

Chapter 10 Online Learning



Mary Shier

Student Success
An Invaluable Resource for
College and University Students



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Note that page numbers reflect the page numbers in the full textbook.

The full text can be found at opentextbc.ca/studentsuccess, where it can be read online, downloaded, printed, or ordered.

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Introduction

Online learning has become increasingly more popular over the last decade. Students are looking to take courses online at an ever-increasing rate. With the increase in part-time studies and students juggling many things including classes, jobs, families and hobbies, taking traditional scheduled classes becomes increasingly harder. There are many advantages to online learning as well as many potential disadvantages. It is important to consider whether online learning is a good option for you. There are several misconceptions about online learning. Many people think that online means it will be easy. Or they believe that since it's online they won't have time management issues. This is usually not the case.

In this chapter you will learn about common assumptions, discover the pros and cons of online learning, and decide if it is a good option for you. You will learn some strategies for successful online learning. Lastly, you will try out an online platform, to give you an experience of how online courses are often set up.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter on “Online Learning,” students will:

- Identify common assumptions about online learning.
- Compare the pros and cons of online learning.
- Evaluate whether or not online learning is a good personal option.
- Identify important strategies for online success.
- Explore at least one online learning platform.

10.1 Common Assumptions

If you have taken an online course before, you may know if it is right for you. If you haven't, it is a good idea to consider the pros and cons of learning online, before signing up.

One of the mistakes that people often make when deciding to take an online course is to make assumptions about learning online. They may have taken or heard of an online course and assumed that all online courses work the same way.

Common assumptions about online learning:

- Assuming you can take as long as you like to complete it
- Assuming you can fit it into your already busy schedule because there aren't scheduled classes to attend
- Assuming that online means that there are no class caps
- Assuming that you can start anytime
- Assuming there are no face-to-face components or scheduled online time commitments
- Assuming that online courses are as portable as a laptop and a Wi-Fi connection
- Assuming that online isn't as much work

Although these assumptions are sometimes true, often they are not. Online courses can be structured very differently from each other. You will need to find out about the structure of the course you want to take when deciding if it is right for you. Here are some things you will want to consider.

Completion time: Most courses have a completion deadline. If it is six months to a year, you should have plenty of time to complete the course. Some courses give only four to sixteen weeks, and these are usually more demanding to keep up with coursework every week. For some courses the deadline only entails a date by which the whole course must be completed by. It doesn't matter if you spread it out evenly or cram it all in at the end (though not a recommended study skills strategy) as long as it is completed before the deadline. However, other online courses have strict deadlines throughout the course. For example, the course might have a regular schedule where assignments are due every Friday, forum posts need to be made throughout the week, and specific tests are scheduled throughout the term. Don't get caught making assumptions, and check out the schedule for the course you want to take. Make sure it is doable for you.

Busy schedules: Many people think that just because there are no scheduled classes that they will be

able to fit in their studies in all their free time. Many students overestimate how much free time they have and are panicked when they realize that only a few weeks into the course they are already very behind. Many post-secondary courses require between nine to twelve hours per week per course. Look at a typical week's schedule and mark in your commitments such as your job, volunteer commitments, and family responsibilities. Schedule where you will work on your course. If you can't carve out nine to twelve hours per week regularly, you may not have the time to do the course, or you may have to give things up to make the time.

Class caps: For some, their experience with online courses includes short certification courses such as Serving it Right or FoodSafe. These courses can be taken online, and the tests are multiple choice so people can get their results instantly. The whole test is automated. People mistakenly assume that all online courses are like that and, as a result, think they can sign up anytime and that unlimited numbers of people can take the course at a time. Post-secondary courses offered online are rarely like that. They have instructors who mark your assignments, give individual feedback, and are available for help. Courses include class discussions and forum posts, and they have many of the components of a face-to-face class. As a result, instructors cannot have limitless people in their online classes, and institutions have class caps (maximum class sizes) for online courses just as they do for face-to-face courses. Online courses fill up and have wait lists just like traditional classes. Don't assume you can sign up for your course anytime. Register early to ensure a "seat" in the class.

Start dates: Another common misunderstanding about online courses is that people assume they can start anytime. Some post-secondary institutions, such as Open Learning-Thompson Rivers University, are generally structured that way and have continuous intake, however many are not. They have semester start dates just like face-to-face classes. These are usually at the start of September for the fall semester and the start of January for the winter semester. Others may have start dates at the beginning of every month. Do your research and see what start dates are available to you as you do your planning.

