

**Digital Learning Commons
Online Courses
Student Focus Group Findings
May-June 2005**

Prepared by Leslie St. Pierre, Assistant Director of Course Support

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Overview	3
Findings	5
Expectations: student self-preparation	6
Learnings and observations	13
Conclusions	15
How focus group findings will be used	17
Appendix A: Student Focus Group Topic Guide and Questions	
Appendix B: Student Worksheet	
Appendix C: Combined worksheet responses	

Overview

In the spring of 2005, in an effort to learn how the DLC and schools can better support students taking online courses, the DLC convened a series of focus groups at participating schools to examine the following overarching questions:

- What did students expect their online learning experience would be like?
- Did they seek information about what would be entailed in their online course before starting?
- How were their expectations met?
- What can the DLC and schools do to align expectations and improve actual experiences?

Asking these questions within the context of a focus group allowed participants, in this case students, to candidly reflect on their experiences and to answer these questions thoughtfully in the presence of their peers. In some cases, the DLC found that the group dynamics afforded by the focus group helped to create a group census on experiences, as well as to highlight contradictory patterns.

Who

In May and June of 2005, nearly 30 students having participated in an online course through one of the DLC's seven course providers were interviewed in focus groups at Oakesdale, North Kitsap and Tonasket High Schools. The three schools were selected according to the following criteria:

- Geographic diversity – the three schools cover three distinct regions of WA state
- School size diversity – the three schools house large to very small populations
- Demonstrated commitment to the DLC for the '05-'06 school year
- Experience in online courses – at the time of the focus groups, the three schools had participated in online courses for a minimum of two semesters.

The majority of students in the focus group population attend Oakesdale High School and participated in a Spanish 1 course. Some focus group students were self-described “learners” looking to “expand horizons” by taking a course in a new and interesting subject; many were students “just looking for the credit” in order to graduate. The focus group facilitators were members of the DLC staff: Leslie St. Pierre, Assistant Director of Course Support and Michael VanHenley, Educational Support Coordinator. Both staff members work directly with DLC course providers and with staff supporting online students at the schools.

How

All were asked the same questions about their expectations prior to taking an online course and how those expectations were met by actual experiences. All were asked about what they would do differently and what they would hope their school or the DLC would do differently if they were to take another online course. A set of prompts were given with each question which addressed various nuances of online learning. (See Attachment A for the full set of focus group questions.)

The 5 hour-long focus groups included an average of 4 students per group. DLC staff took notes via transcription, after the session, from audio recordings; or in person within the focus group session. Students were given a two-part exercise (also in Attachment A) that lead into the focus group questions.

Findings

Why students enrolled in their courses

- The majority of students said they took their courses online because they were not available to them – at all, or due to scheduling conflicts – at their schools.
 - However, some students considered taking an online course as a means to work at their own pace, without having to adhere to their local school's schedule.
 - Foreign languages were most sought out by these students, particularly those looking to earn foreign language graduation credits.
- A few students said their motivation came from wanting to learn more about a course subject that was not available to them or a subject that they wanted to learn for their personal enrichment.

Which courses taken by focus group students

Students in the focus groups took the following courses in the 2004-05 academic year:

- Latin 1 & 2
- Pacific Northwest History
- Spanish 1 & 1
- Physical Science 1 & 2
- Integrated Mechanical Physics with Logical Reasoning
- German 1
- Japanese 1

- Students taking Latin courses would consider taking another online course, specifically another foreign language course.
- Students taking Spanish courses generally would not consider taking another online course, but if met with the necessity to do so, would take something other than a foreign language course.
- Many students exhibiting ready willingness to take another online course expressed interest in math and science courses. Some not having taken one before would consider taking an online foreign language course.
- Some students mentioned having reviewed the online course catalog as a motivating factor for taking an online course, having found a course title that piqued their interest.
 - However, most students did not consult the catalog in their selection process, motivated instead by their need for the credit or their intrinsic interest in the course subject.
 - There was the suggestion from those who reviewed the catalog for better descriptions on how the course “runs” in order for the student to better prepare for the content to be covered and assignments to be completed.

