

Go the Distance

Academic insights for distance learners – EXTRA

Episode 2: How to succeed as a distance learner – With David Hann

David

My name is David Hann. I'm a lecturer in English Language and Applied Linguistics and I was a distance learning teacher for 10 years.

Students need to engage with the course – that is vitally important, which means not only engaging with the course materials and the course concepts, but engaging with their tutors; engaging with their fellow students. And they also need to plan ahead, because that is very, very important. You need to organise your life in such a way that you can do the course as well as possible, and organising your life has to do with your – organising your professional life, organising your domestic life, organising time, organising place as well – where are you going to work when you're doing your distance course? So this means engaging with other people – engaging with your family and, and asking them to help you in terms of giving you time and space. Engaging with your employer could well be telling them that you have these other demands on your time and organising your time accordingly. And planning also needs to be flexible because the, the unexpected will happen and you need to incorporate that into your studies. And I think with distance learning, also knowing yourself is very important as well, because you've got to know when you work best, and how you work best, and organise your life accordingly.

People do courses for various reasons, and a lot of people do them for instrumental reasons: they need them to get a qualification in order to get another job, for example, and that's fine. But it is important to remember that you need to be engaged with the course: the subject matter needs to interest you. And that is very important because if it doesn't interest you, you will struggle to complete it, believe me. And what students really need to do is to engage with the course for itself. And the good grades will be a by-product of that engagement, in fact.

Assessment is very important in, as a barometer of how students are doing and how students understand and engage with the materials that they're studying. But it's more than that: the continuous assessment that students have throughout the course is also a means for them to learn: to learn about what they're doing well and what they need to do better. And also within that feedback are ideas and advice about how to do better.

I think it's fine to be ambitious and to want to improve on your grades continuously. However, having said that, I think it's important for students to remember that as they go through a particular qualification, the materials that they engage with inevitably become more and more challenging, so that means that to get a higher grade actually involves work at a much higher level, so it is those moments of difficulty where learning actually takes place – those moments where you furrow your brow and you think "Wait a minute – do I understand this?" and you might need to go away and think about it for a moment and those are really important moments. It does matter that – if you consistently get bad grades or grades that you think don't reflect your ability: you need to talk to somebody – you need to talk to your tutor about that.

The tutor's role is vital. Of course the tutor is there to explain particular concepts and ideas. But the most important role the tutor has is to give you feedback on how you're doing on the course, and that feedback usually comes at assessment time.

Tutor feedback is vital. It's vital for development. It's vital for learning. So when, when you get your tutor feedback, read it very, very carefully, because the feedback feeds forward into your next assignment, and that reflection and development is vital for doing well on the course. And if there's something about it which you don't understand, then you need to check that with your tutor, and when you look at the feedback, look back at your own work and see what the tutor is talking about, and reflect on how you can improve on those areas which your tutor has identified as weaknesses or shortcomings in your assessment.

Collaborative learning is very important for student success. Often you'll be asked to do things with your fellow students, and even if you're not, doing things with your fellow students can be very, very useful, for two basic reasons. First of all, in real life we have to collaborate, you know, if you think about jobs, projects in jobs etcetera, etcetera, we have to learn how to communicate together and work together. And secondly, actually, having others' perspectives, other people's ideas feeding into your own is very, very useful when it comes to learning.

If they feel they are not succeeding, they first should talk to the tutor about that. I think one of the problems that people have – people who fail courses – is that they don't ask for help early enough and, although people

need to have a 'can do' attitude when it comes to distance learning, when they 'can't do', they need to shout. And so the first person they need to talk to is the tutor. If they're not satisfied with, with, with what the tutor is saying, most institutions have other support mechanisms in place, and it's important for students to be able to access those. And actually before enrolling on a course, it is quite useful to, to look into all the support that a particular institution can offer because when you're actually under pressure, it's less easy to think about where you can get those resources.

I think people need to get over any inhibitions, cultural or otherwise, about asking for help from a tutor because a tutor is not a mind reader – a tutor has to know, and, and if you're struggling, one of the first things you need to do is think about how you are going to articulate that to whoever you are going to ask support from, because it's not enough for a student to simply say "I'm not coping" – it doesn't mean very much and it won't garner any help unless you actually say, and articulate what it is about the course, or the experience of being on the course, which is a struggle for you.

It is normal for students to sometimes feel that they're struggling and I think that's part of the learning process and I think when one enrolls on the course, when people enrol on a course they should actually bear that in mind and remember that on occasion at least, they will struggle. And that's fine. And they need to accommodate that. Of course there's a balance to be struck, because if you're struggling all the time – if you're feeling you're not coping – then you need to seek help.

Institutions let students know if they are passing or not passing partly through the grades that they give them, of course, because the grades are an indicator: they're a barometer of how students are performing. But that is accompanied by probably something more important, which is the feedback that students receive for each assessment that they do. And that feedback is vitally important for the students to know how they're doing, what they're doing well and what they need to do better.

They also receive, not just written feedback but they will get verbal feedback from their tutors, and they will have the opportunity to talk to their tutors and to find out how they're doing, and if they feel the need to talk to their tutors about their

progress, then for sure, they can book a slot with their tutor and discuss how things are going. And there will be other mechanisms, other scaffolding within the institution. If, for example the student is having emotional

problems or whatever it might be, there are usually resources that they can turn to.

The best shortcut to success is to know that there is no shortcut to success, in fact. If there were a shortcut to success, everybody would be taking it. So there is no shortcut – you have to work hard, but that doesn't mean you can't enjoy what you're doing.

A typical mindset of a successful student is to be positive and engaged, but to be realistic at the same time. So they need to have a sort of 'can do' attitude. But when they can't do it, they need to seek help. So there's a balance there. The other thing in terms of mindset is to know yourself. That's very important: know yourself in terms such as when you study best, for example: some people are natural night owls. Others are, you know, early birds and, and that's pretty important as well is – just to know yourself and also be able to walk away from your work – take a walk, do something, and then come back to it because that is also very important in terms of energy levels and being engaged with the course.