

# DigiTeL Pro

Professional development in digital  
teaching and learning

## **A Crowdsourced Guide to Online Learning: Advice for Learners, from Learners**

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#### **Acknowledgement**

This guide was curated  
as part of the Erasmus+  
DigiTel Pro Strategic  
Partnership.

Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme of  
the European Union



The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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# Introduction

In September 2021, in the midst of yet another COVID-19 lockdown, a third iteration of the course, *A Digital Edge: Essentials for the Online Learner* launched with a community of 2,717 enrolled learners from all over the world. Seeking to provide participants with the necessary knowledge and skills to become successful online learners, a central ethos of the course was that it was 'for students, by students'. Experienced online learners co-designed and co-facilitated the course by sharing their tips, advice, and first-hand experiences of how to be effective online learners. Accordingly, the discussion forums quickly became treasure troves of information and advice covering a wide variety of topics relating to online learning.

This guide was curated as a collective resource and lasting record of the knowledge shared among the learner community in the course. Inspired by the 2015 *FutureLearn Crowdsourced Guide to Learning*, the current guide provided an opportunity to collate and share what has been learned from the student perspective during the COVID-19 experience. In this respect it also responds to the need to hear more of the 'student voice' in digital teaching and learning as highlighted by a recent DigiTEL Pro report on student digital readiness during the pandemic (Beirne et al. 2022).

As the move to digital continues to permeate all aspects of our society, student digital readiness or the ability to learn online is fast becoming a crucial life skill. However, readiness for digital learning encompasses more than just computer skills, there is a much wider spectrum of capabilities that come into play. Furthermore, enhancing your digital readiness is not a one-off endeavour. It is likely that your readiness levels will change over time as digital learning environments continue to change and evolve.

So, no matter where you are in your online learning journey, we hope you can all find something in this guide that resonates with you.

## The DigiTEL Pro Strategic Partnership

This guide has been developed as part of the The DigiTeL Pro Strategic Partnership which is funded by the European Commission's Extraordinary Erasmus+ Coronavirus Response Grant. The project led by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) has seven university partners: KU Leuven (Belgium); Fédération Interuniversitaire de l'enseignement à Distance (France); Università Telematica Internazionale (Italy); Open Universiteit (The Netherlands); TU Delft (The Netherlands); Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain); and Dublin City University (Ireland). Overall, the project aims to improve teaching and learning practices in the areas of blended, hybrid and fully online learning while also empowering student digital readiness and the 'student voice' - key tenets of the overall experience.

For more information, visit the project website, <https://digitelpro.eadtu.eu/>.

## About the Course

*A Digital Edge: Essentials for the Online Learner* was developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic by Dublin City University (DCU) in collaboration with the Irish Universities Association (IUA). The initial development was part of the project, *Beyond the Covid Pivot: Towards Transformative Online Learning*, which was funded by DCU's COVID-19 Research and Innovation Hub, and subsequent offerings (including the iteration that the current guide draws on) have been supported by the **DigiTEL Pro Strategic Partnership**.

**The course has two main audiences:**

- 1 Higher education students at all levels who would like to enhance their online learning experience.
- 2 Working professionals who want to become more capable online learners for their chosen careers.

The course is two weeks long and hosted on the FutureLearn platform. The content is structured around four main themes:

- 1 **Ways of Thinking** – Explore different ways of thinking to become a successful online learner
- 2 **Ways of Working** – Develop better ways of working online
- 3 **Tools for Working** – Gather the tools needed to work online
- 4 **Tools for Thriving** – Embrace the mindset to thrive online

The design is strongly influenced by the design principles underlying the FutureLearn platform, which promote visual learning and social learning through conversation and storytelling (FutureLearn, 2018). The content is also anchored in the European LifeComp Framework (Sala et al., 2020) and the Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2019). The fourth iteration of the launched in September 2022 and as of December 2022, over 11,800 people have enrolled in the course overall.

## How the Guide Works

In the following sections, online learning tips and advice from experienced online learners are presented. As we mentioned previously, all advice extracts were garnered from the third iteration of the course, *A Digital Edge: Essentials for the Online Learner*, which opened in September 2021. In total, 3797 comments were posted by learners during the two-week course and 787 of those were deemed by the team to contain useful advice with respect to online learning.

