



# Making the Most Of On-line Learning

An Introduction to Learning on the Internet



Education Development Center, Inc.

gender,  
diversities &  
technology  
institute  
Education, Employment,  
and Community Programs



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The Gender, Diversities & Technology Institute is a strategic initiative of the Education, Employment, and Community Programs (EEC). EEC projects focus on improving living, learning, and working across the life span. The Institute leverages the power of diversity—gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, disability, culture, and sexual orientation—to improve education and work globally. The Institute identifies emerging issues, conducts research on how technology impacts learners, and develops innovative technology projects that demonstrate the power of diversity. Through our work, we seek to deepen understanding of critical social problems and to create effective and empowering technology-based solutions.

Information about our research, projects, and services is available by writing to the Gender, Diversities & Technology Institute, 55 Chapel Street, Newton, MA 02458, or visiting [www.edc.org/GDI](http://www.edc.org/GDI).

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# Introduction

On-line learning is rapidly gaining popularity. More and more people of all ages are turning to the Internet for skills training, workshops, high school courses, college courses, and professional development. By 2002, over 200 million hosts were providing individuals of all ages with millions of on-line learning opportunities.

On-line learning offers a promise of “anytime, anywhere” learning. Gone is the pressure of having to be in one place at a given time. But this is a new environment, with an evolving culture, and a set of expectations about interacting and communicating. On-line learning offers different challenges than on-site training or courses. “Meeting” teachers and students is different—you often do not see the other people in the course, nor their reactions, and as there is no physical site, it may sometimes feel like there is no class. But it can be a highly rewarding experience, in which you get to meet and talk with individuals from around the country and around the globe. Here you can expand your skills and knowledge in ways we would never have imagined only a few years ago.

On-line learning is an adventure. For someone new to the medium, it may be hard to know how to prepare for this virtual classroom—what kind of equipment works best, what does the virtual classroom feel like, and what are the expectations? Even those who have already ventured into e-learning may have questions. Like any adventure, a “road map” or friendly guide can make all the difference, ensuring that the traveler is well prepared and does not get lost. This booklet is just that: an easy-to-follow guide that helps individuals select appropriate on-line learning, prepare for taking a course, and actively participate. We hope it gives you a way to get the most out of your on-line learning experience.

The guide addresses common issues in on-line learning and will help you determine how best to prepare in advance so that you have the most successful experience possible. It is divided into specific sections, each designed to introduce you to an important part of on-line learning. These include: Access to Technology; Technology Skills; Communication On-line; Course Structure; Learning Style; and Ensuring Your Success. Each section begins with a short overview that introduces an important consideration for e-learning, then provides a set of guiding questions and information, and examples of how these can apply in actual on-line courses. The section concludes with Questions to Ask—a checklist for course preparation and participation.





# Access to Technology

Little or no access to the necessary technology is a big obstacle for many people enrolling in an on-line course. This section helps you to identify hardware and software components that you might need in order to fully participate in an on-line course. Since technology requirements are dependent on the course design, these will vary from course to course. Be sure to check with your course administrator for a specific list of requirements.

## Regular and reliable access to a computer and to the Internet

Most on-line courses require you to have access to a computer with a steady and reliable **Internet** connection in order that you can utilize Web-based material.

Most public libraries and community technology centers (CTCs) provide Internet access to the public free of charge. If you choose to have Internet access at home, you will need to research the service options and fee information for different Internet Service Providers (ISPs). In most cases, you pay a standard monthly fee for an ISP, unlike in Internet or cyber cafés, where you usually pay for blocks of Internet time.

## Access for people with disabilities

People with disabilities, depending on the nature of the disability, may have different technology needs, such as an alternative keyboard, screen readers and refreshable Braille, or sound notification. You will probably be familiar with the required technology if you have a disability and regularly use computers. If not, you need to research hardware and software you will require and how to make use of it.

Well-designed Web sites should follow guidelines set by the **World Wide Web Consortium (WC3)**. Adherence to these voluntary guidelines increases a Web site's user-friendliness.

## Access to technical support

Many on-line courses will have avenues through which students can request help on various technical problems. This support can come in several forms, including e-mail, an on-line discussion area, or a telephone helpline. Check to see if the course you are interested in taking offers any such help.



### Terms to know

The World Wide Web (www) is the visible part of the **Internet**, that is, the Web pages that you see. The Internet is the global network of computers and cables through which information flows. The Web exists because the Internet has made it possible for computers to communicate with each other.

Many computers have either a Windows or Macintosh operating system. Windows was developed by Microsoft and is available on most personal computers. Macintosh is installed on Apple computers.

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The **World Wide Web Consortium (WC3)** develops technical guidelines for the World Wide Web infrastructure, taking into consideration the legal, social, and commercial issues that arise in using the Web. The WC3 promotes technologies that take into account the variety of languages, cultures, education, abilities, physical limitations, and access to material resources that users of the World Wide Web experience (<http://www.w3.org/Consortium/>). Sites that have met these accessibility standards usually have a "**Bobby Approved**" logo at the bottom of the homepage. Some sites may not have this logo, but that does not necessarily mean that they do not meet the minimum requirements.





## Terms to know

Files are made up of a collection of **bytes**. These bytes might represent the characters of a text file, the instructions of a software application for the computer records of a database or the colors for an image file. To get an idea what these figures mean, consider this: one page of text is 27 kilobytes or 27,000 bytes, a 15-second video clip is 1,227 KB or 1,227,000 bytes.

\*\*\*\*

The **CPU** or **micro-processor** is the heart of any computer and processes instructions from the user. Examples of types of CPUs are Pentium, K6, Sparc, and PC.

\*\*\*\*

**Wireless technology** provides access to the Internet; but unlike other types of Internet connection such as dial-up or cable, it does not require wires. An example is a satellite connection. Another example is a hand-held device, such as a Palm-Pilot, with a cell phone to access the Internet.

\*\*\*\*

**Video** and **audio** can be delivered over the Internet either as downloads (where they are saved to the computer) or streaming media. Streaming media are not stored, but rather are played in the form of a continuous broadcast. An encoder converts the media into a streaming format; the server makes it available over the Internet; and the player retrieves the content.

## Technology requirements for the specific course

Different courses will have different technical requirements based on the format of the course. For example, a course with video clips will require your computer to have software that can play clips. In that case you would need to find out which format the course's video clips are created in and to ensure that you have the necessary software.

