Best Practices for Virtual Learning

Learning in a virtual environment is likely new to you and will require a new mindset. You may be excited, uncertain or truly overwhelmed! The tips below are designed to set you up for success as you embark on virtual learning. If you have any concerns, reach out to someone at the faculty, be that the Student Centre, the Career and Professional Development Centre, a professor or a mentor.

Establish a Routine

Setting a regular time to do things like waking up, taking a shower (or bath), going to bed and eating your meals will help you stay on track and give you a sense of control over your time. Experiment with different scenarios for a few days and then stick to the routine that works best for you given your natural rhythms, preferences and obligations.

When you have competing obligations such as childcare, parental care or juggling professional responsibilities, setting a schedule can be challenging now that our professional and personal lives have collided in an unprecedented way. Try looking for "your window" – that period of time (even if it is multiple short periods) that will allow you to focus on your studies. Be patient with yourself and try out a couple of scenarios before settling on one that works best for you.

Get Dressed

People often think that being able to stay in their pajamas is a dream come true. But, successful remote workers get dressed before they begin working. As you navigate virtual learning you should get dressed too! When you sit around in pajamas with blankets and pillows, it is all too easy to end up feeling lazy and not getting anything done because you are too comfortable. It will also help to boost your self-esteem when you look good, even if you are the only person to see it.

Decide Where You Are Going to Work

Many people think that learning virtually means that they can sit on the couch in their pajamas (see note above) and do their work with the television on. This is not going to work. You need to set up an area (or areas) that is dedicated to your studies, and minimize distractions if you can. This could be a home office, spare room, dining room, living room or your backyard/patio (once the weather warms up) – whatever works best for you. Once you have established a regular routine and you are comfortable with your new set-up, if, one day, you start feeling like you are in a rut and need a change to increase productivity, consider switching up your study area. You might be surprised at how much more productive you can be if you move to a different location. Switching up your location will help to re-energize you, and you will not be bored by looking at the same surroundings all the time.

Pro Tip – Never Work from Bed

Why Not?

- It becomes more difficult to fall asleep because working from bed weakens the mental association between your bedroom and sleep. If you are in a bachelor apartment, or are limited to working in your bedroom, try to set up a workspace that is not on your bed, and at a minimum make your bed every morning as you start the day as a shift between sleep time and awake time.
- You may start to feel like you are always at work.
- Your quality of sleep will decrease because using electronics before bed reduces the melatonin you need to fall asleep.

Set a Regular Study Schedule

One of the great things about virtual learning you can set a schedule that works for you and avoid travel time. If you are a morning person, you can start your day early. If you are more of a night owl, you can study later in the day and into the evening. Just remember: once you set a schedule, you need to stick with it in order to get your work done. Create a schedule that will allow you to get the most done with as few interruptions as possible. Allow some time for the unexpected and disruptions. That way, you will avoid becoming frazzled when the unexpected happens. Just like when you are balancing attending classes, extracurriculars, assignments and studying, sometimes things can take longer than expected, or something urgent may arise. Be flexible and patient with yourself as you adjust to this new way of learning.

This may seem obvious, but often in a virtual environment, many people tend to get slack about scheduling. You have the same responsibilities whether you are in classes or at home, so make a schedule that mirrors a traditional class/study schedule. You will get more done if you have a plan in place and know what you have to do each day.

Make a List

Knowing what you have to do will help keep you motivated. Break down big projects into smaller tasks. Make realistic To-Do lists either in the morning before you start your day or at the end day looking forward to tomorrow. Remember to prioritize. If you have a really long list, try breaking it up and scheduling tasks on specific days, if you check everything off your list, and still have the time and energy, tackle some of the next day's tasks. Not sure how to even tackle your list? Here are two approaches (1) start with the hardest thing first or (2) start with the things that are easiest to accomplish. There is no right way or wrong way o tackle a list, it will depend on your strengths and preferences.

Avoid Distractions

Know what your personal time wasters are and avoid them. This might include things like having the TV on for "company", listening to podcasts as background noise, or checking in on social media (and suddenly 2 hours have gone by). Save these activities as rewards for a job well done. If cleaning is your distraction of choice, try implementing the 10-minute tidy. Before you settle in to your morning routine set a timer for 10 minutes and go! You would be surprised how many little things you can do in 10 minutes to tidy your space and clear your mind.

