

Pre-registration for Online Courses

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Abstract

Because online learning is still relatively new to most institutions, many students consider online courses easier than on campus courses. When they enroll after reading only the course description, they can experience frustration and may not complete the course because they are not prepared for the text based environment, do not understand the self-motivation necessary for online learning, or are not computer literate enough to use software or do web searches, etc. This manuscript presents a process the author uses to pre-register students for online speech communication courses at Minnesota State University, Mankato (MSUM), a midsize public university. Information and a pre-registration assignment allow the instructor to gauge student commitment to completing an online course and to present students with necessary information before they enroll in the course.

Keywords: Online readiness, Permission to register, Online success, Registration assignment, Pre-register for online class

Introduction

According to Lynch (2001), "Effective student and faculty preparation for the Web-based teaching and learning environment can make a significant impact on student success in their studies, thus increasing retention and curriculum completion" (para. 2). In order to provide a better learning environment for students, the author prepared a pre-registration document for students requesting admission to an online course. Because only a few students in our University have thus far experienced online learning, there are some who think it will be a simple "walk in the park." The permission to register readiness document and the exercise provide a system to prepare students for a successful online learning experience.

Two documents serve as introductions to online learning for students who are thinking about enrolling in an online interpersonal communication course. The "Online Readiness" tool ([Appendix B](#)) and the "Permission to Register" e-mail and exercise ([Appendix A](#)) are distributed to students who request permission to enroll in an online class. These documents are enhanced by the documents posted online through our university extended learning office. (<http://www.mnsu.edu/ext/online/>) Several university produced online documents inform students of minimum system requirements, provide names and e-mail addresses for help. There are demonstration modules which also provide some instruction in Desire2Learn (D2L), <http://www.mnsu.edu/its/ets/d2l/desire2learn.html>, the statewide instructional management program. Additionally, [Minnesota Online](#), the state of Minnesota college and university information website, provides more readiness documents, a list of minimum system requirements, and other student resources for online learning.

Having received the full support of the speech communication department to follow this procedure, it has been employed for 4 semesters for an interpersonal communication course since 2005. As research indicates, “mostly from anecdotal information, it is estimated that dropout rates for distance education are higher than those for on-campus programs and courses. Some studies roughly estimate that students enrolled in distance education are twice as likely to drop out than on-campus students” (Johnson & Willging, 2004, para. 3). Using this pre-registration assignment, the failure and non-completion rates indicated in the literature have not occurred. Approximately 30-40 requests are received for permission to register each semester for each online course. Once students receive the permission to register information and the “assignment,” about 50% complete the assignment and register for the course. Students have only dropped the course because of a death in the family or severe medical problems. Only one student has withdrawn because he was unable to complete the online course work or fulfill the online requirements. The author attributes the success rate to the pre-registration process.

Student remediation can before the course begins which often leads students to other options before registration or course failure. An example: A student read the information and then proceeded to ask some very basic questions about access to materials, software, and MSUM services. He also confided, “I don’t know how to lower my security settings.” He was informed that finding out how to do such a task would be part of his responsibility when registering for an online course. He was provided with several links, options, and opportunities to find the self-directed help he would need. The reply sent by the instructor was, “When you want to take a course online, you must know how to do this rather basic computer work. Please take the initiative to find a way to facilitate this process. Contact me when you have your computer ‘fixed.’ These documents will be resent so you can try again. The university help desk is a good place to start. You may e-mail them at helpdesk@mnsu.edu.”

The following response was sent to a student who wanted to register for the course; however, it was determined she was not ready for online learning without some remediation. She replied only minutes after receiving the permission details. Her attachment was sloppy and included several grammar and style errors. The instructor responded:

There seem to be several style, sentence structure, grammar and spelling problems with the document you submitted. Based on the writing rubric ([writing rubric](#)) included in this permission message, you would earn only 2 out of 4 points. Please try this again, but find the time to proofread your work, and to write more clearly. This is the process that will be used in this online course—especially since it is for intensive writing credit. Based on how quickly you returned your writing sample, it may be that you do not totally understand the commitment required for this highly text based environment. Please consider resubmitting your work.

Happily, this student refined and resubmitted her document. In addition, she successfully completed the course. The assignments she submitted during the course clearly indicated her writing improved with each assignment. Her commitment to do well was demonstrated by her willingness to master the content and the process. Had she not been cautioned from the beginning, she may have experienced frustration and become a student who did not finish the course.

Closing Remarks

This procedure is used by the author to pre-register students for an online course. This technique works for her and is supported by her department and her University. As with all educational endeavors, instructors need to find the model that works best for them. “A good teacher who facilitates well and ensures lots of feedback can make an online class much more worthwhile and enjoyable for participants” (Kearsley, 1997, para. 16). This method of pre-registration give students the opportunity to interact with the instructor and to receive feedback before the fact.. This is one option which allows instructors to help students, whatever their computer literacy level, to succeed and complete an online course even before registration.

