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## **Creating a successful online class in an alternative educational environment**

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## Creating a successful online class in an alternative educational environment

### Abstract

This paper's objective was to describe how creating an online class for alternative education students could benefit school districts. Alternative education is a continuing problem for school districts. Small school districts have difficulty affording alternative education environments. Online alternative programs also benefit students. Creating an online learning environment allows students to work at their own pace, stay in touch with their class, and perform at their own level. This paper's conclusions indicate alternative education programs can benefit through the creation of online classes.

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Cathy L. Lewis

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This Literature Review by: Cathy Lewis

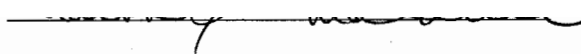
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## ABSTRACT

This paper's objective was to describe how creating an online class for alternative education students could benefit school districts. Alternative education is a continuing problem for school districts. Small school districts have difficulty affording alternative education environments. Online alternative programs also benefit students. Creating an online learning environment allows students to work at their own pace, stay in touch with their class, and perform at their own level. This paper's conclusions indicate alternative education programs can benefit through the creation of online classes.

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## Introduction

Alternative education programs have become a necessity for school districts due to increasing numbers of students considered at risk for failure. Many students are not succeeding in a regular, traditional educational environment. One in eight students fail to complete high school (Gregg, 1999). In the early 1990's, 300,000 youths were sent to adult jails and 450,000 were sent to detention centers or training schools (Tobin and Sprague, 2000). Alternative educational programs are designed to help these students stay in school and not become high school dropouts. Students are placed in alternative programs if they have low grades, frequent absenteeism, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or other factors keeping them out of a traditional school (Lewis, 2002).

Alternative education became popular in the 1960s and 1970s (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Alternative education is defined as “nontraditional educational services, ranging from separate schools for students who have been expelled to unique classes offered in a general education building” (Tobin and Sprague, 2000, p.177). Alternative education programs are sometimes designed to remove students who have antisocial or violent behavior, in part to keep expelled and frequently suspended youth off the streets (Tobin and Sprague, 2000). The National Center for Education Statistics defined alternative schools as being “usually housed in a separate facility where students are removed from regular schools, whereas alternative programs were defined as usually housed

within regular schools” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002, pg. 3).

Alternative education programs are designed for students who are not making it in traditional schooling.

In the 2000-01 school year, only 39 percent of public school districts have at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Urban districts and large districts are more likely to have an alternative school, than other districts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Smaller school districts simply cannot afford a separate alternative school.

Online education is one answer to ensuring an equal education for these students. Until recently online education has only been popular at colleges and universities. The number of online high school courses is starting to rise (Charp, 2002). Now twelve states have already established online high school programs, five others are in the process of developing them, twenty-five states allow for the creation of cyber charter schools, and 32 states have e-learning initiatives under way. Over 40,000 K-12<sup>th</sup> grade students will have enrolled in an online course by the end of the 2001-2002 school year. Most of these students are high school students (Katsiyannis & Williams 1998).

Alternative education has become a topic of interest in all school districts. Students who are considered “at-risk” miss numerous days of school. At-risk students are labeled this way due to many factors. They might only be living with one parent, be a member of a minority group, or have limited English proficiency.



They might be already performing poorly or failing school (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990).

Many students are placed outside of their homes, but their school is still required to provide schooling (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). These students are not able to come to a traditional classroom, so they end up falling further behind in school. They have little chance of ever catching up to their classmates. Online classes would help solve this problem. Students could keep up with their classes by being involved in an online class. Students could still graduate on time and not fall behind from their peers.

This review of the literature will look at research on the subject of online learning and alternative education. The review will discuss strategies that will work at a high school level in an alternative setting. Research on the subject of online learning can easily address the same issues for an alternative setting. This review will show the benefits of online learning, how to create an online classroom, and teaching from an online environment. Each of these subjects will be addressed from the perspective of an alternative setting. Results from this literature review can help school districts address the problem of “at-risk” students who need an alternative form of education.