A listing of hardware and software requirements follows. Remember that all courses have their own specific requirements. You will need to find out what the technology requirements are from the course administrator or facilitator or from the course information. You may have a software program that is similar to the one that is recommended for the course. If you are in doubt discuss it with the course administrator.

## Hardware

### ■ *Determine if hard disk space is sufficient*

Find out how much free disk space is available on your computer's hard drive. Typical desktop computers today have a hard disk with a capacity of between 10 and 40 gigabytes (i.e., between 10 and 40 billion bytes.) When a computer program requests a file, the hard disk retrieves these **bytes** and sends them to the **computer's central processing unit (CPU)** one at a time.

### ■ *Check amount of memory available*

Random access memory (RAM) is also measured in bytes. The amount of RAM available determines how quickly your computer responds to commands. You may need to add more RAM if your system responds slowly. If you are running Windows 95/98, it is preferable to have at least 64 megabytes, while Windows NT/2000 needs 128 megabytes or more to work well. If you plan on accessing many of video and music files, 258 megabytes of RAM is preferable.

### ■ *Determine the minimum Internet connectivity speed requirement*

The speed with which your computer accesses the Internet will depend on what type of connectivity you have, for example a dial-up connection, faster broadband connections like cable modem; Digital Subscriber Line (DSL), T1, and T3; or **wireless connections**.

Dial-up connections transmit relatively small amounts of data at a time—usually up to 56 kilobytes (KB) worth of data. Therefore, if you plan on downloading large amounts of data, such as graphics and multimedia content, or accessing streamed media (**video or audio**), you should consider faster broadband connections. T1 and T3 connections are typically used by large organizations that have a network of computers. The number of people sharing a network simultaneously also determines speed of connectivity. That is why, for instance, many people complain about the slowness of their Internet connection in the afternoon, when many more people access the Internet through the same network.



## Software

- *Know your browser type*

A computer finds and displays information through a browser. Different **browsers** often display information in different ways. For instance, images cannot be viewed on text-based browsers like Lynx. However, either Netscape or Internet Explorer are fine to use with images. You can determine the browser type (and sometimes the version) by looking at the top-left corner of the screen after you connect to the Internet and open up your browser. There you will see the browser icon and the name of the browser written out, after the title of the Web page.

- *Determine your need for a word processing program*

Word processing programs allow you to create, read, and edit text-based documents. Your computer may already have a basic text editing program. Microsoft Word is one of the most commonly used programs for both the Windows and Macintosh operating systems. However, Word usually needs to be purchased separately and installed onto your computer. Other word processing programs include Notepad, WordPad, WordPerfect, and Corel. Adobe Acrobat is another program that allows you to read text documents—its files created in Adobe Acrobat are saved in a **portable document format** or “**PDF**.”

The software with which to read PDF files can be downloaded free of charge from the [Adobe Acrobat Web site](#).

- *Determine your need for a video player*

Some courses include video or audio clips as part of the course material. Most clips can be played with popular players such as [QuickTime](#), [Windows Media Player](#), or [Real Player](#); however, some clips can only be watched with a specific player. You should find out if the course contains any video clips, what format they have been created in, what type of player you need to watch them, and where to download these players. If the course makes use of video clips, they will usually provide a link to a Web site where you can download the appropriate software. Most are available free of charge. Make sure you have speakers on your computer.

- *Check if e-mail is required*

You will usually require electronic mail or ‘e-mail’ facilities if the course involves back-and-forth movement of documents between you and the facilitator, unless an alternative method is in place. Examples of e-mail tools are Lotus Notes, [Hotmail](#), [Yahoo](#), [AOL](#) (which is provided by the AOL Internet Service Provider). Check with the course administrator to determine if e-mail is required for your course.



### Terms to know

The most commonly used **browsers** are Microsoft Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator. Most computers with the Windows operating system come standard with Internet Explorer. Other browsers, like Amaya, Opera, and Lynx, can be downloaded free of charge from the Internet.

\*\*\*\*

**PDF** is a popular format for documents because it allows files to be accessed by any computer and with any operating system. These files are read-only, meaning that the content and format of the document cannot be tampered with and the document will look the same when viewed through a variety of browsers or computers.

- *Determine if making presentations is part of the course*  
Some courses may require you to create presentations. Microsoft PowerPoint is a popular tool for creating presentations. You can also view presentations created by others in PowerPoint. Find out from the course administrator if you will be required to create presentations and what programs are recommended. If you already own PowerPoint or a similar program, you may want to check that your version or program can be used without difficulty.



### Recap of access to technology

In this section, we identified a number of technology components that you might need to fully participate in an on-line course. Following is a summary of those components for you to consider:

- Regular and reliable access to a computer and to the Internet
- Access to help with learning the course technology
- Easily accessible course site, especially for those with disabilities
- Your computer should match the course requirements for technology, which may include some of the following:
  - Hard drive space between 10–40 gigabytes
  - Random access memory (RAM) of between 64 to 128 megabytes
  - Internet connection: dial-up (at least 56K), cable modem, DSL, T1, T3, or wireless connections
  - Browser
  - Word processing program
  - E-mail tool
  - Video or audio player
  - Software for creating presentations

Check with the course administrator for a more accurate list.





## Questions to ask

Following are some questions you might ask the course administrator to determine if the course is a good fit for you technologically:

- What are the technology requirements for the course, both in terms of hardware and software? How can I tell if my computer meets these requirements (e.g., do I check the manual or a specific part of the hard drive)?
- Is there support available to assist me with technical problems?
- Where can I get access to the Internet?
- Is the site designed to be easily navigable by people with varying degrees of familiarity with technology and people with special needs?
- What type of support is available for people with special needs or a disability?

### Your notes

As you think of more questions, write them down in the space provided below.

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# Technology Skills

Different course formats usually require certain technical skills. You may already have some of these skills; others can be developed through regular practice and by using tutorials. These skills will vary from course to course, so be sure to determine the specific requirements for your course. The following are some skills generally used for an on-line course.

## Navigating the Internet

Some course Web sites are designed so that the screen is divided into several sections by demarcating lines, which requires you to navigate between sections of the screen. Navigating between screens or sections of a screen usually requires you to select items from a menu bar or list of **links**.

Some courses will require you to conduct research on the Internet. There are many **search engines** that can be used for this purpose.