Expectations: student self-preparation

Independence and personal responsibility

With few exceptions in their hand-written responses, students expressed the following:

- the overall expectation that online learning would both allow and require more independence.
- the expectation that they would be able to work at their own pace through the course without the more strict deadlines seen in local courses, based on the sense that seeing assignments posted ahead of time would allow them to work on them more as time allowed and to move ahead as desired.
 - However some felt that their actual online experience allowed for less independence with regards to assignment due dates and course deadlines than expected.
 - In many cases, online course calendars did not adhere to local school calendars and students felt the need to compromise between local vacation time and online assignment due dates.
- anticipation of the need to be more independent learners in their online courses, acknowledging that the absence of a teacher in the in-person classroom setting would require self-motivation in order to keep pace with their work.
 - Many of these students felt that while they received answers to questions from their online teacher, not having the immediate response of their teacher left them feeling at a loss for direction.
- Because of the anticipated need for independence, students expressed the expectation that the online course instruction would mitigate the perceived distance between student and teacher – that they would have help “whenever needed” from the teacher.
 - However, some felt that this mitigation was lacking in their experience in the Spanish courses where instructor feedback was often delayed and delivered on a “this is wrong, this is right” basis, despite the instructor’s perceived leniency.

Organization and time management

Since taking their online courses:

- Many of the students said that if they were to take another online course, they would “get started sooner” and not delay working on their coursework.
 - This suggests that many saw their online courses as “secondary” to their on-campus courses, something that was eluded to in one student’s statement about his expectations on the time load of his course: “Since I can work on it whenever I feel like it, it makes it easier to push it aside and say ‘I need to work on this other class’ and then things build up. The fact that the work can get done anytime I wanted meant that it got done, but as a secondary thing which wasn’t best. “
- Some students predicted their courses would take less time than their on-campus course and at least one student saw her expectations met with reality, completing her course in two and half weeks.

- However, some students expressed surprise over the time commitment, claiming that the workload takes longer than just the class period during which they are scheduled to connect to their classes during the school day, having to work on it outside of class - at school and at home - in order to get the assignments done.
- Only a few students acknowledged that prior to starting their online courses, they expected to have to prioritize time wisely in order to get the assignments in on time and do them correctly.
- Many students felt that their online course would take as much time as their on-campus course work and didn't think that connecting online would lengthen the time needed to complete their assignments.
 - One exception to this was a comment from a student taking a foreign language course who "thought the course would take longer than an on-campus course because it takes longer to learn things when it's just out of the book instead of speaking it every day."
- Others felt a lack of ability to control their time and motivation either due to discrepancies between on-campus and online policies or due to the manner in which they were scheduled to take their course.
 - One student suggested that her online course "took more time than anticipated with sports [having] no extra days given to do the work like at school", and so found it to be more demanding.
 - Another said "When I was able to work at home [last year] it was easier to motivate and do it on own time, but actually having a period to do it [this year] makes it harder for some reason to sit down and do it on a scheduled basis. At home I can do it when I feel inspired."
- Many students suggested that making a calendar outlining their entire course load (on-site and online), factoring in local vacation time, half days and days off would help to mitigate the time and organizational challenges that were met with.
- Others suggested that getting a timely and informed start is important and something they would aim to do. "I'd work harder especially in the beginning, and do daily assignments, daily." "I'd stay caught up and do the orientation for the course, keeping track of what to do and when."

Course content and organization

- While one student suggested that "The course was well-organized enough that between testing and working on my own, I actually learned a lot", specifically, some foreign language students mentioned challenges with the assignments and organization of their courses.
- Latin students suggested that the many charts and tables make it difficult to discern the lessons and "what to do", but that cues within the site helped to spell it all out. Just as multiple explanations from an on-site teacher will offer clarity, so does using a number of delivery methods online.
- Students found that when their course and instructor were able to communicate challenging content with pictures, text, diagrams and voice recordings they were able to "triangulate" around their problems and pick up hints about what they should be learning.

