Technology in Higher Education

by Sophia

☰	WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the role of technology and the internet in higher education and discusses online courses. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. The Impact of Technology on Education

Nothing has had a greater effect on the state of education in recent years than the growth of digital information technology. The internet is changing how we learn—not only in terms of the evolving methods of delivering instruction and conducting research but the new structures and contexts of processing information are also altering the fundamental ways we think and work.

One of the most significant practical changes the internet has brought to higher education is the availability of online courses. They offer students with busy or complicated schedules the freedom and flexibility to work on their own time, which they would not be able to find in traditional classrooms. Another is the vast collection of information across all subjects that the internet makes available to everyone. Of course, as we'll discuss later, with this wealth of information comes a wealth of potential distractions.

1a. Technology as the Norm

While instruction today is delivered in a broad range of styles and the degree to which technology is integrated into the classroom varies, the use of technology in some form is decidedly the norm.

Those holding out hope that technology in the classroom is a temporary fad will be disappointed. Not only will technology remain a fixture in the classroom, but its influence on education is going to grow and evolve at a rapid pace into the foreseeable future. So, there isn't much of a point in being dismissive of the use of technology in the classroom.

It is okay to feel intimidated by it, but you'll find that the intimidation will fade once you become familiar with this new educational reality.

1b. Technology as a Distraction

We are living in a very stimulating time. In the digital age, overwhelming amounts and kinds of information are available instantaneously. For students, the internet can be an incredible tool for enriching your schoolwork, but it also offers powerfully tempting potential for distraction. Social media, chat, and your favorite websites are just one click away when you're studying on your laptop or tablet.

What's more, in addition to the screen in front of you, you may have another screen in your pocket or on the desk next to your textbook—your smartphone—and this one buzzes and vibrates with messages from the outside world (the world outside homework).

If you're going to get anything accomplished, you'll need to ward off the temptation of distraction with some practiced self-discipline.

2. Distance Learning and Hybrid Learning

Distance learning is the name for any type of education situation where instruction happens without the students and the instructor meeting in person.

While the proliferation of online courses has totally revolutionized the concept of distance learning, the idea actually predates the internet. In fact, "correspondence courses," wherein instructors and students communicate by mail, date back to the 19th century.

When a course involves a combination of online and traditional in-person instruction, this is called **hybrid learning** (sometimes referred to as blended learning). This approach is increasingly popular, as it can utilize the best qualities of both distance and in-person education.

> 📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**
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> **Distance Learning**
> Term used for courses that do not require you to attend in a physical classroom. Distance learning today is often referred to as virtual learning or online learning because the internet plays a central role in how distance learning courses are deployed today.
>
> **Hybrid Learning**
> Term used for courses that have some physical classroom sessions and some distance learning activities (usually online).

2a. Distance Learning Norms

Obviously, the experience of distance learning is characterized by the fact that you are on your own. However, though as a distance learning student where you may be working alone at your desk, you are not "alone" in the sense of having no one to turn to for help or advice with your classes. Certain resources may not be right in front of you, so you'll need to take the initiative to reach out and get the help you need.

Another worthwhile thing to take note of regarding the norms of distance learning is that most, if not all, of the communication you will have with both your instructors and your classmates will happen in writing. It can be difficult to control the nuances of tone and context with the written word, so it's best to take care that you are coming across appropriately and respectfully in your writing. In addition, taking an extra minute or two with your writing will help you avoid typos and other mistakes.

> ↗ EXAMPLE Let's say you are asked to provide feedback on a classmate's writing and you find the student has a lot of trouble with basic mechanics and grammar. You have written marginal comments like "this is not how apostrophes are used" and "fix the wording," but after reading them over they sound too harsh to you. How can you revise your comments to give them a lighter touch?
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> Try not to phrase things in the negative—so "this is not how apostrophes are used" could be reworked

with the more positive and helpful "apostrophes are used for possession and contraction—this is a plural name." "Fix this wording" is essentially a command. While the wording might need fixing, remember that you and your classmate are peers; it's not your role to give them orders. You can soften the tone with qualifiers that make your comments more like suggestions—"maybe," "perhaps," or "you might consider." Also, a word like "fix" implies the student has written the sentence wrong; how about "adjust" as in "perhaps adjust the wording here?"

2b. Distance Learning vs. the Traditional Classroom

As we've discussed, perhaps the most frequently cited advantage of distance learning is the flexibility it offers students to work in accord with their unique schedules and habits.

Conversely, the most commonly cited disadvantage of distance learning is the distance itself—the subtraction of in-person interactions with your instructors and classmates. But, it would be incorrect to suggest that online courses don't include vibrant class discussions and a healthy sense of community among the students. These aspects of the traditional classroom are not lost; they are just adapted to the virtual environment.

> ⚙ THINK ABOUT IT
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> You feel like in your online class you're going to miss out on some of the intimacy and camaraderie that can be the best part of the in-person class experience. Instead of anticipating a lack of community in your online course and resigning yourself to it, why not think about how to build and foster a sense of community in the class yourself?
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> Of course, you'll need to observe the proper boundaries of your role as a student in the course, but there are likely lots of ways you can take it upon yourself to make your virtual classroom more lively and connected: introduce yourself, contribute to class forums, provide thoughtful and helpful feedback to your classmates, etc.

2c. Success in an Online Course

Ultimately, your success in an online course is going to depend on a lot of the same things it would depend on in a traditional course, such as your attention, focus, hard work, and perseverance. Along with basic computer literacy, the other quality you might need more of for success in an online course is self-sufficiency. Distance learning entails a more independent student experience, and individual students will find different advantages and drawbacks to that independence. If you embrace the challenges of distance learning, you will find that they offer an opportunity for maturity and growth—both as a student and as a person.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES

CHECK YOUR TECH
Make sure the computer, internet, and any other technology you need for your course is functioning properly, and that you know how to find and use the course website.

ENGAGE WITH YOUR PEERS AND INSTRUCTOR
Harness the collaborative learning spirit of a traditional classroom by asking good questions and posting thoughtful responses in a timely manner.

STAY FOCUSED & MOTIVATED
The flexibility of an online course is an advantage, but it also means you have to be even more accountable for keeping up with your assignments and other course activities.

COMMUNICATE WITH KINDNESS
It's easy to come across the wrong way when you are not face-to-face. Use your kindest and most polite language when posting comments.

SUMMARY

Technology is everywhere in higher education, so you can expect **the impact of technology** to become a part of the way you complete your coursework. Although technology has become the **norm**, it can also become a **distraction**. You may choose to enroll in courses that are 100% online, or courses that are a blend of online work and on-campus classes with either **distance learning or hybrid learning**. Make sure you understand the **distance learning norms** and the differences between **distance learning and the traditional classroom**. Having this knowledge can help you find **success in an online course**.

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