Practice is the best way to develop your skills in navigating Web sites. Spend some time exploring Web sites: Click on the links to see where they take you. Use the back button to move back to pages you have already visited. Then try the forward button. Some sites are designed so that clicking on a link will open up a new browser window. This gives you the option of moving back-and-forth from one screen to another. In some other sites, links will open up in the same browser window.

## Using e-mail

You may need to send in your assignments to the facilitator by e-mail. E-mail allows you to compose and send letters or reply to one sent to you. Other functions allow you to edit, delete, save your draft, save a copy of your e-mail before sending, and forward an e-mail to other people. Inside your e-mail, you can include links to files stored on the hard drive of your computer (see “Using attachments” below) or links to Web sites. To include a link to a Web site, look for the Web site address or URL (uniform resource locator), which is displayed above the Web Page. Select this URL by dragging the cursor of the mouse over the URL. When this URL is highlighted on the screen, select the Copy function from the menu bar. Move back to the e-mail, position the cursor where you would like to insert the link, and select the Paste function.

Many e-mail tools are intuitive; you can determine what the available functions are by looking at the menu bar.



### Terms to know

**Links** point to a specific Web site. Clicking on the link takes you to this Web site. Links may also point to a different part of the same Web site. When a link points to an e-mail address, it will open up your mailbox so that you can send an e-mail to that address. When this link points to a document embedded in an e-mail, it is called an attachment.

\*\*\*\*

Internet **search engines** are special sites on the Web that are designed to help people find information stored on other sites. Examples of search engines are Google(www.google.com); Yahoo (www.yahoo.com), and Lycos (www.lycos.com).







## Terms to know

A **server** is where Web pages are stored. Whenever you click on a link to connect to a Web page, your browser will request this Web page from the server on which the Web file is stored.

\*\*\*\*

A **template** provides a preset design or content format, which can be used as a starting point so that the user does not have to create the presentation from scratch.

## Using attachments

If the course is designed to include participants sending and receiving mail, then it is important to know how to open and create attachments. Attachments are copies of files (these can usually be any type of format, e.g., text-based, graphics, or multimedia files) that are copied and appended to the e-mail. The original versions of these files may reside on your computer's hard drive, on an external storage device like a diskette, or on a **server**.

It is also important to know how to locate files from your computer's hard drive or any other place that they may be stored.

You may experience some problems when receiving attachments from someone using a different operating system from you or someone using a different version of the software needed to open up the file. Usually, you will know that there some difficulty when you can't open up an attachment, or once opened, it displays lines of meaningless symbols. In such cases, ask the sender to copy and paste the contents of the file into the body of your e-mail, if possible. However, this solution tends to work best with text documents. Many software packages, however, can open up documents saved in earlier versions. You should consult with the course administrator on ways to handle such problems.

## Storing and finding files

You can either store files in the computer on the hard drive (the C drive) or outside of the computer on an external diskette (this can be the A, D, or E drive depending on whether you are storing on a regular 3.5-inch floppy diskette, a Zip disk, or a Compact Disk—CD). For Apple computers, you can also store files on the hard drive or on external diskettes. It is usually advisable to have multiple copies of important files on both the hard drive and on an external diskette.

You can create folders on both the hard drive and external disk to help categorize files more efficiently. Each folder can be structured to contain files with similar information or a subcategory of folders.

## Using word processing programs

Word processing programs allow you to create text-based documents, such as essays, and this may be a requirement in some courses. You can also copy and paste text, re-arrange text, insert pictures, tables, links to Web sites, create bullet points, change the font, and print. If you are unfamiliar with such programs, spend some time practicing creating documents, saving, and editing them.

## Creating presentations

If the course requires you to prepare presentations, these will need to be created with software such as PowerPoint that allows you to put together presentations. You can either create a presentation from scratch using a blank slide or choose a **template** from the program's selection. You can then modify the template as you require.





## Using chat technology

**Chat** technology allows you to talk synchronously (i.e., in real time) with other participants of the course. While there are different chat programs available, they work in a similar fashion. After typing a message, you can either click on a “Submit” button or press the “Enter” key on the keyboard to display your message in the main viewing window. Once displayed here, your message usually cannot be edited and becomes available for all participants in the conversation. Once the window is shut, all the messages are lost unless you decide to save them into a Word document. The more people who are active in a chat room, the more you may have to focus on what’s there so you don’t lose track of the discussion.

In many cases, the main conversation breaks up into a number of discussions between smaller groups of people. The trick is often to identify a conversation you are interested in and join in with a comment on the last remark made. Sometimes, the other individuals will stop to welcome you to the discussion and introduce themselves. Usually, someone will follow-up your comment with one of their own; and the conversation will continue without a break, if you do not get an immediate response, just be persistent. Sometimes it takes a while to get a response. Chatting allows quicker, more spontaneous discussion, but it has to be scheduled at times convenient for the majority of the group.

## Participating in on-line discussion boards

For many on-line courses, the discussion takes place within a **discussion board**. Messages are posted to a section especially designed for discussion. Following a conversation can both be a skill and a function of the technical design of the discussion area. It is also dependent on the type of directions guiding the use of the discussion area and how the facilitator manages this area.

## Using the course platform

You should be comfortable using the platform on which the course is hosted. It is on these platforms that course designers lay out the course material. This can include articles to read, activities to try out, or links to other Web sites. The course material may be created in a variety of formats, such as video, audio, text documents, or spreadsheets. Blackboard is one example of such a course platform; WebCT is another. These platforms can be accessed on the Web through your browser.

Blackboard is a software platform that offers a variety of tools for on-line learning. The software contains several frames that can be customized by the individual institution to link to a variety of information and resources. Some of the features provided by Blackboard allow users to access a discussion area where they can post messages, store their favorite resources, access a calendar, check and send e-mail, check grades, and manage tasks.



### Terms to know

The **chat** window is popularly referred to as a chat room.

\*\*\*\*

The **discussion board** is a site primarily created for posting messages. Messages are categorized into many topic areas known as threads. When you reply to a message it is posted within that particular thread.





## Recap of important skills

Remember to consider how having or developing certain skills can optimize your participation in the course. These are some skills you may want to consider developing:

- Navigating the Internet
- Using e-mail
- Using attachments
- Storing and finding files
- Using word processing programs
- Creating presentations
- Using chat technology
- Using threaded discussion boards
- Using the course platform

Check with the course administrator for a more accurate list.





