supporting online learners

blending high–tech with high–touch

by Sean Dolan, Chip Donohue, Lisa Holstrom, Latonia Pernell, and Anu Sachdev

Sean Dolan, MProfStud (Hons), BA (Hons), Grad DipTech, leads a team of academic staff in the area of eTeaching and eLearning at New Zealand Tertiary College. NZTC has recently launched NZTC Online, an online learning environment designed for early childhood students and enabled by ecelearn. Sean is currently researching how students engage and learn best in an online learning environment.

Chip Donohue, PhD, is the Director of Distance Learning at Erikson Institute in Chicago and a Fellow of the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media. He is a leader in the innovative use of technology and distance learning methods to increase access, create pathways, enhance learning, and improve teaching practices in early childhood education.

Lisa Holstrom, EdD, is Assistant Dean in the College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services at the University of Cincinnati (UC). As director of UC's Early Childhood Learning Community, she coordinated the development and delivery of online associate's and bachelor's degrees and systems of support for English- and Spanish-speaking Head Start teachers and child care providers. Lisa was selected as UC's 2008 Established Entrepreneur for regional and national partnerships established to benefit these teachers.

Latonia Pernell, M.S. is the Instructional Designer/Distance Learning Program Coordinator at UW-Milwaukee, School of Continuing Education. She manages the design and development of distance and blended learning programs. She provides consultation and training to faculty and staff on technology-aided teaching methods and assessment strategies, and provides tech support and customer service to students, faculty, and staff.

Anu Sachdev, M.Ed., M. A. is Assistant Director of Early Childhood Education at Northampton Community College. She is responsible for the Online Early Childhood program including the development, supervision, and support of online adjunct faculty and students. Anu is using technology to support student learning, enhance social presence, and build learning communities of students and faculty.

Effective and easily accessible student support services are essential to the success of adult learners. A student-centered approach is especially important in the design and delivery of online courses, professional certificates, and degree programs for early childhood professionals. And a student-first approach is essential for non-traditional adult learners who have minimal technology skill and experiences, are skeptical of using technology to learn about early childhood education and care, and have a strong preference for face-to-face learning. Before these students can take advantage of the engaging high-tech online programs and empowering online community of learners we offer, they need a high-touch approach to skill-building, easy access to 'how to' tutorials and resources, 'helpful' help in the context of early childhood education, a safe and easy-to-use learning environment, and guided opportunities for interacting and building relationships.

Once students take an online course they expect to be able to conduct all of their business with the institution online. That means that we have to integrate a wide range of student services to promote persistence, retention, and academic achievement, including: marketing and recruitment; applications and admissions; financial aid, tuition and fees; registration and enrollment; orientation; tech support; web-based resources or a campus portal; academic advising; tutoring; writing support; the bookstore; and library services.

In this article we share effective practices and 'how to' tips for providing support and technical assistance based on our many years of experience delivering successful online programs that have hard-earned reputations for 'above and beyond' student services for online learners. Our online programs include:

- EriksonOnline at Erikson Institute in Illinois
- NZTC Online at New Zealand Tertiary College in Auckland, New Zealand (NZTC)
- Early Childhood Education at Northampton Community College in Pennsylvania (NCC)
- The Early Childhood Learning Community at the University of Cincinnati in Ohio (UC)
- The Center for Early Childhood Professional Development and Leadership at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in Wisconsin (UWM).

Together we have collected stories and examples that illustrate proven strategies for online learner preparation, support, and success.

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A collection of effective practices

Many of the students at NZTC are non-traditional learners, meaning they are mature adults re-entering education after a significant break. Many of our learners are female, work full-time, and are responsible for caring for dependents. Online learning supports their busy lifestyle so that they are able to choose where and when they want to study without having to attend a bricks-and-mortar campus. (Sean Dolan)

Know your learner's needs. At UWM, knowing our audience is one of our best support practices. We've learned that every student comes into an online course or program with a different level of computer knowledge and access to a computer. We use pre- and post-course surveys to help assess our learners' needs.

Pre-course surveys provide a snapshot of the learners' prior knowledge and ability to access and use online learning technologies. Understanding their access issues includes knowing what type of computer they're using, their Internet connection, and when they'll be accessing the course. It's not very helpful to have a support system in place that is only available from 9 a.m. - 5 p.m., Monday-Friday, if most of your learners will be participating before work in the morning, later in the evenings, and over the weekend.

The post-survey results help us determine what changes and improvements need to be made. It gives students the opportunity to tell us what worked and what didn't, to share any challenges they faced while participating in the online course, and to give us feedback on how we can better support them the next time a course or program is offered.