Synchronous or asynchronous: **Synchronous online courses** have a class cohort that meets at regular times. They have lectures or class forums requiring everyone to be online at the same time. It is somewhat like having scheduled class times in the face-to-face classroom, but in this case everyone has to be at their computer at the same time. If this is the case in the course you are considering, you'll need to see if the course schedule works with your personal schedule. Some classes have some parts of the course as synchronous. For example, a class may need to meet to do labs in person. These are often referred to as **hybrid courses**. Some courses are completely **asynchronous** (self-paced) but they require an on-site seminar every few months. Know what the requirements of the course are before spending your money on something you are unable to commit to.

Portability: Often online learning conjures up the image of traveling around with a laptop, light and easy, knowing that all your learning material is digital. This is often not the case. Just because the course is online doesn't mean that everything you'll need is online. There are often a stack of textbooks, lab equipment, journal articles, and manipulatives that accompany an online course. Sometimes online courses are not as portable as you would expect.

Author's Story: Online Portability

While I was on an educational leave working on my Master's of Distance Education, I expected online learning to be very portable. I planned on moving to a new place every month for variety and adventure. I soon learned that was very impractical. In each place I set up my studying environment, I filled the desk with textbooks and materials. I usually used two laptops so that I could use one for research and the other for working on my assignments (essentially creating a double-screen). This, of course, wasn't necessary but it was convenient and I appreciated the ease of having more than one screen open in front of me. I also found that I liked to print off many of the journal articles that I was using in my research essays. It helped to physically have them to mark up, highlight, and organize in piles. In the end, my studying environment was very efficient, but certainly not portable, so I didn't travel nearly as much as I thought I would.

— Mary Shier, College of the Rockies

Nice and easy: Another assumption is that an online class will be easy. This also is rarely true. In fact, it can pose challenges for some learners. Instead of being able to listen to a lecture, students may have much more reading to do. This can be more time consuming for some learners. If students are working in isolation, it can take more time just figuring out what is required rather than having classmates to discuss things with. (However, many online courses have chat rooms for classmates to discuss these kinds of issues.) Thoughtfully crafting forum posts (the online version of a class discussion) to add to online discussions can be far more time-consuming than just adding to a verbal discussion in class. Online courses are rarely easier than their face-to-face counterparts, however, they do often save time in other ways, such as travelling to and from class, so it can work itself out.

Here are some typical questions to research answers for when considering an online course.

- What are the course start dates? Is it continuous intake, or are there specified start dates?
- Is it semesterized or self-paced?
- How long do I have to complete the course?
- What happens if I don't complete the course in time?
- Are there any synchronous components to the class?
- What are the office hours or times of availability for instructor help?

Asking these questions will help you avoid falling into the trap of making typical assumptions.

10.2 Pros and Cons of Online Learning

As you evaluate whether or not online learning is a good fit for you, it helps to consider the pros and cons. Some of these pros and cons will be more important to you than others, depending on your situation, so it's important to consider your own specific circumstances and your learning strengths and weaknesses. Here are a few things to consider:

Pros

Schedule flexibility. Increasingly, students have complicated schedules, often juggling several part-time jobs, family responsibilities, and other commitments. For many, education has been out of reach when traditional scheduled classes did not mesh with their busy schedules and obligations. Online learning means students can learn when it suits them. Students can do their readings throughout the day in between other commitments. They can work on and submit assignments in the middle of the night if that suits them. The time flexibility literally means that students who just couldn't take classes on a traditional schedule can now further their education on a flexible schedule according to their needs.

Location flexibility. Online learning also opens up education for people who live in areas that do not have post-secondary institutions, especially remote communities. People can study at home or in local libraries or in convenient locations that eliminate the need to commute to physical institutions. This can save students hours of daily commuting time. It can also save students substantial amounts of money if it means they do not have to relocate to attend school. This is a significant factor for many who have financial concerns, housing concerns, or have a family member who cannot relocate due to employment or other obligations. Even people in big cities that do have post-secondary institutions welcome the opportunity to forgo a long commute to and from a college or university numerous times a week.