The review will start with the discussion of online learning. The definition of online learning and how it relates to distance education will be answered. Discussions on the advantages and disadvantages of online learning are included. Tips and strategies of becoming successful online learners and instructors will be given. The review will proceed to show how to create an

online course. Then, discussions on how to implement the online course are included. The review will end the section discussing online learning by explaining how students can take an online course. Then, the implications of online learning and alternative education will be shown. This section will also show how alternative educator's can use online learning to help at risk students.

This research paper will help start to answer the question of how online education can help the problem of alternative education in school districts.

Teachers can create an online class for these students. Even though the student cannot come to school, they can still participate in the class. Little research was found on the subject of creating an online class for middle or high school level students. No research was found on this research paper's topic. Research on the subject of online courses for college or job training are numerous and easy to locate.

### Methodology

Literature was located from a variety of resources. Literature was used from the EBSCO Publishing website, Proquest Information and Learning Company website, Eric database, Stewart Memorial library on the Coe College campus, and the Grant Wood AEA reference collection. Literature was also found using the Department of Education website. The North Central Regional Education Laboratory, or NCREL website was also searched for this literature review. Educational journals, periodicals, statistical analysis reports, and books were reviewed. Criteria for review included current online education research, reliable sources, and alternative education statistics and data. Only research from

1994 to present was included on online education in this literature review, to show current trends and research. Authors of each piece of literature are experts on either online education or alternative learning. The authors of the online learning pieces have all taught for years from an online environment. Descriptions used included online courses, online instruction, distance learning, alternative education, and at risk students. Literature in this review includes facts on alternative education, the benefits of online learning, how to create an online course, and how to teach in an online environment.

### Analysis and Discussion

Alternative education and online learning are both nontraditional forms of education. Both forms of education have similar overall goals and objectives. Successful alternative programs are innovative (Donnelly, 1987). Effective alternative education programs include having a clear focus on academic learning (Drakeford and Leone, 1999). Another element is having ambitious professional development by staff. Having a strong level of autonomy is another element of an effective program. The last element is focusing on a sense of community. (Drakeford and Leone, 1999) These four ideas can be found in the research on distance learning. Distance learning is very innovative. Development and acceptance of distance education continues to grow and new technologies continue to emerge (Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Distance learning is focused on academics. Developing appropriate learning outcomes from the beginning allows the instructor to decide how to achieve these outcomes (Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Distance learning involves ambitious development by the staff. Teaching from a

distance involves developing distance instruction, studying distance education research, and creating and setting up courses (Willis, 1992). Strong levels of autonomy are valued in distance education. Students must take an active role in a distance education course by taking responsibility for their learning (Willis, 1992). A goal of distance education is to create a sense of community. Learning communities are created through collaborative learning processes in distance education (Palloff and Pratt, 2001).

Another goal of an alternative environment is using a variety of instructional and assessment approaches that reflect the student's capacity for multiple intelligences (Costello, 1996). Both alternative and online education research shows students should believe their teachers care about their welfare. Students participate in meaningful, engaged learning, and experience opportunities to succeed at school is yet another goal (Costello, 1996).

Online education is a form of distance education. Due to an ever-changing world, there are several definitions of distance education. Carter (2001) states, "The process of distance education is providing a structured learning environment in which the teacher and student(s) are separated by time and geographical place with some form of technology being used for the transmission of all teaching and learning"(pg.250). The technology is usually a two-way form of communication.

Mielke (1999) defines distance education as "a method of education in which the learner is physically separated from the teacher and the institution sponsoring the instruction" (p.1). All definitions of distance learning include a

geographic separation of the learner and the instructor. Other definitions found through research mention individualized instruction and the influence of educational organization. Basic distance learning means time and location separates the teacher and student.

### Distance Learning

There are two modes of distance learning; asynchronous and synchronous. The first mode is synchronous communication, or interactive distance education. Synchronous communication takes place in real time (Deal, 2002). Interactive distance education has become possible due to recent technological developments. Interactive distance education is having two-way communication between sites that are separated physically. Even though teachers and students are physically separated, they are still able to interact with each other. They can hear and also see one another “through two-way audio and video communications thus providing a real-time teaching/learning environment” (Carter, 2001, p.250). Distance education usually has one origination site with an instructor onsite, while the other sites usually have no one or a class monitor.

