

Study Skills for Online Learning

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There is a lot of medical education on the web and a growing pedagogy on how to make the most of this new medium for the purposes of education¹. There are guides on how to create online learning resources, on how to access online resources, and even how to choose what resources might be best for individual learners or specific circumstances². However there is very little on how learners should make the most of online medical education. There are guides on how to develop general study skills but little on how to develop skills that will work well online^{3,4}. This short review article attempts to redress this shortcoming in the literature by suggesting a number of skills that are likely to be effective when using the web for medical learning.

The first and perhaps most important point to make about study skills for online learning is that learners should not automatically think that the skills that have made them a success in traditional learning environments will necessarily be the same skills that will make them a success online. For example some students will gainfully read textbooks for hours and make notes on their books as required; they will be unlikely to be able to read on a screen for as long and may have to use specific software to make notes. Some students like to use active listening skills to engage with

their lecturers in the classroom – this will not work in the same way with online lectures – indeed it may not work at all. There are multiple examples but the principle remains constant: students will have to adapt existing skills for the online environment or will have to develop new skills from scratch. Students should not be unnecessarily intimidated by the thought of having to do this – they will have likely made similar changes to study habits in the past (for example when moving from school to university).

The second important point to remember is not to think that online learning will be any easier than another form of learning. Online learning is not a miracle pedagogy – learning online requires the same work and dedication that is required in any form of learning. Learning online may be more convenient or lower cost – but that is not the same thing as stating that it is easier^{5,6}. Learning online will take dedicated time and discipline. Real dedication will be needed to attend to online learning and often there are few rituals to go through that make traditional learning more acceptable and part of a routine. These might include travelling to medical school, talking to colleagues before class, and discussing subjects with the tutor immediately after class. Online learning is not associated with any of these rituals – so it may sometimes be necessary to make up your own rituals when working online; for example to always start at 8am and to take a 10 minute coffee break one hour later.

The third skill that will need to be learned is online social skills⁷. Learning online

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often requires interaction with tutors and fellow learners by means of discussion boards and chat rooms. But just as you wouldn't walk into a lecture theatre and ask a fellow student the answer to an assessment question, you shouldn't do this online. It is best to take the time to introduce yourselves to colleagues online and find out a little about them. Spend some time watching how others interact and the tone and manner of discussions. Then join in yourself and try to follow the etiquette shown by others. With online interaction, verbal and non-verbal cues are absent – so it is best to be careful when communication by the typed word – what seems innocent to the author might seem offensive to the reader.

The fourth skill, as with any form of learning, preparation is essential for online learning. It is best to ensure that you have the right environment before starting – ideally an office where there will be few distractions. Hardware and software requirements will need to be fulfilled and ideally tested before the learning session starts. As with any learning think beforehand what you would like to get out of the learning, consider what your learning needs are and what questions you might like to ask – if there are opportunities for asking questions.⁸ And just as with face to face learning, leave some time at the end to reflect on what you have learned and ideally to articulate these reflections and capture them online⁹. Leave time also for thinking about how you are going to use the learning – in future course work or perhaps in the actual workplace¹⁰.

Another pivotal skill that is good to remember is to be flexible. Just as there are a variety of forms of face to face learning, there are already a range of different forms of online learning¹¹. There are formative knowledge assessment, virtual patients, simulation based

programmes, synchronous and asynchronous podcasts and webcasts. No single set of study skills will work for those different forms of learning – think about what will work best for you in these different contexts. At the same time distractions must be overcome. There are the distractions of learning at home that must be overcome. There are also the distractions of the internet – books, games and videos unrelated to the subject matter at hand are only a click away. The learner must have discipline and so should adhere to authenticated and reliable websites which are underpinned by evidence based foundations.

It is impossible to give a complete and comprehensive account of study skills in online learning. The above are general principles only. However as a final caveat it is probably best to remember not to do all your learning online. A blend of differing learning formats is likely to be best to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours to become a well-rounded healthcare professional. It is a myth that providers of education can provide blended learning solutions – ultimately it is the learner that should do the blending. Developing skills in the regard is also likely to be worthwhile.

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