

# Technology

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## Learning Online: A New Educational Opportunity for Teachers and Parents

**T**wenty years ago, parents and teachers who wished to expand their understanding of gifted children and gifted education were limited to reading a few books and journals on the topic. They may have been fortunate enough to live near a university that offered a course in gifted education. Today the situation has changed. Thanks to the Internet, a myriad of educational opportunities exist.

Not only is the Internet filled with sites exclusively dedicated to gifted children (e.g., <http://www.hoagies-gifted.com>), many universities with gifted education programs now offer their courses online to an increasing number of students. By the end of this year, 5.8 million adults (Jordan, 2000) will have completed online courses from 84% of the universities in the United States (“MDR,” 2002), and many of those courses will be in gifted education. Some universities even offer entire graduate degrees in gifted education online.

Over 50 years ago, Albert Einstein wrestled with the time and space continuum; today’s Internet student isn’t concerned about either. Online classes can be completed from an Internet connection anywhere on the planet. “One of the reasons online courses have become popular is that students can participate when it is convenient for them to do so” (Poole, 2000, p. 164). Well-designed online courses can furnish adult learners with more control over the learning process. Since Web-based courses are often taught asynchronously, learners attend at their convenience. Because the Web is widely available, courses can be completed from various locations. Online students also avoid the frustrations of commuter traffic and campus parking—transforming

commuting time into significant learning time.

Web-based courses have evolved from inaugural sites where text was posted with limited interaction between the instructors and students, and even less interaction among students, to discussion-based courses creating communities of learners. “The Web is now more than an area to access and post information: It is a place to interactively communicate and construct knowledge” (Van Gorp, 1998, p. 12). However, all Web-based courses are not created equal.

For the past 4 years I have been involved in teaching and designing Web-based courses in gifted and talented education. During that time, our team of instructors has learned a great deal about what works and does not work with adult learners. While most of our online students have been teachers wanting to gain certification in gifted education, more and more of our students are parents who wish to better understand the educational, social, and emotional needs of their children. The purpose of this column is to discuss instructional design issues related to online courses and to assist readers in evaluating the components of online courses that are most important to them. A variety of Web-based designs exist, and learners should reflect on how they learn best as they select the most effective

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online learning design (e.g., Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Florida Gulf Coast University, 2001; Knowlton & Weiss, 2000; Siegle, Young, King, & Silver, 2001; Siegle, 2002).

## Important Questions

The following are some questions readers may wish to ask themselves and their instructors before enrolling in an online course (see Table 1).

### ***Do I really want to enroll in an online course?***

Online learning is not for everyone. It requires self-discipline and time management skills. Online learning also requires active participation in the learning process. Participants need good reading and writing skills and should be comfortable with technology.

Without a regularly scheduled, physical class to attend, participants with poor time management skills often fall behind in online courses. Initially, many students also find navigating a Web-based course to be difficult. Inquire whether the instructor includes an introduction to navigating the Web course and provides an opportunity to practice and master the computer skills required for the course. These should be introductory, nongraded activities during the first week of the course.

### ***What hardware and software are required?***

A standard phone modem connected to an Internet service provider (ISP) is sufficient for most courses.

However, some courses include streaming video and video clips that must be downloaded through the Internet. Students who are enrolled in these courses may wish to connect to the Internet with a cable modem or digital subscriber line (DSL) phone connections. These faster Internet service providers are also more expensive.

While most courses require the users to have a Web browser, a word processing program, and possibly a graphics program, some courses also required the participants to purchase special software. Prior to enrolling in a course, participants should confirm what software they will need. They should also determine whether the memory and processing speed of their computer adequately handles the specialty software that is necessary.

### ***Does the course allow for flexible participation over time?***

Participants often enroll in an online course because they have a busy schedule and wish to complete the course on their own time schedule. Course developers usually create their courses around either synchronous or asynchronous interactions. Synchronous communication occurs in real-time. In other words, everyone is connected to the Internet and interacts at the same time. Asynchronous communication is not live. With asynchronous communication, messages and information are posted and read at the learner's convenience.

While synchronous communication may seem appealing and interactive, it has several drawbacks. Everyone

involved must be available at a specific time. Depending on when the instructor schedules the live connection and on the participants' various time zones, some students may find themselves setting an alarm in the middle of the night to attend an online class. We recently taught a course with students spread from Connecticut to Hawaii to Japan. There simply wasn't a convenient time for everyone to be connected. Participants involved in a synchronous course will find that they must organize their lives around course events. This negates one of the prime reasons for taking an online course: course attendance when convenient. Live activities can also be problematic. Following more than five or six people in a live chat conversation is difficult. An ISP may be scheduled for maintenance when a class is scheduled and participants miss the synchronous event. Participants may even lose their Internet connection in the middle of a synchronous event and experience difficulty reconnecting.