The other form of distance education reviewed is computer-based asynchronous communication, or computer conferencing. Asynchronous communication is separated by both time and distance. The learner is independent from the teacher and class (Deal, 2002). This form of communication includes “an e-mail list group, an Internet discussion group, or other types of conferencing software” (Mielke, 1999, p.3). Asynchronous learning does not take place at the same time. Students can log onto a computer

at their own time and convenience (Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000).

Online learning involves both modes of learning. Scheduled discussions are synchronous, while e-mail and discussion groups are asynchronous. Both modes of distance learning are appealing to learners. They both provide “increased access to learning, lifelong learning opportunities, and convenience of time and place” (Mielke, 1999, p.2).

Online education, or web-based instruction, is a new form of education popular at all levels of schooling. Online education uses the World Wide Web and the Internet to transmit a course to the student’s desktop computer at any time or place. Online sites are structured in a hierarchical or modular manner. Online courses use websites containing objectives, goals, and coursework (Dervan, 2002). The course contains a web-page site with course materials, a syllabus, course policies and expectations, calendar of assignments, tutorials, links, discussion groups, and e-mail. These online classes are both interactive and collaborative (Parise, 2000).

Online learning is relatively new at the high school level. Twelve percent of school districts are subscribing to receive some form of online curriculum (Manzo, 2002). Only 1,600 K-12 educators nationwide are teaching online classes as of 2002 (Blair, 2002). The number is expected to grow by a third by 2004-05 (Blair, 2002). Kentucky secondary educators were the first to post forty online courses on the Internet. Their uses of the site included an alternative school curriculum. Their main mission was to help the achievement levels of

migrant students who move within Kentucky and other states (Abell & Foletta, 2002). Florida has created a virtual school. Their online school enrolls more than 5,000 students in 65 counties (Trotter, 2002). Research from their virtual school is positive. Their research shows enrollment is increasing, communication is great, there are few technical difficulties, and students are spending a lot of time on their classes (Doherty, 2002).

### Advantages and Disadvantages

There are many benefits of teaching and learning from an online environment. Online learning provides flexibility in scheduling classes around work. Some distance education courses are created not to take away from traditional courses, but as an alternative for students who need a higher level of flexibility and would otherwise be unable to complete the program (Cutshall, 2002). Students can work at their own pace, intensity, and at a time they find convenient to them. Students can study and learn from various locations. Students do not have to wait on their classmates, but can move ahead in learning. The cost of online learning is low and can be cheaper than traditional classes (Dervan, 2002). Online learning can be more efficient than traditional learning causing money savings. Many distance learning platforms involve little cost. The cost of online learning is continuing to be reduced yearly (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000).

Online learning is an effective means of instruction. Online learning is as effective as traditional teaching (Deal, 2002). Distance learning provides interactivity. People who are normally shy can open themselves up online.

Students can feel free to debate each other's ideas and even challenge the instructor. The student is initiating the action not the instructor. Students feel freer to talk because they feel almost anonymous (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2002a). Research shows that computer mediated communications especially, collaborative learning, can make a positive difference to the educational experience for some students (Graham & Scarborough, 2001).

Online learning is a multi-sensory experience. Online learning can consist of graphics, text, animation, video, simulations, conferencing, and synchronous chat rooms. Everyone is equal online. All anyone sees is a person's ideas, not their sex, race, religion, or physical appearance (Gehring, 2002).

The advantages for online learning in an alternative environment are very similar. Teachers in an alternative setting need to believe all students can succeed. They need to communicate this idea to their students (Costello, 1996). At risk students fear large classes. They do not regularly raise their hand. These students suffer from poor self-esteem (Denti & Guerin, 1999). Smaller class sizes are essential to good alternative education programs (Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Many of these students suffer avoidance issues. They do not like attending school on a regular basis. The online environment can allow these students an opportunity to speak.