# Communication

## On-line

Communication with other students and the facilitator is key in any learning process—whether face-to-face or on-line. It is through this process of exchanging information that ideas are discussed and challenged. Learning is indeed a social act (Dong, 2001). In on-line learning, such exchange is even more important. The distance from the other students and from the facilitator requires extra effort to maintain effective communication and to foster positive relationships. Following are some aspects of communication you should be aware of if you are enrolling in an on-line course.

### Discussion as a vehicle for shared inquiry

Discourse with others and with the facilitator allows you to exchange information, see different points of view, and receive feedback on your own perspective.

*Entry into this course has been an incredibly broadening experience. It is affirming to know that the 'problems' we experience here in Australia are reflected overseas. My readings and research had told me that, but it is a more powerful message to share and dissect these issues in a practical way.*

*The knowledge I have gleaned from my American colleagues has helped enormously to round off my thoughts about several issues.*

This exchange can occur in a chat room (synchronous) or on a discussion board (asynchronous). Courses may require a minimum number of posts to ensure that the discussion moves forward. You need to think about how best to do that.

Personality type, prior experiences, cultural background, or learning style influence comfort with discussing and sharing ideas and experiences. If you are uncomfortable with engaging others in discussion, consider that on-line courses allow you to share your ideas in a safer, more anonymous environment. If you talk and share your ideas easily with others, on-line courses give you the opportunity to pay increased attention to what others are saying. For example, in an asynchronous discussion forum, you can take your time to go

over what the other participants have shared in their posts as well as thoughtfully compose your own responses.

Normally, the facilitator keeps the conversation moving by stating the purpose of the dialogue and helping you and the other participants stay focused on the goal.

### Sample discussion guidelines

Following are discussion guidelines taken from one on-line course. You are likely to find similar guidelines for the course in which you enroll.

- For each session, we have posted a discussion and reflection question to help focus your thoughts and comments around the key points of the session topic. Please join these discussions—they are our on-line version of face-to-face interactions—and so they are where much of the learning in this course occurs.
- We are committed to making this discussion a safe space for participants to explore issues and to build a community of support for one another. Please listen openly and respond to one another in ways that build rather than shut down conversation.
- You may pose your own questions, share experiences, and try out your theories. You can also move back and forth between the assignments and the discussion space.
- The materials and facilitator are resources to you, providing new information prompts for reflection and discussion, or experimentation in the classroom. Participants bring the ideas, questions, experience, expertise, and willingness to be part of an on-line community of learners. The more questions, responses, reflections, and discussion each person offers, the greater the opportunity for everyone to learn.

### Lack of visual cues

In an on-line environment you usually cannot observe others' facial expressions and body language. This lack of visual cues makes it harder to gauge the intended tone of other people's contributions to the discussion. As a result, a variety of meanings can sometimes be read into one message. One way that you can clarify your intent is to select your words and phrases carefully. Another is by adding "emoticons." Emoticons are small graphic images depicting a variety of facial expressions. For example, an emoticon with a smiling face can be added to a message to indicate a joke or that the message should not be taken seriously. However, keep in mind that use and formality of language varies from one on-line community to another. Certain types of expression may be acceptable in one community but not in another. The tone set by the facilitator or by the discussion guidelines (see section on safety) may indicate the acceptable degree of formality of the course. Always ask for clarification if you think you may have misunderstood something.

For some people, it is important to have a visual image of the other participants in an on-line discussion in order to fully appreciate their input. For others, not having a picture of the others helps focus on what is said, not on impressions formed because of the way an individual looks. See how this teacher taking an on-line course addressed her particular need.

*I have been thinking how one of the reputed strengths of the Internet was interfering with my own personal ability to engage in an on-line discussion. One of the advantages of the Internet is that ideas can be exchanged, and taken at their face value, without the bias that comes with our tendency to judge people by what they look like. In the case of this course, I found it harder to sort out the ideas by their author, because I had no visual picture of each member of the class to associate with the ideas each posted.*

*I have taken other on-line courses; in one case I knew everyone from a workshop in the summer and therefore did not have this trouble; in the other I knew no one and barely kept up with the postings because I could not even begin to connect the ideas with the names of the people who made them because there were over 30 people in the course!*

*For this course I figured out how to compensate for the lack of a visual image, but it took me a while!*

## Use of humor

Difficulty in accurately reading the tone of other participants' contributions to the discussion can be further complicated by use of humor. Humor does not seem to translate well on-line. Since there is no universal definition of humor, diversity in cultural, religious, racial, and gender backgrounds translates into a variety of standards of acceptable humor including what you think are safe or funny responses or even the use of emoticons. Therefore, you need to be careful in how you use humor. You may want to limit your use of humor, at least until you sense the range of the group's tastes.

## Safety

One of the facilitator's roles is to foster a sense of inclusiveness within the discussion group. She or he can do this by establishing a set of rules (a code of conduct) that delineate what is and is not acceptable behavior. The discussion guidelines, which we mentioned above, are a part of this broader set of rules. While the discussion guidelines outline ways to keep the discussion moving forward, the course rules ensure that participants are respectful of each other. These rules help create an atmosphere in which participants feel safe expressing their opinions. It is always a good idea to ask the course facilitator what the rules governing behavior in the course are if they are not posted.

There are some forms of behavior that are generally considered rude or inappropriate in on-line courses and elsewhere. Some are obvious: linking to or displaying pornographic material; use of (or excessive use of) profanity; posting inflammatory remarks; posting racially offensive remarks or linking to such sites or making derogatory remarks about women or people with a disability. Others are less obvious, but generally considered inappropriate: typing in all uppercase letters, which is generally considered shouting; or using the forum to advertise a product or service. However, there are differences from community to community. Each on-line community makes its own rules, some of which are clearly stated and others that gradually become obvious.



## Terms to know

An **IP address** (Internet Protocol address) is a unique number that identifies the location of your computer on a network. It works like your street address—as a way to find out exactly where you are and deliver information to you.

Each facilitator will have his/her own method of managing a discussion board. If you feel that your views are not being respected or that others are not following whatever guidelines have been established, you should raise the issue in a diplomatic fashion with the person(s) involved. If that fails, contact the facilitator.

## Sample board rules

Following are rules taken from one on-line course. These rules were set in place to establish an environment in which all participants felt safe to post and share their ideas.