Multi-media. Learning happens more efficiently when several modalities are engaged. It helps to see (read or watch), hear (lecture or demonstration), do (labs, practice a skill, or write), as well as practice. Often people think that learning online will restrict learning because they'll have to read everything. The opposite is actually true. With so many options for multi-media, modalities can be fully engaged through online learning. Courses can include video clips, lab demonstrations, and virtual labs where students can dissect something over and over until they've got it (as opposed to having one crack at it for an actual dissection). Courses can include hyperactive web links which can conveniently direct you to websites, web articles, and web demonstrations that add fascinating content. Courses can include high quality diagrams, graphs, interactive demonstrations, video podcasts, animations, Ted-Talks, YouTube clips, interactive digital learning games, blogs, wikis, learning objects, virtual worlds, and much more. *Edutainment* is a term describing applications that incorporate multimedia entertainment with educational objectives. Quality online courses have an array of possibilities that can keep the curriculum current and engaging.

Classmates. Online learning offers a diversity in classmates that often exceeds that of a face-to-face class. As you get to know your classmates through class discussions, online forums, group work, and

class presentations, you will often meet people from all over the world. This allows for some interesting perspectives and a more global way of thinking and interpreting information.

Course selection. Making the decision to learn online means that there are seemingly limitless options in course selection. You have the option of enrolling in a different college than the one you would have chosen if you had to move there. It doesn't matter how far away it is if you are learning online. You can choose courses according to price, convenience, and interesting topics. Often you do not necessarily have to take all your courses from one institution if there are courses elsewhere that interest you. If you are taking courses from more than one institution, just be sure to check out transferability into the program you are enrolled in or want to graduate from, prior to taking a course from elsewhere so you do not lose credit for the course. See Chapter 13 The BC Transfer Process ([#part-bc-transfer-process](#)) for more information.

Financial. Tuition and books are often priced the same for online and face-to-face courses, however, there are financial considerations that can make online learning more affordable. Firstly, the flexibility of online means you may not need to quit your job, since you can work on coursework around work hours. (Be cautious that you don't work so much that you don't have time for your courses, though.) Having an income while going to school can relieve a great amount of financial burden and reduce accumulation of student loans. Secondly, you will not have extra accommodation fees or relocation costs taking online courses since you will not have to move to go to school. Even if the college or university is local, you won't have transportation costs including public transit costs or gas and parking fees to travel to and from the institution. If you are a parent, you will likely have less child-care costs. You can also save money, since students are likely to eat out more when traveling to a campus.

Combination of online and face-to-face. It can be an option to do some of your courses face-to-face and some online. This can cut down on commutes if you choose to do online courses on certain days and work your schedule accordingly. This strategy can take advantage of the pros of both. It can also allow you to get to know instructors from a program in person during your face-to-face classes, giving you a personal connection with them for your online classes. Another use for combining formats is to take missing prerequisites online so that you don't miss an opportunity to take a course according to your education plan. This can often save you from having to add an extra year to your education. Another pro of combining formats is that you can choose to take electives for your program online in the summer months, to get ahead on your education plan, or to lighten the load in the regular school year. There can be many advantages of taking a combination of online and face-to-face courses.

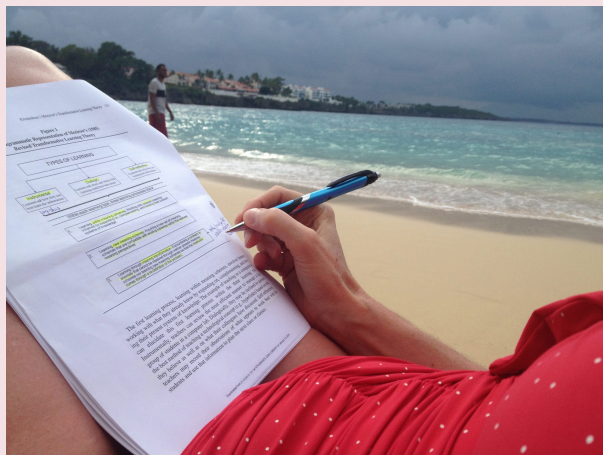
Author's Story: Pros of Online Learning

I did a Master's in online learning. I had an education leave from the college where I work, so I was free to travel and could have chosen to attend any one of several institutions. However, I chose to take my program online. I did this for several reasons. Since I was learning about online learning, it made sense to experience it firsthand while I was studying about it. It gave me many examples to draw from to demonstrate different learning theories. It also gave me the freedom to travel around while I was working on it.