Equality is an issue for at-risk students. These students usually come from backgrounds of poverty, abuse, and family problems. Online learning does not show what these students are wearing or any of the hardships these students face. Working at their own pace is ideal for an at-risk student, and allowing these



students to keep up with their classmates is the greatest advantage of all (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

There are many advantages to teaching from a distance. Distance educators tend to be able to teach a more diverse group of students (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2002a). They are able to teach students who are unable to come physically to class. They can use resources that may be unavailable to traditional classrooms. They can link students from very different backgrounds and experiences (Willis, 1992). Teachers work harder to create a sense of community in their learners (Gehring, 2002). Some teachers enjoy the time they spend online. They view it as time away from hectic face-to-face jobs (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2002a). Teachers can take advantage of online resources like existing websites or online databases. Instructors can have online guests participate in threaded discussions or online chats. Another advantage to online learning is the importance of the written word. The written word encourages a deeper level of thinking and learning. Students spend more time on assignments knowing other students will be reading their ideas (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2002b).

Teaching an alternative class from an online environment also has advantages. Public school teachers are still responsible for students even if they are not in their classroom. In an online environment, teachers can work together to post assignments to a site. Teachers can still be in contact with these students even if they do not see them everyday. Teachers can still see how their students are doing and know they will not be left behind. Teaching from an online

environment can help achieve the goals of quality alternative education. Online learning is not for everyone. There are disadvantages to distance education. In an online learning environment, students can easily procrastinate. Some students can have a hard time staying on task; without the watchful eye of a teacher and a structured classroom (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Students might feel isolated and alone without having direct interaction with their classmates (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Students will have different reasons for taking the course. Some will have to take the course, while others may be choosing to take it. There will be many learning styles in an online environment (Presby, 2001). The student may have little in common with the instructor. In distance learning, it may take a lot longer for the teacher and student to get to know each other and develop a rapport (Willis, 1992). Students might also have a hard time reaching classmates or an instructor through technology. The student could encounter technical difficulties (Willis, 1992). Creators of online classes need to take into consideration connectivity issues. They need to be able to access the site at a reasonable speed. A CD-Rom can accompany the course to eliminate the need to wait on large files to load (Deal, 2002).

The greatest disadvantage for alternative students taking an online class is the subject of motivation (Costello, 1996). Students taking online courses should be self-directed, focused, and motivated (Cutshall, 2002). An alternative school program would have to focus on building on students' strengths in order to be successful (Costello, 1996). An alternative student would have to work under the direct supervision of an alternative education teacher during his or her online

classes. They could not be set free on their own to work on it at home. They would have to be required to work on the online classes in a classroom (De La Rosa, 1998). Technology has been proven to be an effective teaching tool in an alternative teaching environment. Technology can help those who are unsuccessful in a traditional classroom (Denti & Guerin, 1999).

Teachers play an integral role in online environments and alternative education programs. In an alternative environment, the teacher needs to keep students motivated. Research shows that better outcomes are obtained when teachers are well-trained, caring, demanding, highly-motivated, and responsive to the special needs of at-risk students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

Online teaching is not ideal for all teachers. Instructors need to realize upfront, there is a huge time commitment teaching from an online environment. Online learning is basically text-based. All lessons need to be converted to text, or video. Instructors cannot use their oral skills to improvise. Instructors do not have control over behavior problems (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2002b). Teachers creating classes for alternative learners will need to set aside time to work on these classes. This will mean added work for teachers. Teachers will need to put lectures and assignments online.

### Online Students and Instructors

Distance or online learners need to have a few characteristics in order to be successful. Distance learners need to be self-motivated and also self-disciplined. Distance learners are solely responsible for their own learning.

Students work independently to complete courses. They need to be able to work without the personal contact of the instructor (Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Online learners need to have technical computer skills, so they can quickly catch on to the way online environment works (Dervan, 2002). Before the student takes the online class, he or she needs to look at the goals, objectives, and assignments of the course. Students should make sure they can handle the course before they enroll. Most courses do not offer any kind of rebate (Dervan, 2002).