This subsample of comments was thematically categorised under the four main themes of the course and sub themes which best reflected the focus of the advice were identified. Each theme and subtheme are described in more detail in the next section and a sample of our favourite tips from each category are presented anonymously.

# Advice from Fellow Online Learners

## Ways of Thinking

Being a successful online learner is all about having the right mindset as well as understanding yourself and what works for you. In this section, learners share advice on how to stay focused and motivated while studying online.

### Staying Focused

We live in a world of distractions and interruptions and staying focused on your studies can be challenging. Students share their tips below for setting goals and keeping yourself motivated in an online learning environment - which sometimes means knowing when to take a break!



If I want to remain resilient and focused, I need to feed the mind with thoughts that will assist in that. This usually takes the form of reminding myself why I am doing what I am doing, journalling my progress and affirmations.



Try to keep a plan for getting work done. Make it as realistic as you can and don't over plan your day/week. It's also a good idea to remove distractions such as your phone and keep your study space as empty as possible with only your essentials for getting work done.



Also try to schedule in some down time. If you set your down time as your goal, it will motivate you to get your work done!



Chipping away at difficult tasks helps to avoid being overwhelmed by the big picture.



The pomodoro technique is great when I don't feel like doing anything. "Just 25 minutes won't kill me and then there is 5-minute break" is something, that helps me to get into that focused and motivated mindset.



Ambitious but achievable long-term goals broken down into digestible short-term goals is an integral part of maintaining motivation throughout the academic year.



Forest is an excellent tool for studies. It's a study timer that motivates you to study by planting trees. Every time you study & plant trees, you earn coins that can be used to buy trees to be planted in real life by the Forest team. It's a win-win for your studies as well as for the environment :)



## Staying Positive & Celebrating Success

In a world that is constantly pushing you to do more and aim higher it is easy to forget how far you have come. In the following collection of tips, your fellow learners highlight the importance of reflection and marking your milestones or wins, no matter how small.

“

I find it really important to acknowledge the work you are putting in. Be proud of the effort you are making to learn and understand. Especially when it gets hard. Step back, see all the time and effort you are putting in (even if it feels like it hasn't paid off just yet) and congratulate yourself for keeping at it!

“

I think [a] 'Done List' is a great tool. To-do lists are awesome too, but sometimes things pop up during the week that we didn't think about putting on the to-do list. Done lists have really helped me stay motivated and have also helped me realise that sometimes I was setting daily goals on certain tasks too big, that breaking them down into smaller tasks helped me get more of the project completed.

“

Learning how to appreciate your own goals, and success, and how to compliment yourself on a job well done can be helpful in feeling motivated to continue working.

“

Celebrate the small wins.

“

I feel it is important to reward yourself with a good cup of coffee and to celebrate achievements.

## Ways of Working

The nature of online study involves different types and ways of working both on your own and with others. In this section we look at advice aimed at helping you work more effectively in an online environment. Tips will focus on working with others, setting up your workspace and managing your time.

### Working with Others

Group work is a central part of many online courses. Learning is an inherently social process and working in groups can be a great way to get to know others in your course and to learn from them by sharing different viewpoints, strategies, and solutions. However, working with others, particularly in an online environment, is not always straightforward. In the following extracts, learners will share what they have learned with respect to online group work.



Group projects are never personal. If there is a breakdown in communication, it most likely has nothing to do with you. Honest, open, and professional communication is key to success. Also, try to get a sense of how different people work in groups, and different working styles. Some people will have personalities suited to a leadership role, whereas other people will be team players.



Effective communication is important. Creating a group chat for the study group will help and assigning key roles will assist in ensuring that everyone has a degree of responsibility for the task.



Communication, delegation, patience, and understanding are all key. You have to communicate to set a plan, delegate to make sure all work loads are clear, fair and managed, you need patience as not everyone will be as fast or up to date as you and understanding that everyone works differently.



Communication is key when it comes to working in a group. Setting goals and tasks for each member to complete is an important step in a group setting. Along with selecting a leader who is comfortable being a leader. When it comes to members of the group failing to participate, it can be helpful to round up proof of failed participation to show your lecturer in order to find out what to do from there.