- Introduce yourself before you start posting.
- Present your comments in a respectful manner.
- Respect others' differences of opinion.
- Do not use inappropriate language and/or excessive profanity.
- Don't be afraid to ask for clarification if you feel that you have misunderstood someone's post.
- Do not send spam (spam is unsolicited e-mail, often of a commercial nature, sent indiscriminately to multiple addresses.)
- Do not use this forum for advertisement purposes or to advance a personal agenda.
- Respect other peoples' privacy.
- Don't be afraid to contact the facilitator with any questions you may have.

## Degree of anonymity

Total anonymity does not exist on the Internet, so you should think carefully about how much of yourself you feel comfortable revealing to others. [For instance, Web site administrators can trace your geographic location from your **IP address**.] Other participants might use the information you supply to contact you.

To register for most courses, you supply personal information such as your name, mailing address, or details of your job. (Remember, you cannot be required to give your gender or ethnicity.) Some of this information may be made available, in the form of a personal profile, for others to see. In some cases, you can select a screen name that will identify you to the rest of the group. In other cases, your name or e-mail address may be displayed instead (though this option is usually presented to you). Although this disclosing of personal information is usually done for the purposes of community building, not everyone may feel comfortable with it. Before you sign up to take a course, you should find out how much of the personal information you disclose at registration will be made available to other participants. Also, think about how much information about yourself you would feel comfortable revealing to the other participants.

There is also a on-line condition of “perceived” anonymity. Because the communication is usually all electronic, people often feel a sense of anonymity that does not really exist. This can affect people in two different ways.



Some feel that they have more freedom in saying what they think and feel and will do so. Others, because they don't have a trusting relationship with those who may be reading their message, may be reluctant to say what they are thinking and feeling. Additionally, research has shown that we often unconsciously give 'cues' about ourselves, our ethnicity and gender. These cues can be found in the way we talk on-line. Do you know how you're likely to respond?

### **Nature of the course content**

Course content can be classified broadly as either academic/skill building or affective. While discipline or academic content tends to make more use of reasoning and the application of logic, affective subjects tend to invoke strong emotions in the learner. Intellectual subjects can often involve reading, problem solving, and analyzing (e.g., history, science, or math). Affective subjects usually require more reflection on personal beliefs and experiences. Examples of affective subject matter include race, gender, religion, family issues, or war. Participants in courses with affective content can become very emotionally engaged as they discuss deeply felt issues, and this can sometimes cause tensions to run high. You should consider your comfort in discussing deeply sensitive issues with others and how this may affect you. You should also find out how the course is structured to handle the effects of a highly charged discussion.



# Course Structure

All courses have a structure that is determined by the medium itself or inherent in the course design. These may be different from a traditional class or workshop. Structural elements include access, the curriculum, time requirements, the role of the facilitator, and assistance provided. These are aspects of a course's structure that you may want to consider when deciding if a course is right for you.

## Accessibility

One of the reasons to take an on-line course may be its much-touted “twenty-four/seven” accessibility. On-line courses offer access to the course readings, activities, assignments, and discussion forums at any time and from almost any location. While the “anytime, anywhere” feature of many on-line courses is attractive, this flexibility may take some getting used to. Unlike face-to-face courses that you must attend at specific times, there is little overt monitoring of participation—other students or the moderator do not “see” whether you are there or not. If you have a busy schedule, or have not taken an on-line course before, it may be easy to delay logging into the course, doing assignments, or even entering the discussions. For many people, such flexibility can put them at a disadvantage, especially if they do not know how to organize their time and activities in the new environment. On-line courses require as much, if not more, preparation than conventional courses, a reality that many participants are not prepared for. As a result, on-line courses often have a higher drop-out rate than face-to-face courses (Parker, 1999; Carr, 2000). On-line course participants need to organize their time, motivate themselves to participate, and learn how to support their learning. For tips on how to make the most of the anytime, anywhere feature of courses, see the section on ensuring your success.

## Curriculum

One major structural component you will want to think about is the course curriculum. For example, the types of activities that are included in the course, how they are sequenced, how they relate to each other, and the content they address?

A well-designed curriculum will have a variety of activities to enhance your understanding of the subject matter. The activities may be sequenced in a deductive manner. For example, you might be asked to read certain articles prior to each class. During the class, the facilitator will guide a discussion based on the readings. To apply your knowledge of this material, you may be

asked to try certain activities and then report your results to the class. You may write a paper to summarize what you have learned or to explore some aspect of a topic in greater depth. The sequence may be reversed so that it is inductive. You begin by conducting an activity that yields some data. Then, through discussion and readings, you begin to make sense out of the data and to draw conclusions and generalizations. The key question here is if the curriculum meets your learning needs.

The following example is a description of the organization of an on-line gender equity course into a series of readings, activities, and assignments as well as notes on how these individual activities flow into one another.

In each of the eight sessions you will do the following:

- Read through the session's reading materials and case studies, making note of the questions posed by the facilitator.
- Critique the readings and post your comments to the discussion forum. Include what you considered to be the important points of the readings. Also include anything you thought was particularly helpful and anything you disagreed with.
- Read through what other participants have discussed and use that as a springboard to discuss the facilitator's questions. In all your interaction with other participants, try to respond to at least one other posting and respond to another person's response to something you have said.
- In addition to this discussion, try at least one activity and report on the results in the discussion forum.

There are two other considerations regarding the curriculum. First, if you anticipate missing some sessions, you may want to consider whether the course is structured in a cumulative or modular way. Cumulative courses build on previously taught material. Modular courses contain individual units of information that can be learned separately. Modular courses might work better if you think you might miss some of the course sessions. However, not all content lends itself to being taught in this fashion. You should contact the instructor if you know that you will miss one or more sessions.

Another consideration is whether your work will be assessed, and if so, how? For example, what form will assessment take, and which standards or rubrics will be used? Assessment could be based on participation in discussion, assignments, or tests. Tests could be administered on-line or at a testing center (in the latter case, you will be directed to a location close to you). Assessment could also be based on individual work or performance in a group activity. You may feel slightly daunted at the thought of taking a test on-line, or maybe you would prefer the convenience of on-line assessment over going to a physical center. Similarly, your schedule or working preferences might make a group activity hard to coordinate, or you may want the synergy of working with others.