Online education can work in an alternative environment. Alternative teachers can take the place of a regular teacher. The students' regular teachers can post assignments to the online learning site. The students can work on their own to complete the assigned work and stay up-to-date in the class (De La Rosa, 1998). The secondary level online class would not be necessarily similar to a college online course. It could be more for a student to stay in contact with the public school teacher. The site would consist of the assignments of the course and everything the students would need to stay current with the class.

The teachers creating the online course also need to have certain qualities in order for students to succeed. They need to be able to make pedagogical changes. Online learning is very different than traditional teaching, and teachers need to be able to make the adjustment also (Mielke, 1999). Technology will not automatically change the teaching and learning and will not replace good instruction. Distance educators need to remember that it is the students for whom they are providing instruction. They need to learn about distance education

before they start to teach a class. Distance educators should study distance education research findings before planning to teach a course (Willis, 1992).

### Setting up the Online Course

Preparation is the key to creating a successful online course. Setting up an online course requires a time and effort commitment in order to provide a quality distance-learning course (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2001a). A considerable amount of time will be spent on designing, developing, and implementing the course. Time will also be spent learning how to create the class and use the website with expert proficiency (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2001a). An online course does not need to be fancy to be effective (Carnevale, 2000).

An alternative online course should be originally set up through a team of teachers (Costello, 1996). Alternative education should be a collaborative effort (Means, 1997). All of the teachers could use the one site to post assignments and keep in contact with their students. The regular teacher would then update the site daily.

There are many options when it comes to teaching online. The teachers do not have to design their own website, they do however need to decide which online course hosting system they would like to use. Two popular options are Blackboard and WebCT. Both of these online tools were designed to meet instructional needs, and emphasize basic instruction in learning and motivation theory (Chambers, 2002). Educators should look at the value of all course tools and decide which one would work best for them and their students.

There should be a limit to the class size in an online environment. A high-quality education experience involves small class sizes and qualified instructors (Cutshall, 2002). Small class sizes are effective in an alternative environment also.

The instructors will need to take all of their lessons and convert them to text or video. The text needs to be completely understandable due to a lack of verbal communication. Each set of text needs to be laid out in a logical and self-contained way (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2001a). Text should be clearly and concisely written (Blair, 2002). Converting lessons into text is very time consuming. The instructor needs to proofread so there are no spelling or grammar errors. Converting lessons to text makes instructors look at and analyze their lessons in new and different ways (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2001a).

An important aspect of an online course is the class study guide. The study guide provides the essential elements of the traditional course syllabi (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000). The study guide is the student's main reference to the course's content, structure, and all activities associated with the course. The study guide must have good instructional design list the goals and objectives of the course. It should also have assignments and readings listed. The study guide should make it possible for the student to proceed with the course with complete understanding and without the help from the instructor (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000).

The instructor should create assignments with clear goals and objectives in mind. The assignments should center around student tasks actively engaging

students in the learning process. Less focus is on lectures and more focus is spent on student's using real world's settings to learn information. Students should be involved in their learning. Students who are involved in their learning will be motivated to keep learning. Instructors should provide feedback in a timely fashion. This will help them refine their learning and provide guidance throughout the course and activities (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000).

The teacher needs to become knowledgeable with the technology (Willis, 1992). Before the class ever begins, the instructor must learn to navigate the site and get to know every aspect of the site. Otherwise the students will eventually see the instructor's shortcomings and the instructor will undoubtedly lose credibility (Posey, 2002). The instructor should experience hands-on training in computer, video, and any other form of technology used. Instructors should feel comfortable with all forms of technology before class starts (Fay & Sjogren, 2002).

Teaching an online course needs to be as effective as teaching in a traditional, face-to-face classroom. Traditional classrooms involve attending a class in one location with a group of other students and instructed by a teacher face to face. Online courses are taught from the Internet and e-mail. Online courses were not designed to necessarily take the place of traditional classroom, but they have in most cases shown to be just as effective (Schulman & Sims, 1999).