The results from both surveys give us a better understanding of our learners' needs. This allows us to build effective instructional materials and help systems to better support and assist them in being successful online learners.

The online student body represents a diverse group of learners in age, ethnicity, language, culture, geographical location, educational background, and abilities. The mantra of 'anytime, anywhere, and anyone' resonates well with these new online learners trying to balance school with their work and personal commitments. Our college enrollment statistics indicate that more than 45% of our online students are over the age of 35, and it would be reasonable to assume that they did not grow up with computers in their learning environment. They are now beginning to use technology as a tool for their learning. While on one hand this diversity contributes to the enrichment of the virtual classroom experience, it also demands serious consideration when designing programs and teaching practices that will support these new online students. (Anu Sachdev)

Offer various means of support. At UWM, support for online learners is offered through many mediums. Traditionally, many may think of support as responding

to an e-mail or phone inquiry; and while these are very important options, support can be offered in many other ways. One is by providing 'how to' materials that assist your learners. We have found that providing these resources prior to the course and making them available during the course eliminates some of the anxiety that new online learners may experience about participating in an online course. Materials on how to navigate through the course management system, how to download software, and how to access instructional materials, for example, help take the guesswork out of getting started.

Allowing learners the opportunity to 'explore' the environment prior to the start of the course is another support practice we follow. The 'explore' time allows them to take a look around, get used to where everything is, try out the tools, and practice navigating and using the tools. You can use scavenger hunt activities or checklists to get students to practice logging in, navigating, and participating. All of these

support options give the learner time to confirm that they can access the course and navigate through the environment, and gives our support team adequate time to troubleshoot prior to the start of class.

Make help resources and helpful people easy to access and use. At NZTC we help learners become familiar with *NZTC Online* by giving them clear instructions and easy access to a real person who can help them to better incorporate online learning into their study regime. On every screen on *NZTC Online* we have created a link to our fully-staffed IT Helpdesk that students can either e-mail or telephone with their questions or concerns. This provides students with a greater sense of security in that they know there is a dedicated staff of professionals who will be able to assist them with any technical difficulties. We have found that the strong support of a technology help desk is essential to facilitating student success and eliminating frustration. At Northampton Community College, the help desk staff works diligently over long hours to provide tech support to new students, answering their questions patiently, and walking them through step-by-step to perform computer tasks to navigate through coursework and submit assignments. (Anu Sachdev)

Offer 'how to learn online' experiences. For the majority of NZTC learners, *NZTC Online* represents their first experience with online learning. We have therefore put together an accessible and easy-to-follow orientation to online learning which students are asked to complete prior to the start of their academic course. In the orientation course we focus on those components of online learning that are central to our students' success. For example, feedback from our pilot studies showed that learners were most anxious about the process of submitting assignments online. In response, in the orientation course we have created a sample assignment which students are asked to submit prior to the start of their academic course.

The transition for our students to this new mode of studying impacts significantly on the effectiveness of their learning. At *NZTC Online* we have recognized the importance of students' feeling confident navigating the LMS by creating multiple opportunities for them to inform themselves and enter into a dialogue that will assist them in effectively utilizing this learning resource. By addressing issues concerning the *how* of student engagement with online learning, we are setting up our learners for success in this mode of studying that will give them the confidence and

motivation to interact with other learners, teaching staff, and course content.

Orientations give you the ability to do a 'show and tell' and can be an opportunity to have the learners actually complete activities within the course. This gives them the ability and confidence to participate in the online course on their own. (Latonia Pernell)

Provide clear expectations about participation.
Each NCC course clearly outlines what is required of the student in their discussion board interactions, laying out the ground rules as well as a simple rubric for participation. This creates clear parameters and expectations for student participation. Students who are hesitant to post their thoughts can seek the feedback of an online tutor available specifically for Early Childhood Education before getting started. The faculty, in their role as facilitators, post thought-provoking questions related to the required class readings, and respond to the posts of students with more probing questions to lead the class deeper into the discussion, while encouraging and acknowledging the contribution of each student. Our faculty also model best practice of netiquette (online etiquette) for new online students. This helps dispel any fears

Lucy's story

Lucy enrolled in our second pilot study at NZTC with not a little trepidation. Lucy at the time of enrollment was a busy center director and a grandmother. This was to be Lucy's first encounter with online learning and discussion forums. Lucy felt that as a mature grandmother of sixty plus years, learning how to use the technology of online learning would be a distraction from the academic course.