- However, some students suggested that their course had them going in too many directions trying to find the answers to things.
- Students also expressed frustration with vague course assignments and instructions leaving them not knowing what to do. And some were frustrated by course textbooks that failed to “tell you everything”, seeming to have missing parts and becoming increasingly harder to use as the course progressed. Other course textbooks and content just jumped right in – with no indication of where to start.

Course orientations

- Many students did not expect to have access to an orientation as part of or prior to their course, hoping instead that the course would be self-explanatory, that help to direct them where to go would come easily and that the course would have self-contained information.
 - However, those who were required to participate in an orientation or found it on their own accord found it to be a valuable tool in their ability to situate themselves and get started in the course. As one student put it “I would take any orientation available – it spells out how to do the course, how to navigate the site, where to get help – ‘this is what you do!’”
- Students who were unaware of the availability of an orientation prior to taking their course encountered difficulties getting started. As one student put it “in the beginning it was difficult because none of us had a clue about the format of the site or how to get around.” This student and her classmates found their way after asking many questions of their teacher and Teacher/Mentor but some admitted that taking an online orientation would have helped to mitigate these challenges.
- Some students suggested that without an orientation they would definitely try to figure out at least where assignments and the course grade book are located – “the main stuff” – before even starting.
- Other students encountered difficulties regardless of whether or not they participated in an orientation – some even mentioned that the orientation itself was hard to find.
- One student encountered challenges with his online textbook and would have benefited from an orientation to this component of his class, saying: “I thought that the books would be really helpful but they don’t seem to really explain what everything means.”
- Despite their apparent willingness to use orientations included in or immediately preceding their online courses, overall, students did not express a need to for more training prior to taking an online course. One student suggests that “as long as you know the basics about how to use a computer and how to manage time, anyone can be fine at it”.

Technical difficulties

- A few students expressed concern over expecting the need to have tech skills upon beginning their course or to have to take a tech skills class because they were not familiar with computers.

- Some suggested that students not having one at home would want to know more about working on the computer and the Internet before being expected to take an online course.
- And, while some students expressed surprise by the actual need to have tech skills in order to successfully participate in their courses, (with the exception of needing to know how to scan hand-written assignments into their computer), most technical difficulties encountered by students were attributed to school-based issues with computer configurations.
 - These issues created difficulties in loading or running the various programs needed to submit assignments, take exams and access Internet-based resources.
 - Some students suggested that these issues played such a major part of their online challenges that the bulk of their on-site support came from their school technologist (as opposed to the Teacher/Mentor).
- Some students' "tech"-related challenges came from not having regular and reliable access to computers and again, most specifically to computers meeting the technical requirements of their particular course.
- Some students complained about slow or failing school connections to the Internet when many students were online at the same time.
 - These students recommend having more access and adequate *designated* computers for all online students, especially when schools expect students to connect from school, but also to bolster after school access, even for students connecting from home.
 - Students also recommend the computers being located in areas where they can be allowed to talk and collaborate with other local online students and their Teacher/Mentors.

Support from the online teacher

According to their expectations prior to taking their online courses,

- Students expressed a general expectation that their main source of support in their online course would be their online teacher. Students expected their online teacher to be friendly, quick and helpful, providing a relatively large amount of feedback in order to mitigate the lack of direct personal contact.
 - While there is strong and specific evidence that this was true for many, students taking Spanish expressed significant frustration with the perceived lack of support received from their online teacher. Many felt that any connection with their teacher required many and repeated inquiries before delayed and unsatisfying responses to questions or concerns were received. Some felt that their teacher simply could not be reached or that whatever feedback had been solicited was impertinent or vague.
 - Some students reserved a measure of anticipation of these challenges with this particular course, having spoken with students who had taken the course already who claimed that there was little teacher support to be had.

- Another discounted her unmet expectation this way: “I thought I’d get a lot of help from the teacher – that expectation probably comes from going to a small school.”
- Some students, while expecting to receive help from their teacher, were relieved to at least get assistance from their Student Mentor.
- Specifically, foreign language students recommended connecting with their teacher by phone if not online – for questions and oral quizzes – as a good means to connect with “actual teacher” and to learn how the language sounds. The Latin course featured verbal recordings of the teacher reading the assigned reading material which the students found very helpful.