Face-to-face classes allow discussion between students. Online classes offer discussion through threaded discussion groups. Forming threaded

discussion groups is very important to online learning. Discussion groups are a form of asynchronous communication. These lead to the formation of learning communities. The group shares experiences with each other and in turn learn from each other. Students can learn as much from each other that they would from a textbook (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000). Each student profits from all of the other students in the group. Threaded discussion groups can lead to a powerful learning opportunity (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000). Discussion groups encourage a deep level of critical thinking. Students spend time contemplating their answers and responses knowing others will read what they write (Blair, 2002).

The online discussion learning can be on a broader and deeper level. Students and instructors can read the question or response and spend a day thinking about their answer before they respond (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2001b). Instructors can look at participation through the classroom management of the website. They can look at both the quality and quantity of the responses (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2001b).

Online discussions are very different than discussions in a traditional classroom. In a traditional classroom, usually only a certain percentage of students participate. There is only a small amount of time for students to respond (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2001b). Online discussions allow everyone to participate without fear of interruption. There are no time constraints. The shy person does not have to be afraid to raise his/her hand.



E-mail communication is essential to online learning. E-mail keeps students in touch with one another and also with the instructor. This provides communication with everyone participating in the online learning community. E-mail helps with projects, assignments, progress, feedback, and administration. Students can e-mail one another for help on assignments or to collaborate together on projects (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000).

E-mail can be essential to a successful alternative online classroom. E-mail can keep the classroom teacher in contact with the student in the alternative environment (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000). The teacher and student can be in constant communication. Any questions or concerns can be handled through e-mail.

Research shows instructors will need to develop new teaching styles (Willis, 1992). Traditional education needs to be changed to allow for technology and to fit the needs of the distance learner. Most traditional teaching can be used in a distance-learning format, but will need some changes in order to be successful. Instructors need to find traditional materials and lesson plans to fit the distance education classroom (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Instructors need to take advantage of the online Internet environment. The interactivity and visual features of the Internet need to be used (Horton, 2000).

### Teaching the Course

The very start of a distance education class is very important. It sets the tone for the entire length of the class. Instructors should explain procedure rules, standards, and guidelines in the first class period. Teachers should be consistent

with all procedures. Instructors should also start out class with a way to get to know each other. Instructors should get to know student's backgrounds and experiences (Borja, 2002). Instructors should facilitate an activity of meaningful introductions. In the beginning, time should be allowed for these activities in order for students to feel comfortable the rest of the class time (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2000).

The instructor needs to keep current on every aspect of the class. The instructor should log on to the website at least three to four times a week for a number of hours each session (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2001a). E-mail should be checked at least twice a day. Instructors should respond to e-mail within 48 hours, so the student feels connected and important (Posey, 2002). Instructors must respond to discussion questions, evaluate assignments, and above all answer any questions (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2001a). The instructor must be willing to field questions and engage students in group discussions (Carnevale, 2000). The instructor will create an "online presence" when they post to the discussion board, show up in chat rooms, and provide a timely response to e-mail (Caris, Ferguson, & Smith, 2001a). If the students do not feel the instructor is watching, they may not do assignments or start to feel insecure.

In an alternative classroom, the instructor will log on once a day to update assignments. He or she will respond to any e-mail at this time. Assignments from the student can be uploaded to the site, sent through e-mail, or mailed.

Chat rooms are an effective teaching tool in an online environment. Chats should be kept to a small number of students, 10 or fewer. The instructor may

require students to meet in a chat room at a specific time and day. The instructor can take a roll call and start off with a greeting. The instructor can write in all caps, so students are not confused on who the instructor is and when they are talking (Posey, 2002).

Another idea is to have a virtual chat room during your office hours. Students could come into the virtual chat room if they have questions or concerns. This would help with having immediate feedback. Students can be encouraged to keep in contact with you just like in a traditional classroom. If the instructor is going to be away for more than 48 hours, they should let their students know in advance (Posey, 2002).