My program was a lot of work – to which I was committed. Even still, I took advantage of some of the fringe benefits of online learning. I spent the fall in my hometown, where I saw lots of family and old friends. Though my course load was heavy and I was working on my schooling 10-12 hours a day, it still meant that I had tea breaks with my mom, lunches and dinners with different family members and friends, and had the ability to just be around them even though I was busy a lot of the time. I look back at that time as incredibly precious. I otherwise could never have spent so much time with my mother in my adult years as I did that fall, and it was wonderful. Online learning made that possible.



I loved my classroom!



A great learning environment: doing schoolwork in the warmth of the sun and to the sounds of the ocean.

I was fortunate in that I went to the Dominican Republic for the winter semester. I rented out my home which more than paid for the rent on my beautiful villa by the ocean. I kept a rigorous schedule for my program. I woke up to the sounds of roosters crowing each morning at 6 a.m. I made coffee and went out onto the deck overlooking the ocean. I did my computer work in the morning, contributing to forum discussions and other course work. I did a work out, made breakfast, and continued on the computer. After lunch, I went down to the beach, got settled into my lounge chair, did my readings, and took notes. I went for a long swim in the ocean every afternoon. I dried off in the sun on my lounge chair while I continued my readings. In the evenings, I went back to the villa and worked on my assignments. This was my schedule all

winter. I had the odd excursion and time out with people I met there, but my time included a lot of studying and writing papers. I had an amazing winter in the Dominican and met some incredible people. I had the opportunity to volunteer at a school there, which I thoroughly enjoyed. I learned a lot about their culture. The experience was life-enhancing, and I am so glad that I did my studies that way.

Cons

Time management. You have to be very organized when you take courses online. It is entirely up to you to stay on-track. Although this is true in a face-to-face class as well, students often feel more pressure when they have scheduled classes. They don't want to miss class or get behind. They have classmates around them talking about upcoming assignments and tests, who inadvertently pressure them into getting things done. When they know they have class Monday morning, for example, they make sure they complete the course work that is required before that class. These scheduled things are more conducive to keeping on track. Online students are notorious for procrastinating and getting behind. It is vital to keep a schedule as if you were attending face-to-face classes. Once your study times are in your schedule, don't divert from the schedule unless it is critically important. (That doesn't include that your friend called you up and asked you to go to the show!) You have to get used to telling people you are busy with your school work and that you are not available. Review Chapter 7: Time Management (#part-time-management-2) for further time management strategies.

Motivation. Motivation is another key factor for success in online learning. If you are constantly talking yourself out of doing assignments, doubting your abilities, or not willing to give it your all, this can seriously impede your ability to be successful. Some people know themselves and are aware that they don't have the motivation, self-drive, and determination to be consistent in their online studies. They will make the sacrifices required to commit to face-to-face courses. In other words, they are willing to commute and change their schedules to accommodate their scheduled classes, because they know that, for them personally, they are likely to be more successful in their courses.

Weak readers. Online learning most often involves a lot of reading. Some learners are strong readers and find they learn more by reading than listening in a class. Others find reading tedious and lose focus. If reading is a struggle, you may want to find out the differences in the amount of reading between the specific face-to-face classes and the online classes you are interested in taking. This may have a bearing on which format you choose.

Limited computer skills. Those who have very little experience with computers will find it more challenging doing online courses. As well as learning the course material and expectations of the instructor, these people will have to deal with learning computer skills concurrently. This is not necessarily a con as they will benefit greatly, however, it would be important to allow extra time needed for dealing with the learning curve of gaining the necessary computer skills. Of course, taking a face-to-face course likely will require computer skills as well, so it is wise to gain them regardless. Likely, it will initially be a little more challenging with an online course. Prior to starting online courses, it would be beneficial to take a computer skills course at a local community college, if possible.

The social aspect. Some learners enjoy the dynamics of being in a physical classroom. They get to form a personal relationship with the instructor. They meet classmates in person and can form study groups. They can benefit from the answers to questions that others ask or from the class discussions that arise. After class, they can easily discuss issues that they didn't understand or they can go deeper into an issue, furthering understanding. Even moral support is a beneficial perk of having face-to-face classes. Other

classmates can detect whether or not you are struggling and can offer support, lend materials, and offer a much needed smile. Many people really appreciate the social aspect of attending classes and being part of a college or university where they can join teams and clubs, have a drink at the campus pub, live in residence, and develop a healthy social life. This is particularly important for young students who have recently left home after completing high school. Older students who already have children and jobs, may not necessarily be looking to expand their social lives.

