Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You’re off to Great Places!
You’re off and away!

Dr. Seuss, *Oh the Places You’ll Go!*, (1990)

Have you ever wondered if online learning is for you? Searched the Internet for colleges, universities, or training providers that offer online early childhood training, courses, or degree programs? Talked with colleagues who have taken an online course to find out what it is like and what they liked about it? If you’ve considered these matters and decided to try an online course or training program, this collection of survival skills and practical tips will make the experience of learning online more meaningful.

The places you’ll go!
The Internet is a powerful tool for building community, for exchanging ideas and information, and for learning. Taking a course or training program online can be very gratifying, yet equally frustrating. You’ll get more out of the experience when you take advantage of the technology tools designed to support your learning. These survival skills will get you off to great places.

Survival skills

Know the tech specs. Most online course providers have information available on what computer hardware and software configuration you will need to log on and participate. Don’t wait until the course begins to discover that your system isn’t compatible with institutional specifications. Be especially mindful of the provider’s expectations about computer operating systems, word processing and spreadsheet software, or any special requirements for the course you are taking.

Get a handle on the basics. Before you tackle an online course seek out opportunities for basic technology training so that you are comfortable with a few key skills including word processing, sending and receiving e-mail, attaching a document to an e-mail, and searching the Internet for information and resources.

Try out all the tools. In the process of taking an online course, you’ll be called upon to use new technology tools, so take advantage of the opportunity to strengthen your technology skills. Many students report that their computer confidence and competence rose dramatically from participating in an online course.

Use ‘em or lose ‘em. You’ll work hard to develop new skills, so put them to use to improve your program management, enhance your parent communication, strengthen your marketing, and increase your networking and advocacy efforts.

If you don’t have a teenager in the house, borrow one! Perhaps the most important tip is to get tech support anywhere you can find it. Many successful online learners report that the best technical assistance comes from a teenage son or daughter (even a middle-schooler or elementary school child), a spouse, partner, or friend who is into computers. And once you have mastered the art of learning online, think how cool you’ll be in the eyes of that teenager!

Secrets to success

From our experiences as online instructors and from the comments we hear from students, we can offer the following secrets to your success as an online learner.

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Stay connected! One of the attractions of an online course is the perception of ultimate flexibility — you can work on it whenever and from wherever you have access to the Internet. While this perception is often the reality, that flexibility can also be a trap. If you fall behind, you will find it very difficult to catch up since new content and assignments keep coming at you. Set aside a regular time and space for working on the course. Successful online learners have found it helpful to check in every day, or at least five days a week, to keep pace with the course in smaller increments of time. That way, you’ll know if something new has been posted, grow closer to the other participants and benefit from what they share, and you won’t fall behind with your readings and assignments.

Don’t be shy! Let your instructor know if you can’t make something work, don’t know how to do something, or don’t understand what is being asked of you. Classmates who have experienced an online course before are the real experts and chances are they’ve had to figure out the same things as you. Don’t suffer in silence . . . odds are you’re not the only one in the class who doesn’t know how. Send an e-mail or post your question in the discussion for your classmates to respond.

Get help! Some institutions have a “Help Desk” that can be reached by phone and/or e-mail. If you have any problems that are technology or software related, contact the Help Desk right away. Don’t worry if you don’t know the names for all the pieces of hardware or how to describe the problem in technology terms. And when you get a solution from the Help Desk be sure to share it with your classmates so that everyone knows the answer.

Sample everything! You will have many tools available to enhance your learning and the quality of your experience online. Discussion forums, chat rooms, journals, electronic-reserve readings at the library, e-mail, “favorite” web site listings, and document sharing, are just some of the tools at your disposal. Learn to use each of them to share information, exchange ideas, gather resources, and stay connected with other professionals. These skills will serve you well long after the class is over.

Participate! The learning community benefits most when every member speaks up and shares. Whether you are working alone or on a group project, contribute your ideas, perspectives, and comments on the subject. And be sure to read the comments of your classmates — they will offer valuable insights and resources.

Collaborate! Two of the most exciting advantages of an online course are also some of the most unexpected — how well you get to know your online classmates and the sense of community you feel in the class. Online classes offer wonderful opportunities for collaborative learning and an open exchange of ideas from a variety of perspectives. You can help build the sense of community through your active participation and meaningful contributions to the discussions, activities, and projects.

Make the most of discussions

Discussion forums are typically the heart and soul of an online course and often the means by which student participation is evaluated. To encourage active participation by everyone, and to keep your online discussions lively and interactive, always:

Make it personal — For starters, provide a little background on yourself the first time you enter the discussion. For example, “My name is Mary, and I am the director of the Forever Young Preschool in Janesville, Wisconsin. My question is . . . .”

Or, “My center just started an infant/toddler program and the most pressing issue my staff faces is . . . .” Always personalize your question or response by addressing your message to the person by using his or her name, for example, “Jason, thanks for your suggestions on professional development opportunities for directors.”

Keep the tone friendly and conversational, but professional — this is meant to be a discussion, so talk to each other. Since you can’t gauge a person’s reaction as readily as you do in face-to-face conversation, use special care when interacting online. Use humor carefully, because in an online context it can be hard to convey the intent of a funny comment or aside. Others may misinterpret your attempt to be amusing as criticism.

