

Why I love online learning and teaching -- especially for project management.

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I have spent over 4,000 hours in online classrooms as both a student and a teacher – long enough to have established an opinion on the topic of online versus traditional classes. I am not with the majority when I say I overwhelmingly prefer the online environment to the physical classroom environment for project management learning. I know the arguments that critics have about it ... it doesn't have the same social bonding benefits as meeting students face-to-face, it's hard to demonstrate skills, it's not as fun, etc. And I admit that there are some people it doesn't work for. But to many others (especially those who are computer savvy, good readers, and self-motivated) it is a Godsend.

I believe the reasons for online learning success, which I have attempted to list below, far outweigh the negatives. Consider these benefits:

1. Impartiality.

The benefits of impartiality in the learning environment help us focus on the issues instead of the distracting personal traits of the people we are communicating with. Wow, they are pretty/ugly. They talk/dress/act/smell/walk funny.

Eliminating these personal distractions leads us all to more appropriate thoughts, less physical judging, and fairer grading. Not that these issues aren't important to the day-to-day success of some project managers in the workplace, but isn't it nice to remove those distractions while we focus on the topic of learning good project management processes, tools, and techniques?

This is an example in a different setting, where appearance shouldn't count: According to "Orchestrating Impartiality," a study sponsored by the National Bureau of Economic Research, it was almost unknown prior to 1970 for women to make up more than ten percent of any leading American orchestra. However, as blind auditions (performing behind a screen) became more common, female representation rose dramatically by 1996 to an average of 35 percent throughout the United States. Compare this to Europe, where auditions are done almost entirely without screens, and where men still comprise somewhere around 99 percent of the typical orchestra lineup.

2. The Internet is the work field for Project Management.

Learning project management online helps us practice in the same virtual environment where many project managers will be working. Most professional project managers today are working with multiple virtual team members and vendors. At a minimum they are using e-mail communication (often even when co-workers are located in the same building with co-located team members). In today's business world, some project managers rarely meet their project stakeholders, communicating primarily through posting project reports and information to project portals and tracking systems. Therefore

it is important to feel comfortable communicating and working online. What could be a better simulation of this than online courses?

3. Save the logistical hassles.

Driving, parking, and finding the room on a big campus, is not value-added time. Memories of speeding to campus to make it on time, struggling to find a parking spot, plugging the parking meter, and running up steps to get to class is a big part of my student life memory. I also remember plenty of times that I would arrive to find that my instructor was sick and had cancelled class!

According to DreamSchool.org, one of the most common reoccurring dreams that people have is to dream of forgetting which room of the school the class is being held in, or she may be unable to find her locker to get her books. I remember having this dream many times myself (which is supposed to mean that the dreamer is unprepared for gaining growth and awareness in their waking life- which is another issue entirely) but I'm happy to report that online courses do not seem to trigger that stress response.

4. Students tend to learn best when they are relaxed and comfortable.

Sitting at home with bunny slippers up on the desk, sipping a cup of tea and working online at a time of convenience is absolutely the best learning environment.

Critics will retort that there are too many distractions at home. And it takes discipline to stay focused. One of the discipline tricks I use is to mentally note a short progress milestone, usually about 30 minutes out, which when achieved I will reward with a distraction (to throw in a load of laundry, play with the pet, etc).

These distractions, although real, are not more challenging than the distractions of trying to pay attention to a boring lecture, or trying not to think about the sometimes strange student sitting in front of you.

5. Geographic and organizational diversity of students.

When I physically attended college, my teachers and all of my fellow students were from the same general geographic area, most worked for one of the local employers, and there was very little ethnic, intellectual, or cultural diversity. Online classes still are not as diverse as I would like them to be, but they are still much more diverse than the physical classroom.

There are a few trends in the types of students who choose online. Some of these trends are:

- People who are computer and Internet savvy.
- Parents who can get their education while still being home and available for their children.
- People who live in the rural communities (away from good educational opportunities).
- Physically disabled people.
- People who move often, yet want to stick with one college.

All in all, the online classroom provides a wider pool of teachers and students, which greatly adds to the richness of the group discussions.

6. Skip the busy work.

The online environment does not tempt instructors to “fill up” class time with low-value activities. When teaching and learning online the courses tend to be structured to jump into the topic, work with it to help ensure learning, and then move on when the student has individually mastered it. Students are better able to work at their own pace rather than be forced to “fill a classroom hour”. Minute for minute, it eliminates waiting for others and therefore online is just more productive.

7. Deadline orientation.

In the project world, schedules are focused on milestones and deadlines rather than specifying exactly when work should be performed. The physical classroom tends to treat learning as a timed meeting.

Different students work at different paces. Some people are new to the material and need more time, others might be slower readers or workers, and it can be very difficult to accurately estimate the time it takes a students to do an exercise. Classroom time is often structured for exercises to be lecture breaks for the instructor. However there are always a certain percentage of students who don't get to complete the exercise, while others complete their work early and end up politely wasting time.

The online environment is structured around milestones and deadlines, the way real work projects are. There is no wasting of time. Students learn to complete assignment deadlines rather than to just show up. As a matter of fact, the act of just showing up online without doing work is unrewarded.

8. Safety.

Many adult learners attend evening classes that often conclude around 10:00 pm. After class there is the long, dark walk to the car. This is followed by a long drive home in an extremely tired state of mind, after doing double duty as a full-time employee followed by four hours in the classroom. There are personal safety and public safety issues involved with this scenario that are completely eliminated in the online environment.

9. Earlier true view of the course.

Online courses provide students with the opportunity to “see” the reality of the course much earlier than the traditional classroom setting. In both formats, the good instructor will initially provide a comprehensive course syllabus outlining the content of each class or unit. These descriptions, although well-intentioned, often are difficult for a student to comprehend until the student understands the instructor's vocabulary, style, and meaning. Many students in traditional classes don't feel like they really understand the flow of the class until about 40 to 50% of the way through the semester.

The online course is an open book to students. As soon as they gain access to the course, they generally are free to view all of the assignments and activities in all of their detail. They can very quickly determine what they will be experiencing. They can make a much quicker assessment on if they want to complete the course, or if it wasn't what they wanted or expected, they can drop it before they have much time invested.

In summary, I'm anxiously awaiting, and lobbying for, online technical improvements that will make our Internet courses more engaging through better design, multimedia, story telling, and tool sharing. However even with the current, relatively unsophisticated approach available today it is already a wonderful learning environment.