The format of some online courses are specifically designed to include a social aspect to learning. The course incorporates group assignments and forum discussions. Students get to know each other even though they may all be in different locales. Other courses don't have any social component to them. Often in these online courses, students can feel very alone as they do their courses. If the social aspect is important to you, find out how the courses are structured at the institution where you are considering taking your program.

Author's Story: Social Interaction Online

I wouldn't have believed that social interaction online could match social interaction in a face-to-face classroom, but I experienced it. Of course, it depends on the structure of the course because some courses don't facilitate it in their set-up.

During my Master's online, the courses were designed using a constructivist philosophy. We regularly had to do group work and participate in online discussions. I got to know many of the people in my cohort. As a result, I got to know those I worked well with, and those I didn't necessarily want to work with again. As group work assignments were assigned, we had the option of choosing our groups. I went through the forum discussions to see people who I would likely work well with, and eventually I had specific people that I knew I worked well with, so we planned to work together in future assignments.

In order to do our assignments, we emailed, messaged, and Skyped often. We contributed to group documents, and commented regularly on each other's contributions. It became quite natural to be working together with folks who were all over the world. I got to know them, we asked each other about things going on in our lives, and encouraged each other through challenging times. I celebrated with a class mate in Greece, who got engaged. I knew throughout the term that she was hoping for a proposal, and I was genuinely excited when it finally happened. I learned about others' children and their struggles. I discovered others' tips and tricks for fitting the program into their busy lives. We regularly had class discussions about different concepts, and I learned a lot from my classmates.

When I went to the graduation ceremony, I met many fellow classmates and instructors for the first time in person, and yet it felt like I already really knew them. I did. It was a time of celebration. Even long after graduation, I am still in touch with a few classmates. We have contacted each other to catch up, get professional advice, and even to network for jobs. The social interaction in my online courses contributed richly to my educational experience.

— Mary Shier, College of the Rockies

Exercise: Evaluate if Online Learning is a Good Personal Option

Consider the several factors above and any others that apply. Relate them to your own personal circumstance, and evaluate whether online learning is a good personal option for you. As you evaluate consider the following:

1. your goals
2. your options
3. your circumstances that affect your ability to take classes
4. your strengths and weaknesses
5. your best choice

Write an answer that includes the above factors and explains why you came to the conclusion you reached.



Online learning has its perks.

10.3 Strategies for Online Success

Many of the strategies for online learning success are the same strategies for success in traditional courses. Using all the principles described in this text to this point will contribute to your learning achievement. These include: enhancing personal wellness, utilizing your support networks, maximizing your learning strengths, using effective study skills, implementing effective test-taking strategies, using time management strategies, and accessing student support services as needed.

As well as these, there are a few strategies and tips that are particularly useful in online learning.

Before the Course Starts

- **Computer access.** Make sure you own or have frequent access to a recent model of computer with a high speed internet connection. It may be time to upgrade your laptop or computer. Otherwise frequent access to another computer could include a room-mate's computer, library access, college computers, or a borrowed one. Note the key word being "frequent" access; you don't want your schoolwork to be limited by someone else's schedule or the library being closed at times you are most free to do school work.
- **Writing proficiency.** Much of your work and evaluation will depend on strong writing skills. Take the time before your course starts to review good writing principles or take a college course in writing skills to be able to start strong.
- **Familiarize yourself with the online learning platform prior to the start of the course.** Popular platforms include Moodle, Blackboard, Brightspace, and Canvas. Different post-secondary institutions use different learning management systems, so you may not necessarily use the same one that you used in a previous course from a different institution. They all have their similarities, so if you've used one, you'll likely adapt quickly to another. However, it is nice to become familiar with the platform before the course starts. Often a course will open the platform to you a week or so before the course starts for exactly this purpose. You can get comfortable navigating around the course, finding the home page of your course, accessing grade books, and knowing where to access course materials. It helps to be comfortable signing in and out of the platform.
- **Know course expectations.** You can often read the course introduction and the instructor profile so you will know what to expect. You can read the course outline so you'll know the grading format, how many assignments, essays, and tests to expect, and the number of modules in the course which can help you to lay out a schedule before starting.
- **Get familiar with the how-tos.** Once you have signed in to the course, figure out how to message the instructor, submit assignments online, submit forum posts etc.
- **Bookmark the course page** in your favourites for easy access. If your computer is private, save the passwords so that you can easily sign in and out of your course.
- **Write your student profile.** Many courses will ask you to introduce yourself to the class.

