in press). Other articles aimed at graduate level learners explore seeking help for mental health related issues (Ekong, 2004,), how to build community within the online environment (Hasler-Waters & Napier, 2002; Wang, Sierra, & Folger; 2003, Swan, 2002; Woods & Ebersole, 2003; and Royal, 2002), or strategies for accessing library resources. While an understanding of how online graduate learners seek help is beginning to emerge, little is known about the specific strategies these learners require to lessen their isolation, and increase their comprehension of the material.

Fear of negative responses from instructors deters learners from seeking help (Karabenick, 1998; Taplin et al, 2001; and Price, 2002). Karabenick (1998) emphasized how "Help seeking has traditionally been associated with learning dependency, even dishonesty, and at best a mere coping strategy" (p.1). Bornstein (1992) supports this notion in identifying that fear of appearing ignorant prevents individuals from seeking help. Price (2002, p. 2) asserted that learning is a "difficult journey because we have been socialized to measure ourselves in terms of what we know, can do and can prove to others." Price identified how perceptions of the value of help seeking can start with how individuals represent themselves to others. Among learners, a belief can exist that the instructor is the expert and that help seeking is a concession of ignorance. Students fear that if they concede to not knowing one thing, the instructor may question their competence.

Taplin et al (2001) notes how high-achieving undergraduate students do seek out help more often than low achievers, and urged for a move away from the debate around why students seek help. Instead, Taplin et al encouraged a deeper exploration of where learners do seek help and how their own strategies might strengthen. Affirming the need to communicate help seeking skills that lead to success in learning, Taplin et al (p. 8) identified "the need to explore strategies that will make it less troublesome for students to seek help when they need it." For online graduate learners, knowledge of practical skills that promote successful help seeking that goes beyond simply suggesting that students ask their instructor for further direction, are invaluable. Drawing from the data collected during the Melrose, Shapiro and LaVallie (2005, in press) project and the author's own experience completing a Master of Health Studies (MHST) online graduate degree, the skills for succeeding in online graduate studies are discussed.

### **Enlist Help from Family, Friends and Co-workers**

The importance of enlisting the help of friends, family, and co-workers is essential to succeeding in online study. Friends, family, and co-workers are accessible, provide an outside perspective, and are supportive. These factors nourish success for students. Participants identified that reaching out to family, friends, and co-workers is very helpful. Students take a proactive approach to learning by anticipating the need to reach out beyond the borders of online learning and secure available systems early on. Involving family, friends, and co-workers affords students opportunities to fine tune opinions and understanding before presenting it to the somewhat-daunting atmosphere of graduate education. This outside support is not a replacement for the efforts educational institutes make in creating an online community, but does enhance this process by increasing accessible resources. Participants identified that they made friends with fellow classmates and kept in contact for support and direction as the program progressed, even when they were in separate courses.

Friends, family, and co-workers are valuable resources in comprehending content, providing direction and guidance. As one participant identified, "Sometimes I would just take the email message to friends or librarians and ask them how they would interpret what I did not understand." Other participants identified that because of the distance-learning situation they sought help from a number of co-workers who had completed graduate degrees from other universities, for clarity and direction before

**submitting assignments. Participants used co-workers to "bounce ideas off of." One participant described how (he/she) would do their readings ahead of time and then take the concept to work to get a better understanding and different views:**

I think if you're working in a health environment at the time you're taking the courses, or if you're not working, it doesn't matter--and I wasn't working in a specifically health care situation--it would have been very valuable--a bonus I guess--it didn't take away from my experience, but to get a group of people who you check in with in person every three months. Whether it's over coffee or whatever, people who are health care professionals, who probably some of them your friends, maybe some of them just co-workers that you've had in the past that you know maybe it would change every course according to what content you're taking--to bounce ideas--not like an accountability group, but that kind of--almost a support group.

**In addition to immediate comprehension of material, family can assist in creating an environment conducive to studying. Family members watch children, offer financial resources, and much like friends, provide the subtle needs of debriefing, guidance, and interpretation. They are also important in debriefing with you when you receive uncomfortable feedback, or course content that is challenging. It is comforting to be able to pick up the phone and contact a trusted person to discuss your experiences. Enlisting friends, family, and co-workers is an essential skill in succeeding in online study.**

### **Recruit Others to Proof Read Assignments**

**Recruiting someone else to proofread your paper could mean the difference between a clear, succinct document and a paper full of disjointed ramblings. We have not met the spouse of a graduate student not enlisted to proofread an assignment (a vow, not specified during the wedding ceremony). One participant identified that proofreading is not meant to substitute reading your own work over, "it would be more asking them what direction I should proceed if I was, in their opinion, following what I should be in terms of the outline, and the instructions that were given." Having someone else proof read your paper, enhances clarity and direction. Participants identified that having others proof read their material supported their feelings of credibility. Recruits who have taken graduate studies are even more valuable. Enlisting someone who has knowledge and experience regarding graduate level writing is crucial to academic success. Students encourage recruits to provide honest feedback and suggestions for improvement, keeping in mind that the more feedback provided, the deeper the level of comprehension. In addition, if the online educational institution allows, hiring a technical editor is of benefit.**

**Students may hire someone to type their assignments if their computer skills are lacking. Accessing efficient word processing programs is also crucial for student success. Typing forum postings in a word processing document before posting online, assists with spelling and grammar concerns, not always identified. Success in online graduate studies relies heavily on recruiting others for proofreading assignments.**

### **Create Discussion Groups**

**Creating discussion groups outside of the online environment support a deeper comprehension of course concepts. One participant identified "bringing content to discuss at work helped me shed light on difficult concepts." Creating discussion groups among co-workers to acquire diverging opinions and depth of comprehension is essential when enlisting educational supports. One participant stated,**

I did need that kind of personal face to lace talking it through context, and so one of the things I found really helpful personally was to find people within my work area that would follow me through each course. Because much as you can express yourself online it's still of--you know you don't actually get the time to actually work it through and discuss it through and try to get some understanding of it. I really did use my co-workers at work a lot, almost as my tutorial group and again it wasn't something that I did at the beginning.

**Discussion groups can be formal or informal, structured or unstructured, scheduled or unscheduled. Discussion groups happen synchronistically (in real time), a situation not always possible through online learning. Discussion groups promote diversity of discussion, challenges of ideas, and spontaneous critical thinking to deepen understanding. Didactic discourse is also valuable with co-workers. Co-workers are not the only resource. Relying on family and friends in discussion is another critical factor. Diversity of opinion is the key to surviving content comprehension. In addition to discussing course content, when creating an outline for assignments, students may bring concepts to discussion groups to explore topics to address in the assignment. The verbal discussion of course topics and potential content in group conversations supports critical thinking and enhances successful online learning**

## **Conclusion**

**Few adult learners feel confident in reaching out for help within learning environments. Online graduates may be limited to directions for learning support because of the isolated learning environment and the desire to remain self-directed. The importance of enlisting the help of friends, family, and co-workers, recruiting others for proofreading, and creating discussion groups outside of the online environment is critical to succeeding in online study. Ultimately, implementing the three skills of enlisting the help of friends, family, and co-workers; recruiting others for proofreading; and creating discussion groups outside of the online environment, supports student success in online graduate studies.**

## **Author Note**

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countries.

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