Support from the Teacher/Mentor

In general,

- Students’ expectations on the level of support that they would receive from their Teacher/Mentor were met.
 - However it could be said that many students had no expectations on that support, at all. Some students expressed surprise and relief to having had their Teacher/Mentor available to help them and admit that their Teacher/Mentor was a major source of support in the course.
- Some expectations regarding support seem to have been both assembled and unmet by the school staff involved in the selection of the student and online courses (this could be the Teacher/Mentor, the Registrar or Administrative staff), as suggested by this student: “When I signed up for the course I was told I would get all the support I needed, but the support system was non-existent at the school.”
- Others expected more Teacher/Mentor support than was received.
 - Scheduling and access to the Teacher/Mentor is mentioned as a potential reason for this as a few students mention not being able to connect with their Teacher/Mentor on a regular basis or during their online course period during the day.
- One student recommended meeting with a Teacher/Mentor for “lots of checkups to make sure getting work done and correctly”, recognizing the on-site support as an external means of providing motivation to progress through the course.

Support from the Student Mentor

- Many students were unaware that they had been assigned a Student Mentor who could assist them with the subject matter of their online course.
 - However, of those who were aware of the Student Mentor program, about half said they used this service and found it helpful.
 - One student expressed surprise over the benefit he experienced in communicating with his Student Mentor: “[I] expected help to come from the teacher, but ended up getting more help from the SM.”
- Foreign language students seemed to derive the most use of the assistance their Student Mentors were able to provide. One in particular suggested that in the future, she “would use [the program] more, particularly for foreign language – [to

- make use of the] vocabulary sheets, conjugating questions, worksheets, and tips on learning the language easier.
- Two students felt that while their Student Mentor was helpful, the attention the Student Mentor could offer the student online was not as much as was needed. A few others expressed frustration with long response times to their inquiries, but that this would not prevent them from using the service in the future.
 - Two students suggested that they were unable to reach their Student Mentor or failed to connect with him/her. However one of these students noted that while he didn't get assistance from his Student Mentor, he did have friends who passed on what they learned from theirs which he found to be helpful.
 - A couple of students expressed reluctance in participating in the Student Mentor program, expressing shyness or discomfort in sharing their work with others, particularly strangers.
 - A few students suggested that the service wasn't needed in their current courses but that they would keep the service in their list of help options in the future.

Perceived level of academic difficulty

As with our findings on independence needed and fostered in online learning, the anticipated and actual levels of academic difficulty perceived by students were inconsistent – both in what the student expected and how those expectations were met.

- One student suggested that she anticipated the course would be more difficult purely because the teacher would not be “right there to help when you need it”.
 - In many instances, students communicating these expectations perceived online courses as more difficult than their on-site versions.
 - Another student noted that she felt the online course would be more difficult, but its actual difficulty exceeded expectations.
- A few students taking foreign language courses anticipated having more academic difficulty in their courses “because you can't learn to speak it the same way without hearing it first”. Paired with some of these students' feelings of inadequate teacher response to questions, was the perception that the online course was in their experience more difficult without the personal relationship and one-on-one interaction with their teacher.
 - For instance, delayed e-mail responses, time zone differences and the inability to connect in a mutual online location meant that Spanish students were left to read and re-read assignment instructions, inadequate feedback and textbook lessons without the instructional filter of their teacher.
 - As a result, some students expressed anticipating the increased difficulty of their experience in Spanish due to witnessing their schoolmates' difficulties.

Contrary to these findings, many students expressed the expectation that the online course would be academically easier than an on-campus course.

- Some foreign language students were surprised that the online workload was bigger, having to actually work through the entire textbook, the assignments were

not as hard as on-campus course assignments which were perceived to require more memorization.

- A few students anticipated and even welcomed a rigorous experience in their online course, hoping to be challenged and immersed into the course content.