A major advantage of asynchronous communication is timing. Participants can attend to class activities when it is convenient for them. However, this can be problematic for individuals with poor time management skills. "I'll get to it later" turns into never getting to it as the participant falls further and further behind.

"Think time" is another advantage of asynchronous courses. Because time usually passes between when participants read material and when they respond, more reflective thinking occurs. Our students have commented

## Table 1 Self-Check Quiz for Potential Online Participation

Successful online participants respond positively to the following:

### *Technology Skills*

- I use the Internet regularly.
- I comfortably send and receive e-mail attachments.
- I can adjust to basic technical problems.
- I can organize my life to be near a computer with reliable Internet access.

### *Expression Skills*

- I easily understand print material.
- I communicate well through writing.
- I am able to organize information.
- I can provide supporting evidence for arguments.

### *Self-Management Skills*

- I monitor my progress.
- I am able to set aside some time each day to dedicate to the course.
- I am able to structure a working space.
- I am able to set goals and develop timelines for meeting them.

that class discussions are actually better in an online class. They appreciate the opportunity to reflect on what they will contribute to online discussions. They also welcome a format where everyone can equally contribute without a few students monopolizing the discussion.

Interaction among the participants

should be built into the course. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Participants can work on cooperative projects. They may also provide each other with feedback on individual projects they are developing. The instructor can provide provocative articles for participants to read and discuss through electronic discussion boards. Instructors can facilitate instruction by posting challenging questions for discussion. An interactive online course develops a community of learners where students often get to know each other better than students do in a campus course.

### *How much and what type of participation is required?*

With an online class, participants need time to acclimate themselves to the pace of the class. A well-organized course includes guidelines for student participation. Are participants required to visit the class Web site each day? Every other day? Once a week? Are they required to respond to other students through electronic posts? How often are they required to post comments? Are the discussions graded? If they are graded, what criteria does the instructor use to evaluate them? How much time does the instructor expect the participants to spend on the course? What is the role of the instructor in class discussion? Some instructors ask students to interact with each other and wrestle with complex class topics without instructor input, while other instructors actively guide course discussions. The instructor should establish these guidelines early in the courses.

Some courses require a great deal of online time. This is time connected to the course via the Internet. Generally, participants spend more time offline preparing for their online interactions. Offline time may include reading articles and a text, as well as preparing papers and responses to discussion questions. Prior to enrolling in a class, par-

ticipants should investigate the average number of online and offline hours previous students have spent on a course.

Instructors should create flexible assignment deadlines. Instructors ought to offer time-spans within which assignments and projects are completed. Parents and teachers have busy lives and online courses should take that into account.

Instructor feedback is another critical component. How and how often does the instructor provide feedback? Students deserve regular instructor feedback throughout a course. This may be through e-mail, postal mail, Web postings, or phone calls. A course Web site should include an area where students can periodically check their progress. This may include a password protected grade book.

### *Is the course self-contained?*

Does the course contain all of the material the student needs to be successful? Most courses include outside readings. These often include books and journal articles. The university bookstore where the online course originates should sell the required course books. While participants may be able to purchase their books online from suppliers and publishers, if these sources fail, the university bookstore should have the necessary material.

Is the university library available to online students? Can articles be obtained through electronic reserve? Most university libraries maintain electronic reserves of journal articles for registered students. This is essential for participants in isolated areas. Courses projects should not require physical access to a library beyond what is available electronically.

### *Are there additional tuition fees for online courses?*

Offering online courses often requires additional university staff and

many universities charge supplemental fees for their online courses although many universities do not. Some universities waive out-of-state tuition requirements for online courses. The pricing structure for online courses varies from university to university.

### *How do I find an online course?*

Finding online courses in gifted education is easy. Many university Web sites have an area dedicated to online course offering. Internet search engines are also helpful in locating online courses in gifted education.

Enrolling in an online course is an opportunity to interact with educators and parents who share a passion for gifted children. Just as a potential college student visits college campuses, a potential online student should spend some time choosing an online course. Students who select an online course or program of study that fits with their needs and learning styles are more likely to have a satisfactory online experience. **GCT**

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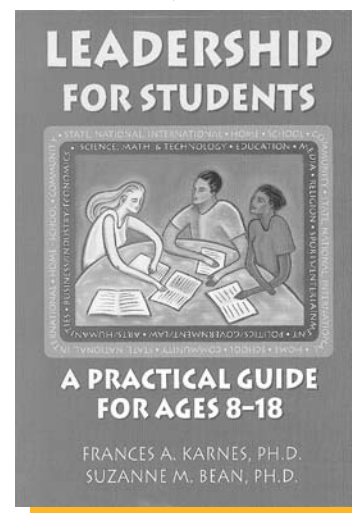
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## Author Note

While the author discusses online courses for parents and teachers, online courses can also meet the educational needs of gifted students. Many states offer online high school courses. Many of these courses are appropriate for gifted elementary students. Elementary- and high-school-age gifted students may also wish to explore their interests and develop their talents through online university courses.

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