You will need to write a short paragraph, which usually includes a bit about yourself, why you are taking the class, and possibly some of your interests. You will often have the option to post a picture, which is nice for classmates to put a face to the name. Most courses will ask you to do this in the first week, but it is nice to have it pre-written and a photo chosen, ready to post.

During the Course

- **Sign into the course regularly.** Sign in at least once every day. You'll see important notices, deadlines, and forum discussions. This will help keep you on track. Your instructor can tell how often you sign in, so your instructor will know you that you are keeping current.
- **Use the college library.** Despite the fact that you aren't on campus, the library is accessible to you. Librarians can assist you with research, and you can access numerous online articles, journals, and resources.
- **Print materials.** Many people are adept at using online resources exclusively. This is admirable for saving trees and being environmentally friendly. However, for some, having print copies of articles and research material in front of them can help with organization. If you need to print materials, do so sparingly, but don't be afraid to print things you need for your assignments to make your work more productive.
- **Make a schedule and keep it.** This is important for all courses, but it is especially important for online courses. It helps to make a semester schedule with all the big assignments and tests mapped out. Then make weekly schedules at the start of each week, so that you have a specific daily plan for the week. It should include readings, forum posts, assignments broken into parts, test preparation and so on. See Chapter 7: Time Management (#part-time-management-2) for further strategies.
- **Connect with classmates.** If there is an option to connect with classmates, take it. Even if it is only a small number of connections, they will help you along the way.
- **Ask questions.** Take the initiative to ask your instructor questions if you don't understand something. Chances are your classmates will benefit as well.
- **Reward yourself.** This is an effective way to keep the motivation going. After each assignment is handed in or each test written, give yourself a little reward to celebrate. It could be as simple as a square of your favourite chocolate or your favourite drink. It could be a walk along the beach, or an afternoon visit with a special friend. Decide what your reward will be and indulge each time you reach an important milestone in your course. Celebrate every time you complete a course.



Reward yourself with a hike to the top of the Three Sisters in Fernie, BC

10.4 Chapter Review and Activities

Key Takeaways

- Avoid making common assumptions about online courses.
- Online courses have many advantages and some disadvantages.
- Online learning is at least as effective as traditional face-to-face courses.
- Know how the characteristics of online learning fit with your personal needs and circumstances.
- There are numerous learning strategies that can help make your online learning experience successful.

Many colleges or universities have free short courses to familiarize yourself with an online platform. Check with your local institution or another institution to research this option. For example, College of the Rockies has a free Sample Course available to familiarize students with online courses. It can be accessed on the learning platform, Moodle, and gives a little tour through the sample course so people can see how things are set up and organized. Anyone can access the free course and in the course, there is a video link which shows how to navigate the course.

Exercise: Try a Moodle Platform

Familiarize yourself with a Moodle Platform to view how an online course can be navigated.

1. Go to www.cotronline.ca (<http://www.cotronline.ca>) and click on the Sample Course link. It will take you to the online course named, “Sample Course – Learning How to Learn at College”. Click on, “Start here. Click on this link and watch the attached video to find out how to navigate your course.” This video will show you how to navigate an online course in Moodle. Then you can try navigating the Sample Course on your own.
2. Go to the Sample Course homepage again. It has an introductory section followed by six chapters from Academic Honesty & Avoiding Plagiarism (first chapter) to Writing a Quiz, Test or Exam (last chapter). Clicking on any of these chapters will lead you into the content of each chapter respectively. Move around the course by going into and out of chapters, checking out the introductory sections, and going back to the home page by clicking on Sample Course on the navigation bar at the top. Moving around the course will help you get used to the learning platform.

Exercise: Use an Online Learning Platform

The purpose of this exercise is to get experience using a learning management system such as Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas, or Brightspace. Find a short (possibly free) online course, and take the course to familiarize yourself with using an online platform. If you can't find a short course to use, feel free to use the Sample Course above. Write a short report about your experience. It should include:

1. The name of the course you took including a link.
2. The type of learning management system that it used (if available).
3. Comments about your experience doing the course.
 - Was it user friendly?
 - Was it easy to navigate around the course?
 - What was your general impression?
 - Were there aspects you liked or disliked about learning this way?