However, in the first few days of the course, Lucy made extensive use of the IT Helpdesk to the point where most of the staff knew Lucy by name and had come to expect her call. Many of Lucy's difficulties where not of a technical nature but were more a reflection of Lucy's extremely low level of confidence with using the technology. Although the orientation course covered many of the questions that Lucy posed, having them addressed again and in a different way by the IT staff gave Lucy the confidence to be more adventurous in the way that she navigated around the LMS and helped Lucy realize that many of the 'errors' that she made were reversible.

After a relatively short time, Lucy became one of our most prolific posters on the discussion forums. Not only did she use the forums to articulate her own ideas about issues central to the academic course, but her experience as a centre manager and her maturity meant that she was able to provide other learners with very useful insights and comments that contributed to the sense of community that the learners experienced.

On our exit survey, one of Lucy's most memorable comments was that not only had the technology enabled her to engage with the learning material at a deeper level than in her previous correspondence mode, but also that she had learned a range of technical and computer skills that had elevated her status in her grandchildren's eyes. As a technically-savvy grandmother, online learning allowed Lucy to flourish and this benefited not just Lucy but also those other learners who shared the same virtual space.

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about how to post and provides samples for them. This is an intentional teaching practice at NCC.

Use discussions to develop a strong community of learners. Engaging students in a meaningful discussion allows for student participation, the exchange of ideas representing various backgrounds, and the construction of knowledge that builds a sense of social presence. In online classes at NCC, discussions encourage students to 'write to learn,' as well as to scaffold the learning of peers by posting their thoughts and responding to their peers' questions.

Discussion boards also create an open forum for students to post their reflections, suggestions, and frustrations which are often answered by more experienced online students. Students often post questions relating to technology, assignments, and portfolios that are required of every student. Responses posted by more experienced online learners extend the help

available to students, serve to support each other's learning, and help build professional relationships and linkages.

At NZTC we have established question-and-answer discussion forums that run alongside the academic discussion forums. The question-and-answer forums allow students to pose questions more concerned with the process of online learning, such as where students can find details of their study schedule or how they can access the course readings. We have found these forums to be particularly useful in the early part of the program when students are still coming to terms with the newness of the technology. (Sean Dolan)

Develop an e-Practicum model for student teaching. To support teachers pursuing an associate's degree, UC developed an e-Practicum model that replicates the mentoring and supervision that occurs in an on-campus student teaching model. The model allows

working professionals to complete the requirements in their geographically-dispersed classrooms and programs by leveraging video technology with a support system of a supervising faculty located in Cincinnati and an on-site mentor chosen by the student.

This approach has shown positive results. Specifically, desired outcomes have been surpassed by student teachers. As they near the end of their two-year degree program, these student teachers have demonstrated high levels of reflection and growth. Furthermore, many have exceeded the minimum required competencies for early childhood education teachers identified by the early childhood education program faculty and organizations in the United States, such as the State of Ohio Department of Education, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education.

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Student teaching changed the way I view myself. I was able to watch the videos and learn a great deal about my style in the classroom. I now know how I actually sound, and have been able to find my 'teacher voice' and use it appropriately. The videos gave me a view of the class like no other opportunity. I was able to see how I looked through the eyes of a child and, most importantly, how I reacted in the eyes of a child. (Mandy, ECLC graduate)

Use video documentation. At NCC, we use video documentation for coursework requiring field experiences. Online teaching requires innovative approaches to teaching and finding strategies that can effectively support students in a virtual class setting. The challenge lies in creating a framework that allows students to gain field experiences while receiving meaningful feedback from their instructor. With this in mind, students enrolled in lab-based courses are required to submit video documen-

tation of their lab work to instructors. To prepare them for this task, the college catalog course comment section asks students to arrange access to a digital camera and software. A step-by-step guide to uploading the video documentation is also included in the coursework, and technology help desk staff are available to provide support.

The video documentation provides instructors with basic information about the lab site and a frame of reference to give meaningful feedback to students, especially while discussing their use of teaching strategies with young children. This newly introduced practice has enabled faculty to provide feedback to students regarding their teaching skills and strategies that are contextualized to the lab sites, and modify their online teaching to address issues viewed on the videos.

Serve Spanish-speaking teachers.
Developed with funds from a grant from

the Office of Head Start, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, UC offers online early childhood coursework in Spanish. All students receive assistance from a bilingual academic advisor, interact online with Spanish-speaking classmates, and complete readings and assignments in Spanish with guidance from a bilingual instructor. These teachers not only make progress towards an associate's degree in their home language, they are transitioned to an English learning environment through a Bilingual Bridge program.