## Time requirements

Expected time commitment is a major factor in deciding whether to sign up for a course or not. Find out how much time you are expected to devote to the course—this includes time spent completing any assignments, participating in any discussions, reading the course material, and trying out any suggested

activities. Find out how the sessions are organized and the fit with your schedule. Decide if this is a commitment you can make at the present time.

The following example from an on-line course describes the estimated time commitment for this course, and the actual time spent on it.

This course is an 8-week course, which typically requires about 3 hours each week. These 3 hours are spent doing the course readings, reading the case studies, trying out at least one suggested activity and reporting on it, and contributing at least 3 times to the discussion forum.

Most of the participants reported that they were able to complete the readings, try out an activity, and post a reply to the discussion question within the estimated 3 hours. Most students reported logging in every other day. The next largest group reported logging in once every 3 days.

Another time factor is whether the sessions are synchronous or asynchronous, that is whether you need to log in to the sessions at specific times or not. Asynchronous communication does not take place in real-time and so one party can post a message at one time and others can read this message at a later time. This gives you more time to read the contributions of others and compose your own. Some courses may impose a minimum level of involvement with the discussion, and so you will need to decide if you can commit to this. Asynchronous communication includes discussion boards and e-mail. Synchronous communication is real-time communication. This means that the conversation is happening at a specific time and all parties must be present and logged in to the conversation space simultaneously. Synchronous communication offers few, if any, scheduling options and can be difficult to keep up with if you are less familiar with such technology. If the course uses synchronous communication, think about the options available if some of the sessions conflict with your schedule.

## The role of the facilitator

The facilitator (or teacher) is a key structural component. You might want to find out what type of role the facilitator plays in the organization of the course and in the facilitation of any discussion. In some on-line courses, the facilitators will guide rather than “lead” the class by asking fewer questions and intervening in the discussion only on occasion. Some facilitators rely on a more traditional “lecture” style. In some other courses, the facilitator will ask a lot of questions, probing participants’ answers, and introducing new perspectives to the discussion. You probably will like one type of facilitation more than the others. If you have not had the experience of taking an on-line course, you may be unsure what your preference is or you may be more comfortable with a style you’ve had experience with. Openness to new facilitation styles can enhance learning. The facilitator’s moderating style can significantly affect your experience, as illustrated by these two contrasting examples. In this first excerpt, a student discusses the facilitator’s role in the learning process.

*I also appreciated your ability to really listen to our many varied voices and to summarize our discussions. And finally, I really appreciate your openness and willingness to be a co-learner with us, rather than the traditional “teacher” who solely imparts information.*

Compare this to the second excerpt:

*My participation decreased somewhat when I did not receive answers to my communications to the facilitator and when I perceived a lack of involvement of the facilitator. Although I would not like a facilitator who dominated the conversation, more involvement would have made the medium more interesting and valuable.*

There are three general models of on-line facilitation: the guide, instructor, or group process facilitator (Collison, et al. 2000). While each has a different role and may shift according to the course content or participants, a facilitator may generally do the following:

- Provide a structure and tone for the discussion and ensure a smooth process.
- Provide guidelines for the discussion and interaction between participants and enforce those guidelines when required.
- Provide participants with questions or topics to be discussed each session and also provide examples that help to maintain the focus of the discussion.
- Prompt participants if they start to stray too much from the intended topic of discussion, or probe to deepen the current discussion.
- Organize and post discussion threads.
- Provide regular feedback to individuals via routine private communications.
- Establish a clear assessment process to evaluate the participants’ progress or contribution to the discussion.

### **Type of assistance available**

Another structural component that you should consider is the amount of assistance available to you. If you are having difficulty—either with the course content or the course technology—is there someone to go to? Can you contact the facilitator directly? Do you have an on-line buddy? Is there someone onsite to speak with? Just how much assistance does the course provide, and how much do you think you will need? While some courses expect a high level of independence from you, others will be prepared to offer extensive assistance with helping you understand the course material.

It is harder for a facilitator in an on-line course to know when you need help, so it is important that you ask for assistance when you need it. You may prefer to figure out a problem or instructions to an assignment on your own and only ask for help if you feel you really need it. Alternatively, you may prefer to receive some guidance beforehand. Whatever your preference, you should find out what the typical turnaround time for responses to questions and feedback on assignments is.







# Learning Style

Learning style can be thought of as “a characteristic way of information processing, feeling and behaving in and toward learning situations.” Past research has linked the way people prefer to learn with their achievements (Smith, 1986, pp. 24, 50). Individuals often learn best when the structure of a course matches their preferred learning style. An understanding of your own learning style can help you determine the degree of match with an on-line course. This self-knowledge can also help you make any adaptations to get a better fit between your preferred way of learning and the design of the course.

Well-designed courses take into consideration the way in which individuals learn; however, courses often reflect learning style biases. For example, a text-based course will appeal more to an individual who learns best by reading while a course that incorporates more multimedia will appeal more to someone who processes information better through seeing or hearing.

Following are questions to help you identify the ways in which you learn best.

- ***Do you prefer to learn on your own or with others?***

Some people prefer to learn on their own. This can be by reading and reflecting on the new material or it can be by listening to others or watching activities. Such people tend to set their own goals and decide how best to achieve these. People who prefer to learn with others tend to enjoy the guidance they receive from the course instructor or the collaborative process involved with group work. You should find out if the course is designed to accommodate both participants who prefer to learn with others and those who prefer to learn on their own. Features that support group work include an initial face-to-face meeting of all participants, on-line collaboration for group activities, and an active discussion board. Features that support more individual learning include individual assignments and a limited (or no) discussion board.

- ***Are you better at seeing the big picture or the small details?***

People who are better at seeing the larger perspective of a situation than the smaller details are called global learners. They tend to be able to make connections between the many elements of that situation. They also tend to rely on their intuition and take into account their feelings when making decisions. Detail-oriented, or analytic learners place great emphasis on focusing on details. They are interested in knowing the right way to do things and prefer step-by-step, sequential, organized learning activities. They are logical thinkers, who are able to focus their attention on the task at hand and are able to make decisions unaffected by their emotions (Kirby,

1988). While analytical people will tend to pay greater attention to details and to see the differences in situations, global thinkers will tend to see global view, as well as the similarities to other external factors (Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998, p. 51). Case study analyses and problem-solving projects can be good activities for both global and analytical thinkers. This is because analytic thinkers are able to focus quickly on the relevant issues, absorb the details of each case, and follow through to a logical conclusion and/or solution; global learners are able to identify the bigger issues, identify similarities with other situations, and work down to a solution.