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Appendices

Appendix A Permission to Register e-mail

Thank you for your request for admittance to speech 101, Interpersonal Communication, the online section. You must know how to use D2L as part of your responsibility for taking this class online. The university has provided a demonstration course if you are unfamiliar with D2L. <http://www.mnsu.edu/ext/online/demo.html> In order to receive permission to register, please do the following:

1. Please carefully read the "Online Readiness" document (the last section of this message) to help assess your readiness for online learning. Taking a class online is quite different than taking a class on campus; it is not harder or easier, worse or better, it is simply different. It meets the needs of some learners but not others. Please spend time determining if it is truly an option for your learning style. Some skills needed for online learning can be reviewed at <http://www.mnsu.edu/ext/online/skills.html>
2. In the body of an e-mail addressed to johnsn3@mnsu.edu, send your tech id number, your classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, other; and your major and minor.
3. In less than a one page, double spaced essay, complete the following statement. I have read the online readiness document. I believe I can be successful as an online learner because: (Please use 12 point times or time new roman font.)
4. Attach your essay to the e-mail as a word document. When I receive the e-mail message and the attachment, I will assess your essay using the rubric below. You must receive a minimum score of a 3 or a 4 in order to receive permission to register for the section. I will follow up by sending you a confirmation message. (If you do not receive a 3 or a 4, you can of course register for a face-to-face section of Sp 101, interpersonal communication which is listed in the registration area.)

The one page essay you write will be evaluated using the following writing rubric. (This is the rubric used for papers in this writing intensive class.)

Writing Rubric

Task Completion:	The assignment is complete; it clearly answers any questions asked or issues raised. The content is well developed. Ideas are detailed, convincing and/or imaginative and clear. Thoughts are well documented and defended with authority and citations. The paper provides significant awareness of communication theory as it relates to this course.
Comprehensibility:	The reader can readily comprehend the thoughts and ideas. The reader is not required to make an interpretation of the ideas. Sources are used to make the writer's ideas credible and the sources are properly cited
Vocabulary:	An appropriate range of vocabulary is used. There is accurate and appropriate language used. The writer has included vocabulary consistent with the field of oral communication.
Grammar:	The work is free from grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors. The work indicates the writer's control of basic language structures. Use of paragraphing enhances communication.

Appendix B Online Readiness Questions and System Requirements

Can you answer most of these questions in the affirmative? Please reflect carefully on the following questions about your academic responsibilities in an online environment.

1. Does your computer and internet hook up support online learning. Perform a system check by navigating to: <http://www.mnsu.edu/ext/online/technical.html> (see [appendix B](#) for more specific computer and system requirements.)
2. Can you devote 6-8 hours per week (for a 3-credit course)? You must be willing and able to devote time to this course whether you are traveling, are ill, or have family or personal emergencies.
3. Do you understand how to navigate D2L, the MSUM instructional management system? If not, navigate to the demonstration class located at <http://www.mnsu.edu/ext/online/demo.html>.
4. Are you good at managing your time? If you answered no, you may wish to check out time management websites: http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_HTE.htm.
5. Are you comfortable working primarily in a text-based environment? For obvious reasons, this class will not entail lectures or classroom activities. If your learning style demands oral teaching, this section may not be for you.
6. Are you able to follow directions easily?
7. Do you check your e-mail daily? If you answered no, please learn how to use your MSUM user id and password at <https://www.mnsu.edu/its/userid/>.
8. Do you possess competent writing skills? Purdue University offers online writing help at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/oldindex.html>. Check out how to receive tutoring help from MSUM staff at <http://www.mnsu.edu/supersite/academics/success/>.
9. Are you able to ask questions when you do not understand an assignment or a concept? The e-mail address for the instructor is johnsn3@mnsu.edu. Most e-mails is answered within 48 hours. If not, please resend your question or comment as it may have been lost.
10. Do you feel comfortable contacting an online peer learner to arrange for team assignments?
11. Do you have colleagues, friends, and relatives who will help you with some assignments (particularly interpersonal communication assignments)?
12. Are you able to work independently with little direction and only a final due date?
13. Do you read well?

14. Does your lifestyle (family, work, or personal schedule) allow you to set aside time for you to work on the course assignments?
15. Are your friends and family supportive of your decision to take an online course?
16. Can you produce a document, save it to your desktop and upload it to D2L? Get support from MSUM technology department at <http://www.mnsu.edu/its/>.
17. Do you know how to "link" a completed assignment to the proper D2L placeholder?
<http://www.mnsu.edu/its/ets/d2l/desire2learn.html>.
18. Are you able to use the track changes feature of Microsoft Word to peer review documents? Or, are you able to find someone to show you how to use this feature? This is a process we will discuss in a class orientation session the first week of classes.
19. Do you know how to surf the Web and use it as a research tool? MSUM librarians can offer some help at <http://lib.mnsu.edu/>.
20. Do you know how to download software from the Internet and install it on your computer? Instructional Technology services including software that can be downloaded for class use can be found at <http://www.mnsu.edu/its/>. Further support can be found at MSUM technology department at <http://www.mnsu.edu/its/support/training/>.
21. Do you have access to the following minimum or preferred system requirements? Are you familiar with university supported software and downloads? <http://www.mnsu.edu/ext/online/technical.html>.
22. Some software can be downloadable from the MSUM website by following the instructions located at: <https://secure.mnsu.edu/downloads/>.
23. If you have questions or need technical assistance, contact the MSUM Technical Support Help Desk Web Help: <http://www.mnsu.edu/its/techservices/>. Email: helpdesk@mnsu.edu. Phone: 507-389-6654

**If you do not have internet access at home, you may be able to access the internet through your local public or school library. Of course, you have access on campus. There are many computer labs in various locations around campus as well as in Wissink Hall, the Academic Computer Center, the student union, and the dorms.

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