

Go the Distance

Academic insights for distance learners

Episode 6: Going the Distance - with Leigh-Anne Perriman

I'm Leigh-Anne Perriman. I'm programme lead for a masters in online and distance education programme, and prior to that, for many years I was a tutor in online and distance learning across the Arts.

The length of a distance learning course can vary wildly, depending on which institution you're studying with. Some can be requiring you to study in the same amount of time that a face-to-face course would be: so three years for an undergraduate degree, for example. Some allow you to take an indefinite amount of time and some have, say, a fixed time period, but that's maybe double the amount that you might take face-to-face. Some of this will depend on the subject, so if the subject requires up-to-date information – for example, something to do with the law or social care - then there may be a more rigid time constraints than something that is more timeless: let's say a subject in the arts.

Over the longer term, distance learning can be really stressful because you're trying to fit it in amongst other commitments. There will – there may be a mismatch between your expectations of what you should be achieving and what you're really achieving, and studying over a course of years can be quite draining, so it can be very stressful.

As a distance learning tutor, I'd be very surprised if a student didn't encounter at least one crisis during their course of study. Distance learning involves fitting in study around other aspects of your life and so there will be multiple points at which there are challenges and crises. So yes: perfectly normal.

If you're feeling stressed as a distance learner, there are two main things that you can do and both require talking to other people. Talk to your tutor: they may be able to advise you about study strategies and motivate you in terms of getting a broader sense of your own journey and to help you with doing things that can alleviate the stress a bit. But above all, talk to your fellow students. They're probably also feeling stressed; they'll have been through the same things that you do. Some students talk in online forums, some students set up Facebook groups to support each other and all of those things can be really helpful, so students can support each other and share their own particular experiences.

Keeping in contact with your fellow students is a vital part of success in distance learning. Your fellow students will have similar experiences to you. They'll be a

great source of support when things are tough. When you're considering perhaps withdrawing from your course, they will be able to share their own experiences and can be really good for motivating you. And also you'll have something to give them as well.

If a student gets a grade that's lower than they're expecting, that can be a real de-motivator: they can end up feeling really fed up and sometimes wonder whether it's worth carrying on. At that stage, it's vital to talk to your tutor. They can help you to understand whether you've actually answered the question that was set – often that can be a problem – and they can help you to plan for getting a higher grade in future.

Having said that, it's also important to look at your overall study journey. Go back to look at the grades you were achieving at the beginning of your studies, and to see that perhaps, in fact, you've done increasingly better over the course of time you were studying. Also realise that assignments are set to become progressively harder, and so it's quite likely that students' grades will get lower or level out across a program of study because of that. One thing I would say "don't do": don't compare your grades with your fellow students, because they're all going through very different study journeys to you. It's your own personal journey.

There are multiple options for students who are experiencing a crisis and considering withdrawing from their course of study. Obviously, some will decide to withdraw altogether and to stop distance learning for any length of time, maybe because the demands on their time were just too great. Others – and this depends on the institution – can choose to defer their study: so stop in a particular year and resume again when the course is next presented, and your tutor will be best placed to advise about whether this is possible in your case. Other students will decide to – with the advice of their tutor – to be strategic about their studies: just do what's essential in order to be able to find the time to do the studying. But at all points, the tutor is the best point of contact to advise on what would be the best way forward.

When taking distance learning course, taking study breaks is really important in order that you can recharge your batteries and get new energy for the next course of study. Some people are so motivated to carry on – perhaps if they're studying for work reasons – they're tempted to study back-to-back courses and not stop in between. But while that's possible, it's perhaps not the optimal way of doing things, because you can burn yourself out a bit.

So three to four years into a distance learning course, one can be very motivated, and also not motivated at all. Very motivated because the end's in

sight: there may be only a few months to go before you get that qualification. However, a student can be experiencing something we call 'study lag', so, yet another year of compromising, of not having that social life that you wanted, and having to try and find time to study in the midst of other things that are important to you. At that point, I think you can call on your friends or family as a really great resource. Tell them that you're flagging a bit. They'll help you motivate and to see that the end is in sight and call on them as a resource to encourage you through those final months. Also, use your fellow students as a resource. Students are really great at motivating each other, and some students can find that invaluable and it will stop them withdrawing from a course, in feeling that their fellow students have gone through the same thing.

Students can stay motivated when they're studying by trying to apply their learning to contexts they find interesting – perhaps something to do with work or something to do with their family setting – and choosing a study pathway that fits their own interests: that can be a real motivating power. There are no shortcuts to success in distance learning. There may be study strategies that can help you to study more efficiently, but there is no shortcut.

These days there's a variety of different ways in which you can graduate. Obviously some people will go to a face-to-face ceremony, where everybody meets in person, but in some institutions it's possible to have online graduation ceremonies. I've heard of one in the virtual world Second Life, for example, where people dress up in their virtual gowns and get presented, along with their virtual families, with their degree certificates. So there's a lot of different ways in which people can graduate. This is especially relevant for students who are studying outside their home country.

Seeing your students graduate can be one of the most rewarding parts of being a distance-learning tutor. Seeing your student with their family celebrating their achievements and all that they've been through in order to gain a particular qualification is unbeatable and it makes me feel just so proud.

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