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# Solitary but not idle

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# Solitary, But Not Idle

**Michael Simonson**

“If you are idle, be not solitary; if you are solitary, be not idle.”

—Samuel Johnson, 1779

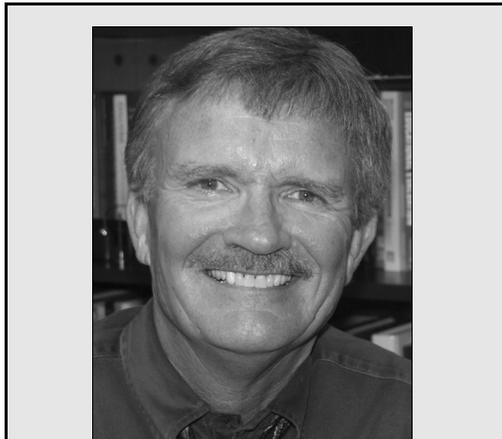
There has been considerable discussion lately about the problem of the solitary learner who is enrolled in a distance education course. Fengfeng Ke and Alison Carr-Chellman (2007) studied the solitary learner, and Simonson (2008) even discussed the solitary instructor; the instructor who works alone, outside a tra-

ditional instructional institution, with little or no contact with other professionals.

As distance education and virtual schooling have grown in importance and the number of students who learn at a distance has increased, the issue of the solitary learner has become a concern to many educators (Simonson, 2008). These concerns have produced a series of recommendations that are intended to reduce learner solitude by requiring learner action. In other words, the solitary learner must not be “idle.”

Certainly, teachers of distant learners design their courses and build communities of learners, and plan activities that reduce the potential pitfalls of learning on one’s own. Development of learning groups, use of social networking activities, and incorporation of synchronous audio and video instructional events are used by instructors to minimize the impression that a learner is alone.

However, there are also actions that students should take to ensure that they are not learning in solitude, even though they may be studying in isolation from their classmates. There are two categories of actions to be taken—those before the start



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of an online class, and activities to be taken during a class.

Before an online or blended class begins a learner should:

- Develop a personal and very formal organization plan for the course. This might mean the use of file folders for various course-related activities—either physical or digital—or the development of a study and learning plan where specific times are scheduled.
- Obtain a copy of the course syllabus and become familiar with the planned course activities, assignments, and requirements.
- Trouble-shoot all equipment and connectivity that will be used during the course.
- Find and file the instructor's name, address, e-mail, and telephone number.
- Send the instructor an e-mail introducing yourself, just before the beginning of class.

During an online or blended class the learner should:

- Obtain a list of other students in the class and find out about them, if possible. Often instructors will ask students to post a picture and short autobiographical paragraph. If so, save this information and review it to get to know classmates. If the instructor does not do this, then take the initiative yourself—contact your classmates and introduce yourself.

- Participate often when interactive instructional events are planned—early and late. Many online instructors use threaded discussions of relevant course topics—the best approach is to post early in the discussion, post comments reacting to what classmates have posted, and return to the discussion thread several more times to read what others have written and add additional posts to the thread.
- Identify classmates after a few weeks of instruction who seem to be ones you would like to “get to know better.” Contact them and try to build a small study group—classmates you can bounce ideas off, and whom you will help when they have questions—build your own learning community.
- Contact your instructor periodically—noncritical questions can be sent via e-mail, and for more complex or important issues, do not forget the telephone. Get to know your teacher, and help your instructor get to know you—be pro-active; most instructors appreciate this if it is not over-done.

*And finally*, while online learners may be solitary, they must not be idle.

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