Setting regular time-slots in advance for working groups is helpful so the members know when they are expected to be available and can plan around this. Assigning tasks/roles to the individuals helps to share the workload and create accountability. I find that people 'show up' better when they have a responsibility to the group.



Regular and clear communication is key to successful group collaboration and it is very important at the start of the project to define communication platform/s, schedule group meeting times, identify the goals, assign roles, tasks and responsibilities etc. to ensure everyone has a very clear understanding of the expectations and if there is a ghost in the group that cannot be contacted or is not participating then the tutor needs to be informed. There are lots of different Poll apps available now that are very useful when working with a dispersed group to determine if everyone is on the same page or not.



## Your Workspace

When you are studying online your workspace can take different forms and may change day to day. In the following extracts, learners share their experience and tips for creating an optimal study space.

“

It's very easy to get distracted by little things when trying to focus on lectures or assignments while at home. That's why I find it important to reduce the number of distractions such as unnecessary items on my desk or my phone while I'm working.

“

My study space is any serene environment where there is a stable WiFi connection and a working electrical outlet for charging my devices.

“

I like quiet places with good WiFi. A place with natural light is also appreciated!

“

Before COVID, I would spend my time studying in public spaces like parks, libraries, and cafes. I do well with body doubling, feeling that others are around me as a kind of accountability. Now, with COVID, I do almost all my work at home, in my bedroom. I have made extra efforts to separate my sleeping and workspace, however, to make sure I can sleep well at night. I use different lighting when I work, and I keep my room warm when I am working. I cool the room off for bedtime, use dimmer lights, and have my bed moved behind my dresser so that I have no view of my desk at all when I am in bed. I like having people around me when I study. I will likely continue to go to friends' houses, cafés and public spaces once COVID is more under control in my area.

“

I find it really difficult to work or study at a messy desk or surrounded by chaos, so I try to keep my workspace tidy.

“

One of the most important habits related to online learning I have is to set a working space. That means that my phone goes into Do Not Disturb mode and all irrelevant applications are hidden from my desktop. If I am studying in a noisy environment, I put on earphones with some relaxing music without lyrics or sounds of nature to help me focus.



## Managing your Time

One of the major benefits of working online is the flexibility of being able to organise your day your way. But this flexibility can also be a challenge if you do not plan out your week and semester.

“

I manage my thinking by dividing the tasks into four groups according to their importance and urgency, then prioritising them and solving them one by one.

“

I use my email provider's calendar and find it helps remind me of things that are upcoming as I can also see this on my mobile as well as when I am on PC it helpfully flashes up reminders in the corner set as far in advance as I decide.

“

I mainly use the Microsoft calendar to show any events to do with clubs and societies and assignment due dates. Colour coding specific tasks will be extremely handy to see how many things are due or what's coming up. Also setting reminders before the assignment is due or when the event starts helps too.

“

Set up a to-do list sorting the tasks in priority, assigning approximate timings of when to start and complete them, including the due dates.

“

When organising your calendar, colour code each event, in how important the event is... **Red** = Assignments, **Orange** = Lecture Zoom Meetings, **Green** = Family/Social Events.

“

Usually, the day before, I try to plan my next day, making it easy to know where and what time I should start. Setting goals or creating weekly routines help me to finish the tasks with less stress.

“

Be disciplined. Never put off until tomorrow.

## Tools for Working

There are hundreds of unique tools, apps, and online resources available to help you complete the various tasks or assignments associated with your online course. For example, in a national survey of the digital experiences of students in Ireland, over 600 different tools were mentioned by the students surveyed (*National Forum, 2020*). In this section, we present a selection of the most recommended tools by students in the course based on what they found them useful for:

TOOLS FOR:	
Brainstorming	Mindmeister
Planning/ Organisation	Google Keep Trello TickTick Asana Google Calendar Freedcamp
Research/ Citing and Referencing	Mendeley Google Scholar Zotero
Writing	Grammarly
Collaborating	Microsoft Teams Google Drive Google Hangout Zoom Doodle Box WhatsApp Freedcamp
Learning	Khan Academy YouTube LinkedIn Learning CrashCourse
Note-Taking	One Note
Staying Focused	Forest
Studying/ Revising	Quizlet
Designing Graphics	Pixaby Canva
Scanning documents	Genius Scan

## Tools for Thriving

The ability to learn online is now a crucial life skill. Being a successful online learner involves more than just having the know-how and tools to get the job done. You also need to look after your physical, social, and emotional well-being to ensure that online study is sustainable and healthy for the long term. This section shares some tips around cybersecurity, knowing who can support you, and finding a work-life balance.