The chat room would be a good idea in an alternative environment. The teacher can meet with the student(s) once a week. In the chat room, the teacher could answer any questions. The chat room would keep the lines of communication open.

The instructor's personality should shine throughout the class. In face-to-face classroom's an instructor can smile, make jokes, tell personal stories, and have a strong personality. In an online environment, the instructor needs to still let his or her personality show; otherwise he or she might seem too formal and unapproachable (Posey, 2002). Instructor enthusiasm is not only important in a traditional classroom, but also in distance education. Online learning does not provide teachers the opportunity to see visual clues. Teachers need to spend more time investigating whether students understand the content. They cannot look around and see any confused faces.

The at-risk students need to know their teacher still cares about them. The instructor should view the online environment as a helping environment, not time consuming. The teacher should show his/her enthusiasm for the student through e-mail and chat rooms.

Distance education instructors need to be very organized. They need to locate and prepare all teaching materials in advance. They must plan for a variety of activities, so they do not bore their students. They must also plan for transitions between activities. Teachers should schedule 3-5 hours of planning time preparation for each hour of distance education instruction (Mielke, 1999). A class needs to be well planned out before any teaching actually occurs. Students should receive all materials before class starts. Plan ahead of time to increase interactivity between the students. Also, plan out possible group assignments in advance. Instructors should also plan an alternate method of teaching in case the technologies fail (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2000).

The online environment will be different in an alternative setting. The students will be starting at different times throughout the year. The student should have an introduction to the site. The goals and expectations should be listed for the student. The teacher will already know about the student's background and experience. The beginning of the course will mostly be spent on orienting the student to online learning.

Instructors can use their background knowledge of distance education to teach their students how to be successful taking a distance education class (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Finding quality distance education literature on tips to

become a successful distance education student is readily available on the Internet. Literature shows that students who set aside specific time for class keep motivated (Willis, 1992). This time should only be used to work on the class with no interruptions. This should be in a place where they will not be disturbed (Willis, 1992). Students should also stay in touch with their instructor.

Participation is important for the student to be successful. By showing students how to become successful students, they will know how to succeed. Instructors need to help students develop skills to become and stay responsible and motivated to keep with the class. The instructor also needs to help students recognize their own skills, strengths, desires, and needs. This will help increase motivation. Helping students increase their self-esteem will also help motivate them. Students also need to reflect on what they have learned, so they can connect the information with previous knowledge. Instructors should also try to relate the content to examples the student can understand (Willis, 1992).

Students should be encouraged to become involved with the technology. Throughout the course, instructors should facilitate activities to help familiarize students with the technology. Students will feel more comfortable in class knowing how to use the equipment. By showing students how to use the equipment, they can also become effective troubleshooters, when the technology may fail. Instructors should create opportunities to use the hardware or Internet site with guidance. This will help students become excited and less frustrated with the technology (Willis, 1992).

Educators need to create instruction, which is learner-based, not instructor-based. Students will be working independently, so they will be responsible for their learning. In the beginning of class, focus should start out on the student (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2000). Responsibility should be placed on the student from the very start. Students should know what participation and work ethic is expected from them.

Online educators must have a “strong commitment to student interaction” (Mielke, 1999, p.3). The teacher must create an atmosphere for students to comfortably communicate with the instructor. Students should feel comfortable actively asking questions. Instructors should be available for immediate feedback either through e-mail, chat rooms, or office hours. Courses with little interaction have high dropout rates. E-mail, chat rooms, and discussion boards remove the feeling of isolation and provide opportunities for discussion (Charp, 2002).

The instructor needs to realistically look at his/her goals and objectives. Then, he/she needs to decide what is important and what can realistically be taught from an online learning environment. Alternative education goals and objectives should focus on providing for GED completion, remedial assistance, vocational training, developing communication, coping, and self-control skills, reducing student engagement in delinquent activities, and make schools challenging and fulfilling for all students (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998).