Current technology may favor certain kinds of learners because only a limited amount of text or image can be displayed on the screen at one time. There are tools that allow you to focus on details. For example, when searching for information on the Internet, you can use the “advanced search” option to narrow your search results. Flipping back and forth from screen to screen or from one hyperlink to another can be very frustrating to those who want to see the big picture. Storing information in a separate “portfolio” on your computer can help keep material organized and available. Technology can also allow you to collect and synthesize your thoughts more easily. For example, word processing programs allow you to edit text without starting over as you would do when writing by hand. This minimizes the risk of losing your train of thought and helps make work more efficient. You also can write your comments first and then paste them into the discussion board. You can print out documents if reading on-line is uncomfortable for you.

Technology can sometimes be both an impediment and a solution when trying to access information, as this big-picture learner discovers:

*I have a similar question. I would really like to print out all of the NEW messages on the discussion board and not have to read them on the screen. This may be a bad omen, especially since this class is taught totally on-line, but I really cannot process information as deeply when it comes in frame by frame. Being a big-picture learner, I'd like to have it all in front of me at the same time. I have just printed out the messages that are already posted, but what I'd really like is to be able to 'print all' at once. Is there such a feature?*

■ ***How well can you identify relevant information?***

Some learners are able to focus on the most relevant aspects of an activity, without getting distracted by unimportant or conflicting information. These “flexible” individuals will most easily use the Internet and the World Wide Web, which offer access to a variety of information and require learners to process this information removing the irrelevant from the essential (Kagan, 1966; Jonassen & Grabowski, 1993). However these activities provide good training in concentration for people who tend to be more easily distracted or who organize information differently.

■ ***Are you a more impulsive or reflective learner?***

Reflective learners are those who tend to take their time to think about a problem before offering a solution. Impulsive learners tend to offer

solutions quicker (Kirby, 1988). Computer conferencing accommodates reflective learners better than face-to-face group activities because it gives more time to think about a problem and its possible solutions. This technology can similarly encourage impulsive thinkers to take more time to reflect on their responses.

■ ***Are you a visualizer or verbalizer?***

Visualizers process information best from pictures, charts, and other imagery. Verbalizers prefer to process information from words—spoken or written (Paivio, 1971; Richardson, 1977; Swassing and Barbe, 1979; Sanchez and Gunawardena 1998). On-line courses can usually accommodate both types of learners by using a combination of readings and charts. Find out the different ways in which the information in the course is presented.

■ ***Do you prefer smaller, more frequent packages of information or bigger, less frequent amounts of information?***

Do you learn best with small, frequent chunks of information, or with larger, but less frequent blocks of information? While some people can process a lot of information at one time, some others are better able to process smaller amounts of studying material. It is important to determine the volume and the frequency with which the on-line course presents its material and, consequently, how comfortable you are with that method of learning.

Knowing about these differences and understanding their impact can be important in deciding if a course is suited to your preferences or in determining how to best organize yourself for the course structure. The best on-line courses are made up of some combination of reading assignments, discussion, off-line activity, and use of some visual imagery in order to meet the needs of most learners.

### **A sample course**

Below is a description of the methods employed by one on-line course. Although primarily text-based, this course combines

- learning by reading (books, articles, or Web sites)
- learning by doing (trying out suggested activities and assignments in a classroom setting)
- learning through discussion and debate (participating in the discussion board)
- learning by completing a project; this demonstrates what one has learned from the course.

Typically, students are asked to read some course material, then try a suggested activity or work on an assignment, after which they discuss their results. Students are also often expected to work on a project, which they submit by the end of the course.

The alignment between your learning style and the course needs to be such that you can do your best work and be comfortable. At the same time, on-line courses can offer opportunities to learn in ways in which you may be less comfortable, thereby encouraging you to develop skills in other modes of learning. For example, if you are uncomfortable engaging others in discussion,

take advantage of the discussion board feature (if one exists) to share your ideas and opinions with others. The asynchronous nature of this forum allows you to reflect on other peoples' contributions in private and take your time in responding.

Flexibility to adapt the course to your style preferences is important and something you might want to find out more about. There should be options in the ways that you complete your assignments and how you demonstrate what you have learned. For example, can you work with others or work by yourself? Can you demonstrate knowledge and skill development by writing a paper or submitting a project? This is something you will want to discuss with the person moderating or facilitating the course.



## Questions to ask

How do you learn best? Select the statement that better describes you.

I learn better on my own.

I learn better with others.

I am able to focus on the relevant material.

I am easily distracted by irrelevant information.

I think carefully about a problem before giving an answer.

I offer solutions quickly.

I process information better from words.

I process information better from pictures and charts.

I am better able to process information in small chunks.

I prefer to process information in large chunks.

The statements you selected above give you a good indication of what your learning style and preferences are. Before enrolling in an on-line course, look at the mode of instruction and types of coursework to see if these are compatible with your learning style.

Following are some questions you can ask yourself and some that you may want to ask the course administrator in order to find out if the course is a good fit for you.

- To what degree does the course align with my learning style preferences?
- Does the course challenge me to learn in ways in which I am not so comfortable? If so, what might I gain from learning outside my comfort zone?
- How much flexibility is there in the assignments and how I complete them?
- What might I need to negotiate with the facilitator?

### Your notes

As you think of more questions, write them down in the space provided below.

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# Ensuring Your Success

The previous sections of this pamphlet have outlined key factors to consider when choosing an on-line course. This final section provides a way of assessing factors supporting your taking the course and those that might be working against you. To be successful, the force of the supporting factors should be greater than the force of the restraining forces.

First, ask yourself why you want to enroll in this course. What will you get from this course, and why do you want what it offers? Will you learn new information? Acquire new skills? Improve your overall performance? Are you required to take this course? Will successful completion get you more money or a promotion? Knowing why you are taking a course and what you want out of it will help you stay the course.

Although you may be clear about what you want from the course, there are factors working for and against you. Knowing what these are and their influence on you is important to predicting the outcome. Possible supporting factors include the following:

- You have a high level of interest in taking the course.
- You need the information that the course provides for your work.
- You have time during the day to take the course.
- You know others who will also be taking the course.