### Protecting Yourself and Your Work

It is your responsibility to stay safe online and protect your work from technological or human malfunctions. The following tips will help you avoid hackers, fake news and keep your documents safe online.



Change passwords regularly, don't reuse passwords on lots of accounts especially ones connected to a bank card, use strong passwords -mix of upper case and lower case, use special characters and numerals and make it a >3-word phrase e.g., 'MyLogin4College. If you can set up 2 factor authentication on any accounts, do it. And be mindful if you are setting up 2FA that it may need you to receive a text (which depending on your location may or may not be useful, signal can be bad in some parts) so look at what forms of 2FA are available. Google Authenticator just generates a code on your phone that is only good for 10 seconds or so. You only need Wi-Fi for it.



No one likes to do updates but keeping your main learning device updated is incredibly important! Updating your computer not only protects it from viruses, but also makes sure it won't slow down when performing!



If possible, try to use a two-step verification process for very sensitive or important things like a PayPal account, or your academic/professional email address so even if someone obtains your password, they will not be able to access your account without your consent.



Regularly back up your work, I use the auto save function but also make sure to double check this by manually saving after a set time and before I close down the document or leave the PC for a break. I also lock the keyboard and mouse to prevent any accidents.



Storing your digital documents in the cloud is a secure way to keep them safe. Protect your accounts with a strong password. A private internet connection or electronic encryption will also keep your documents safe and secure.



The night before an assignment was due my dog jumped up on me and knocked my laptop out of my arms, absolutely destroying it. I was not granted an extension because of the timing and was penalised, always save your work. I've started to save essay drafts to Google drive so that they are readily accessible from anywhere.

## Connecting with Others

Learning online can be an isolating endeavour. Connecting with others and finding your support network can go a long way in helping you overcome many of the challenges of online study. The following tips will help you start to identify those who may be of support to you during your studies and the different ways to connect with others online.

“

Try to get as involved as you can! Stepping out of your comfort zone can be scary but often great things ensue from it, whether that be saying hi to people in your in-person lectures, turning your mic on in breakout rooms on zoom or sending a text into the course WhatsApp group.

“

Don't be afraid to contact others in your class, even if you feel shy or anxious about it. It's important to remember that everyone in your class is all in the same situation as yourself and by talking to each other, it could ease the minds of others. You might find people with similar interests and decide to meet up outside the boundaries of the online learning environment.

“

It's good to connect with people when learning online, as it can feel quite a lonely experience at times. That's why it's good to do the comments, and like other's points too. I always check my notifications, when I log on, and it feels great to get the feedback from fellow students/mentors.

“

Reach out to classmates at times when your phone isn't being blown up by chatter, it's those times they might need someone to reach out to them.

“

Don't be afraid to say something first. Sometimes the people around you are as nervous to start a conversation as you are.

“

I think having your camera on in lectures and online activities is key - it's easy to switch off, but we all benefit from seeing each other and connecting.

## Finding your Balance

Work-life balance is particularly important in an online environment where the boundaries between study and leisure can often become blurry. In the following tips, students will share their experience and tips for balancing your online study workload against other commitments in your life.



It's really easy to forget to take care of ourselves when assignments and college can get overwhelming. The best thing to do is to designate an hour to yourself each day to do something to relax. Try to remove yourself from an academic environment such as your desk where you do work and go for a walk or take some time to make a nice meal.



It can get overwhelming at times and it's okay to take a step back to rest in order to get back into the swing of things.



Map out personal non-academic goals.



Never underestimate the value of sleep if you want to learn well then sleep well.



It's so easy to leave out self-care parts of your day as they don't seem compulsory, when in reality they could really improve your everyday life and lift your spirits. Schedule them in as a part of your to do list.



Never underestimate the value of sleep if you want to learn well then sleep well.



Balance in life is a main goal for achieving the rest of things we want to so, don't forget that the quality is better than the quantity.



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Co-funded by the  
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