Instructors need to look at the different learning styles of the students combining group work and independent work. Activities should be diverse. Examples should be used to help students understand the material. Teachers

should look at ways of achieving student reinforcement, review, repetition, and remediation (Willis, 1992).

In an alternative online environment, the classroom teacher needs to re-evaluate their current classroom materials. The instructor needs to look for the key ideas. Then, they can decide what is really important for the student to know.

The distance educator also needs outside support. The instructor must have the support of administration, production staff, web designers, and technical staff in order for distance learning to be successful. Successful distance education includes all groups working together to ensure zero technical difficulties (Willis, 1992).

The on-line classroom teacher will need to work with an alternative teacher or monitor. The teacher will also need the support of the administration and website support team. Each group will need to work together to ensure the success of the student (Willis, 1992).

Evaluation of an online course can be accomplished in several ways. Tracking software allow the instructor to view how students are using the website. The software reports to the instructor each student's interaction with the website (Horton, 2000). Server logs provide data on how the site is being used too. Server logs can show which web pages are used the most and least frequently (Horton, 2000). Questionnaires, or surveys are an excellent form of feedback. Asking simple question like, what areas of the class did you like most, are very helpful. Instructors can ask students to evaluate the course contents, availability of the instructor, their understanding of the class organization and the grading

process; compare the quality of learning in an online class to a traditional class, and also their reason for taking the course (Cooper, 2001).

### Taking the Course

Students need to acknowledge some proven tips to successfully complete an online course. First, they need to stay motivated. Since there is little personal contact with the instructor, they need to be in charge of their own learning (Dervan, 2002). Students need to keep up with the assignments, discussion board postings, and projects. There are many online courses available, but some are not quality online courses (Dervan, 2002). Before students even start a course, they need to make sure the course is really what they are looking for (Dervan, 2002). Students need to have the technology in order to complete the course. The technology should be readily available and reliable. Taking a course with a friend or acquaintance will provide students with the support they might need. Students should allow themselves sufficient time to check e-mail, work on discussions, and projects (Devan, 2002).

The alternative online student will need to first learn how to use the site. Then, he/she will need to access the site daily to learn assignments and receive any messages from the teacher. The student will work with the alternative teacher to complete the online course.

Providing education for those whose needs are not met by traditional or formal education is a goal for both alternative and online education. Online learning has been described extensively. Alternative education is a catchall phrase for a mixture of students. These students for some reason are having



trouble in the traditional classroom. The problem may be behavioral or social. The problem may be stemming from a home situation. They might not be attending school regularly. They may be in a court ordered placement. For whatever the reason, they are not benefiting from a traditional classroom.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Online instruction can offer a potential solution to teaching students in an alternative environment. School districts foster the provision of challenging technology-supported learning opportunities within schools serving at-risk students (Means, 1997). "Technologies in and of themselves do not automatically change the nature of teaching and learning; rather, it is the way educators integrate such technologies into the curriculum that brings about change" (Stammen and Schmidt, 2001, pg.47). Online learning may be the answer for these students who fail in a traditional setting. Online learning is not traditional, so it could be considered a form of alternative education. "Well-designed alternative education programs can benefit students at risk for failure in traditional programs" (Tobin & Sprague, 2000, p. 177). Students are able to learn the same information from the classroom only in another format. Students will be able to access assignments, stay in communication with the instructor, and keep up with the coursework. The alternative teacher will be able to fill in any gaps that online learning leaves out. When the student returns to school, he or she will not be behind. The student will not fall further behind in school.

Alternative education has come under attack in the last few years. Most research shows alternative education needs major overhauls. Most alternative

education programs simply do not work. Many successful strategies involve technology.

Above all, research shows in either an alternative setting or online environment learning should be meaningful for students. The online alternative class needs to focus on planning, student interaction, and teaching to ensure a successfully delivered course. Creativity and imagination lead to successfully online learning environments. Online learning is one example of creating a positive environment for alternative learners. These students can keep up with their work and stay in school. The alternative classroom can provide the individualized learning necessary for students to succeed in alternative learning environments.

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