Challenges to your success in the course might include the following:

- You have prior commitments that will prevent you from participating in some of the course's sessions.
- You are not especially skillful in operating in an on-line environment.
- You have family responsibilities that may interfere, for example your spouse is having major surgery.

So the trick is seeing if you can lessen the effects of the factors against you. For example, can you make up what you will miss from the sessions you cannot to participate in? Is the level of technical support sufficient to help you; could you work with a buddy? Can you get some help when your spouse comes home from the hospital?

In the following excerpt from the evaluation of an on-line course, a student who dropped out explains why she was unable to complete the course. Note that she felt overwhelmed by the factors working against her.

*I was teaching 6th grade for the first time, and found it too hard to manage class prep., my family, and the course. I only had time to work on the lessons over the weekend, which gave me no time to do the suggested projects and discuss them before the Mon. reading. To top it off, the final project seemed unmanageable. The facilitator said I had a great idea, but I would need to quantify my results. By the last minute I still hadn't designed my experiment, let alone done it. I felt it was too late to ask for help, because other end of year obligations were creeping up.*

If you are clear as to why you want to take this course and what you want to get out of it, your motivation is often sufficiently strong to neutralize or at least lessen the influence of some of the negative factors. Occasionally, the force of a restraining factor is so great that it cannot be overcome, for example serious illness on your part. If the timing does not work for you, perhaps you can wait until the course is offered again.

On the other hand, if your motivation is low you are not in the best position to find success in a course that, by its very nature, requires a higher level of self-discipline than a face-to-face course.

Some people have the ability to assess their motivation and the supporting and restraining factors and make a decision in an intuitive fashion. Others need a more structured approach. We offer the following worksheet as a guide for both of these decision making styles.





## Questions to ask

1. Why do you want to take this course? Specifically, what will you get out of it? Write your answers below:

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2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how sure are you about your reason(s) for taking this course and what you hope to get out of it?

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3. List factors supporting your taking of this course. Assign each one a number from 1 to 3, based on its strength. Three is high; one is low.

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4. List factors interfering with your taking of this course. Assign each one a number from 1 to 3 based on strength. Again, three is high.

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To assess your responses, ask yourself the following questions:

- Did you rate your clarity about and commitment to taking the course as 6 or higher?
- If you scored lower, you may not have sufficient motivation to sustain your participation. If you scored in the 6–8 range, you may need to sort out what kept you from giving yourself a 9 or 10. If you don't know what is holding you back, you may encounter difficulties at some point. You need to be clear about your purpose and intent.
- Does the force of the supporting factors exceed the force of the restraining ones? If not, can you neutralize the negative effects? Is it possible to strengthen the positive ones? Is there any negative factor whose influence cannot be lessened? If that's the case, what alternative(s) do you have? Remember that you need to have more supporting factors working for you than negative ones working against you.

Our best wishes. We hope that our pamphlet facilitates your entry into the on-line learning environment.



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# Additional Resources

## *On-line Courses*

- e-College partners with colleges, universities, K-12 school districts, and corporate training organizations to design, build, and support e-learning communities. <http://www.ecollege.com/>
- The Heritage Institute has many on-line courses, which are fully accredited by Antioch University, from languages and art to history and the sciences. <http://www.hol.edu/distancecourses.cfm>
- On-lineLearning.net offers accredited graduate-level extension and graduate-credit courses in teacher education. This is collaboration between the University of California in Los Angeles and the University of California in San Diego. <http://www.on-linelearning.net/index.html?s=325.r040i821x.0791012o91>.
- PBS Adult Learning Service offers programs for both adult learners and for educators via the Web and via satellite. <http://www.pbs.org/als/programs/index.html>
- Peterson's.com offers links to many on-line learning opportunities and additional information. <http://www.petersons.com/>
- The Concord Consortium provides on-line instruction for students, teachers, and faculty. Their Web-based courses, based on the Concord Consortium e-Learning Model, can help you design and facilitate your own on-line courses. <http://www.concord.org/>
- The University of Wisconsin—Madison offers many distance learning courses <http://www.slis.wisc.edu/academic/ces/>. It also offers distance courses in library and information studies: <http://www.slis.wisc.edu/academic/ces/>
- AllLearn is a consortium of professors from Oxford University, Stanford University, and Yale University. The courses are primarily delivered through an on-line platform, but some include the use of videotapes and CD-ROMs. <http://www.allianceforlifelonglearning.org/>

## **Self-assessment tests are available from the following sources:**

- *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the On-line Classroom*, Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt, March 1999 Jossey-Bass <http://www.petersons.com/>
- *The On-lineLearning.net Self-Assessment Quiz*.  
<http://www.on-linelearning.net/OLE/holwselfassess.html?s=821.9070y330n.014h011g40>
- *Self Evaluation for Potential On-line Students*, developed at the University of Illinois.  
<http://www.ion.illinois.edu/IONresources/on-lineLearning/selfEval.html>
- *Is On-line Learning for Me?*, Developed at Pace University  
[http://appserv.pace.edu/execute/page.cfm?doc\\_id=2423](http://appserv.pace.edu/execute/page.cfm?doc_id=2423).
- *Is On-line Learning for Me?* Developed by MarylandOn-line.  
[http://www.marylandon-line.org/prospective\\_students/assess/on-line\\_learning\\_for\\_me](http://www.marylandon-line.org/prospective_students/assess/on-line_learning_for_me)





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gender,  
diversities &  
technology  
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Education, Employment, and Community Programs

The Gender, Diversities & Technology Institute works at the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, culture, language, and sexual orientation, seeking to expand the understanding of how technology can support the development of democracy and promotion of human rights. Building partnerships with members of diverse communities, organizations, and educational institutions, we facilitate the development of holistic and sustainable solutions to critical social challenges. We seek to increase participation in and distributed ownership of the new “Knowledge Society” brought about by the Internet and other emerging technologies.

We offer:

- innovative on-line and on-site professional development that embodies equitable educational practices, builds the capacity of educators, and guides the development and facilitation of culturally appropriate on-line education
- leadership and practical experience in creating effective digital libraries that integrate diversity with content to improve research, pedagogy, and practice
- research and resources for increasing the participation and success of girls and women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
- resources for gender mainstreaming, including gender-equitable curriculum and teaching tools for all levels in both formal and informal settings that help build gender-healthy education for males and females
- research, programs, and technical assistance to integrate diversity into technology design and implementation and increase positive outcomes for all students
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