Take Breaks

Contrary to what you may think, taking breaks is not counter-productive. Not taking breaks is. Your mind gets into a rut. Your body gets stiff and sore. You get tired. Take a few minutes to get up and stretch regularly. Consider using "focus rounds". Set a timer for 50 minutes, then take a 10 minute break.

Pro-Tip – Pace Yourself

Build 5 to 10 minute breaks into your day: walk around the block, call a friend or family member, pet your cat (or your dog). Making time for exercise or meditation can drastically increase your sense of well-being, let alone your actual physical health.

Remember to Move

Choose from a variety exercise apps (many of which are currently free) to help you get moving, Down Dog has a variety workouts from yoga, to High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT), to barre and 7 minutes drills. There is something for everyone; you can choose your level and the duration of the workout. Get some fresh air – consider going for a walk! Remember that social distancing does not mean you have to stay inside.

Communicate with Your Professors and Get to Know the Expectations

Clarify your professor's expectations about class time, technology, how you will communicate, how you will submit your work, etc. Taking the time to clarify expectations will help provide structure to your learning and avoid any potential conflict or frustration later on.

Become Proficient with Email

You will likely be using your email more than ever, so it is time to become an expert at it. First, be very precise in your wording, as it is easy to take things the wrong way in email communications. Keep all emails documented, and make sure that you take the time to read and answer your email. Establish a filing system to keep yourself organized.

Pro-Tip – Proofread & Spellcheck

Remember to take the time to proofread all of your communications, especially your emails. Double check that you are sending the information to the correct person. A great way to do this is to draft and proofread your email *before* filling in the "send to" field. This way, you will avoid sending an incomplete email and it forces you to focus on the "who to", therefore avoiding sending it to the wrong person.

Use the Right Tools | Technology

Establish with your professors what tools are required to complete your courses. Are there specific tools you will need? If so, how will you access them? For video conferencing – you can use Skype, Google Hangouts, Zoom, Adobe Connect or even FaceTime. Your study space should include all of the tools you will need to get your work done. Having the right tools is essential, and you will need to make sure that you know how to use them properly, in order to get the most out of them.

Set Regular Check-Ins and Clarify Assignments

Check in about your progress and your assignments regularly. When receiving assignments, ensure you understand what is being requested and what is expected of you, the timeline and any format requirements. If an assignment is unclear, follow-up and get clarification. If you regularly communicate by email, this may mean asking for clarification during a class, setting up a phone call or video conference.

Create Virtual Study Groups

If you are struggling with studying on your own, create virtual study groups using video conferencing. This will help you keep you and others accountable. Implementing social distancing can sometimes feel isolating, take advantage of this opportunity to connect with others.

Take pride in your work

Study hard and review your work. Once you have toiled away and submitted an assignment, it is just as important to applaud yourself for a job well done as it is to do the job well. Celebrate your accomplishment by sharing it or treating yourself! The feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction that you achieve when you acknowledge your efforts will reinforce your subconscious to keep up the speed and continue making headway in your work. Also, remember we are all adjusting to a new reality; try not to put too much pressure on yourself.

Keep Yourself Motivated

Talk to yourself and give yourself little pep talks while you are tackling your objectives. And do it out loud. Say things like "C'mon. You can get this done – just a little more to go." Be your own cheerleader. Also consider listening to your favourite music to boost your mood. The bottom line is that you need to trust yourself and never underestimate what you can accomplish.

Persevere

There are always challenges to overcome when it comes to ploughing through any type of new situation. The best way to reach the finish line is often to simply take things one-step at a time until you are on the other side.

Virtual learning can be intimidating, and it can be amazing. When you understand the factors that go into successfully managing yourself, your studies and maintaining meaningful connection with other, the word "virtual" will become less of a connotation for isolation and more of a tool for choosing your own channels to thrive. Give yourself a grace period and be gentle – some days you will add more items to your "To Do" list than you will check off – we all have those days, it is perfectly normal. Be kind to yourself as you adjust to this new reality.

Additional Resources

For additional tips and best practices on virtual learning and working remotely, consider reviewing the following tutorial: "Time Management: Working from Home" available on **LinkedIn Learning**. These tutorials are available free of charge for all uOttawa students. You may also want to read this recent article: *Working from home for the first time? Here's how to make it a success* — *Stephanie Hogan, CBC.*

Sources:

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'Employment revolution' signals rise of freelance lawyers — Yamri Taddese
The New World of Legal Work: the Changing Rules of the 21st Century — Jordan Furlong