An evaluation study completed in 2008 revealed the positive impact the program has had on teachers and the children they serve. This impact has been demonstrated in their own classrooms, and in their Head Start programs, where they are now considered 'experts' in a variety of areas. Teachers give credit to their accessible courses and student support in Spanish for their new knowledge and skills. They reported that course-

work in English would have delayed their academic progress and their subsequent professional growth.

Of the 72 teachers who were a part of the evaluation, 15 had college degrees from their home country. They demonstrated an initial foundation of 'good teaching,' but evaluation of their student teaching videos revealed a greater ability to implement a more socio-constructivist perspective towards teaching and learning.

Conclusion

As our stories and examples illustrate, effective and personalized support and technical assistance prepare online learners for success as they first come online and throughout their online experience. We believe that a student-centered approach to tech support for online learners improves persistence and retention, increases satisfaction, promotes success, and develops technology skills that will benefit their professional practice long

after the online course is completed. In addition, we know from experience that delivering online programs that excel at offering support for online learners has given us a competitive advantage in a crowded higher educa-

tion and professional development market where prospective students make educational choices with their fingertips.

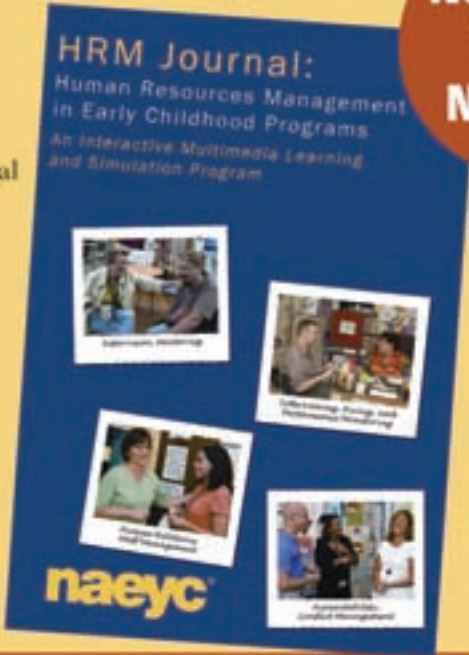The UC program never requires students to be on-campus; thus, all registrations,

Ligia's story

Ligia Hendrie was the first student to graduate from the ECLC program. Arriving with her husband, children, and mother from Watertown, New York, she attended graduation ceremonies on the University of Cincinnati's campus. This was her first visit.

Ligia gained legal residency in the U.S. after moving to the U.S. from El Salvador nine years ago and had spent four years in medical school in El Salvador. After marrying her husband (who was born in the U.S. but raised in Scotland) and starting a family, the couple decided to settle in the U.S. where they felt there was more opportunity. Ligia, who is 38, became interested in the ECLC while working at a Head Start center near the Fort Drum military base. "The area was seeing an increasing number of Spanish-speaking families so they needed someone to relate to the children, as well as their parents, in their native language," she says. She now runs a private child care business.

"I see how it can be difficult for immigrants to finish a degree. It was difficult for me, juggling family and work," she says. "For other people, this might be considered just an associate's degree, but for me, it meant so much more, and I wanted to see my teachers and the other people who helped me get to graduation. It meant so much to me to physically be there with them."

Ligia is now working on her bachelor's degree in early childhood, which is being offered online completely in English.

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orientations, purchasing of books, and other student-related activities are transacted at a distance, demanding a significant infrastructure of support personnel to be successful. The team of directors, coordinators, advisors, and staff provide a significant support system to both students and faculty. Each team member has an important role in establishing relationships to successfully manage and support the growing student population and the concurrent growth in hiring, training, and mentoring of teaching faculty. (Lisa Holstrom)

As more and more early childhood professionals search for courses and degree programs online, higher education institutions, training organizations, early childhood faculty, instructors, and trainers all need to be intentional in the design, development, and delivery of student support services that effectively blend high-tech approaches with high-touch practices for effective, engaging, and empowering online learning experiences. We hope some of our effective practices affirm what you are already doing and offer a few new ideas you can use to better serve the adult learners in your online courses and programs.

Learn more...

Erikson Institute, EriksonOnline
www.erikson.edu

New Zealand Tertiary College, NZTC Online
www.nztertiarycollege.ac.nz/

Northampton Community College,
The Center for Early Childhood Education
www.northampton.edu/academics/
departments/ece/

University of Cincinnati,
Early Childhood Learning Community
http://eclc.uc.edu

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee,
Center for Early Childhood Professional
Development & Leadership
www.sce-earlychildhood.uwm.edu