Be clear — Identify the issue, topic, or specific statement you are asking about or responding to. For example, “Hi, this is Felecia again. I’m following up on the comment that was made by Delechia about infants and toddlers with special needs.” Keep your comments brief and to the point. For the sake of clarity, focus on one subject per message. It is hard to answer a question like, “I was wondering what you thought about infants in child care, the latest brain development research, and what to do about toddlers who bite.” To initiate a meaningful exchange, it is better to ask a specific question about one of these broad topics.

Be brief — Remember the student who goes on and on and on in the classroom and never seems to get to the point? No one wants to be the online equivalent. By keeping messages brief — no more than two or three paragraphs at a time — you will encourage others to read what you have posted, and fit your comments into the discussion more easily. If you have a lot to say, break apart the issues you want to discuss and post several shorter messages that are topic specific.
Speak up! — If you’re someone who tends to be quiet in a face-to-face class, now is your chance to be heard. The nature of online discussions offers a luxury not available in the face-to-face classroom — time to pause and reflect before responding to others with a well-developed reply. On the other side of that coin, be careful not to monopolize conversation or come across as a know-it-all. Discussion postings that offer absolute answers tend to end the discussion while messages that suggest a potential resolution to a given scenario tend to foster discussion. You can invite the participation of others by closing your message with a question asking for their responses. For example, “...so that’s what we do at our center. What strategies have worked in other centers?”

Observe the standard rules of Netiquette — The guidelines that have been generally accepted for composing e-mail messages also apply to posting messages in an online course discussion forum. For example, don’t “shout” by formatting a message in all capital letters. If you need to post a long message, warn other readers at the beginning that it is lengthy, and never forward another participant’s message to anyone else without first getting his or her permission.

Your mountain is waiting

Learning online can be a wonderful adventure, and you have several options available to you for credit courses and non-credit training programs — with many more to come. We’ve found that students who like learning online, really like learning online, and are likely to take another online course. We’ve also found that the learning curve is very steep at the beginning of an online class. Success as an online student relies on having the right computer setup, the comfort of fit between one’s lifestyle and learning preferences and the demands of online learning, and the student’s excitement about learning the course content. Try an online course or training program, and remember the tips we’ve shared so you can feel successful, enjoy your experience in the online learning community, and become living proof that online technology is a powerful tool for teaching and learning among early childhood practitioners.

And will you succeed? Yes! You will indeed! (98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed.) KID YOU’LL MOVE MOUNTAINS! Dr. Seuss, Oh, the Places You’ll Go!, (1990)

References


Seuss, Dr. (1990). Oh, the places you’ll go! New York: Random House.


Visit www.ChildCareExchange.com online for additional resources to accompany this article:

- Resources for Online Learners
- Online Opportunities for Early Childhood Professionals

Go to Training Resources tab — then click on FREE RESOURCES.
Online Opportunities for Early Childhood Professionals

There are many online courses, credentials, degrees, and training programs for early childhood professionals, and more come online every month. The following are a few of the higher education institutions with the most experience designing and delivering online courses for early childhood professionals. Start your search with these programs, and then use an Internet search engine to locate other institutions and training programs.

Broome Community College — http://web.sunybroome.edu/teachereducation/index.html
Colorado Community Colleges Online — www.ccconline.org
Concordia University•St. Paul — www.csp.edu/
Kansas State University — www.dce.ksu.edu/dce/cl/earlychildhood
Kentucky Virtual University — www.kyvu.org
Minnesota Child Care Resource & Referral Network, E-Learn — www.mnchildcare.org
Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, E-Lect — www.elect.mnscu.edu
National-Louis University, graduate degrees in Early Childhood Administration — www.nl.edu/ecaonline
New York State Early Childhood Education Online — www.nyseceonline.suny.edu
Northampton Community College — www.northampton.edu/Distancelearn/Programs/degrees-earl.htm
Nova Southeastern University — www.fgse.nova.edu/ecaa
Pacific Oaks College — www.pacificoaks.edu
Professional Training and Consulting, Early Childhood Training Programs — www.ptctraining.com
University of Cincinnati, Early Childhood Learning Center — http://eclc.uc.edu
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Administrator Credential Program — www.sce.uwm.edu

Resources for Online Learners

There are many wonderful resources for prospective online students available on the Internet. Here are a few of our favorites to help you find, select, and successfully participate in an online class.

Are online courses for me? College of DuPage — www.cod.edu/dept/CIL/CIL_Surv.htm
Colorado Community Colleges Online — http://ecollegelogin.ccconline.org/index.real?action=islearn
Florida Distance Learning Consortium — www.distancelearn.org/readyDL.cfm
California Child Development Training Consortium, Schedule of Non-Traditional Classes & Trainings — www.childdevelopment.org/schoverview.htm
Illinois Online Network, University of Illinois — www.ion.illinois.edu/
Self Evaluation for Potential Online Students
www.ion.illinois.edu/ONresources/onlineLearning/selfEval.asp

What Makes a Successful Online Student?
www.ion.illinois.edu/ONresources/onlineLearning/StudentProfile.asp

Tips for Online Success www.ion.illinois.edu/ONresources/onlineLearning/tips.asp

National Child Care Information Center, Distance Learning in Early Childhood Education — http://nccic.org/poptopics/distancelearning.html
Project CONTACT, A Guide to Distance Learning for Early Childhood Students in North Carolina — www.tpg.unc.edu/~contact