Comparison with findings to 2005 DLC independent evaluator report findings

Similar to the survey findings of the independent evaluator report, student focus groups revealed the following trends in student experiences with online learning:

- Participants cited the main reason for student participation in online courses was to take courses they could not otherwise take.
- Participants cited the importance of the availability of reliable and appropriate computers and technology needed for students to engage successfully with their online courses.

Learnings and observations

Feelings of isolation, connection

- Students who participated in online courses with their local classmates – enrolled in the same course and connecting at the same time from the same school location – generally and with few exceptions, expressed a sense of camaraderie with their classmates.
 - Many of these students suggested that having each other available to collaborate on work, study with and ask and answer questions was a positive aspect in their online experience. One student suggested that he would not have learned as much or have had as good an experience if it had not been for his classmate.
- A few students not having local classmates in their online courses suggested missing “other kids” or wanting the “teacher there to answer questions”.
 - In a few instances, time zone differences between students and instructors seemed to contribute directly to their sense of aloneness. As one student put it, “It was hard waiting for the instructor to get back on a question.”
 - It was also suggested that schools should schedule all local online students to connect at same time, from the same place, seemingly regardless of whether they were taking the same online course or not.
- And yet, another student liked the chance to work alone: “I like to go at my own pace, not alone, just doing what I want.”
- Another experienced a strong connection with his teacher: “Because the teacher always responds quickly it always felt like she cared and got us more “into” the class. The teacher seemed like she cared whether or not we got the information. It felt like any other course.” This student also suggested that he could see the likelihood of staying in touch with his teacher after completing the course.

Surprising successes

The students, in general, were reluctant to suggest that they experienced any surprising successes however these comments are representative of a few “Aha!” moments in the discussions and written answers:

- “I learned way more than I normally do in science classes at school.”
- “I was skeptical whether you could learn a language (Latin) “by just reading it”, but it worked!”
- “I didn’t learn as much as expected based on the course description. The instructor didn’t do all the effort to create the info themselves, but pointed to other sites.”

Other students mentioned improvement in their personal time management and organizational skills:

- “I learned how to manage time better and how to get assignments done on time and get done as needed.”
- “I became more self-motivated than previously, but only in order to get everything turned in on time. Not as motivated as [I] should be, but knowing how

- much work has to be in by the end of the year, so [I] know how much needs to be done each day to turn it in on time rather than just waiting and holding things up.”
- “[This was the] first time I ever created a calendar to keep a schedule for completing work – [I] will do that again.”

Learning online

The fact that their online courses incorporated online resources wasn't entirely a surprise to students, however some were not prepared to have *everything* come off the Internet. Some students even requested hard copy versions of their textbooks despite having online versions available to them.

A few students recognized the Internet as a tool, using it to conduct research and some mentioned the Internet as a main source of support in their course. No specific mention was made of the DLC online library resources.

Advising conversations

Some students suggested the need for school staff assisting with the selection of students and courses to emphasize the need for student independence and self-organization, to enroll students who can sustain themselves and play a part in the direction of their learning. Others suggested that when enrolling a student in an online course, the student should be given a class period dedicated to connecting to the online class, every day. One student suggested that having “veteran students explain what it's like to do it” would be helpful and instructive.

Conclusions

Gathering information, dispelling assumptions - ahead of time

In general, students participating in the focus groups cited making little preparation prior to taking their online course. Students rarely read information posted about their online course within the DLC course catalog and thought seemingly little about the differences between the online and on-site learning environments. Despite the tendency towards expecting increased academic difficulty and the need for increased independence, students generally assumed that course organization would be easily navigable, teacher assistance would address all difficulties and course materials and content would be self-explanatory.

Recommendations:

- Online students might benefit from more pre-participation investigation into the online course descriptions and syllabi, as well as into the course provider platform demos provided on the DLC web site to better prepare them for the academic demand and online learning environment.
- Guided conversations with “veteran” course takers might also improve student expectations, giving them a “real world” depiction of how a specific course and online courses, in general, operate.

Mitigating student-teacher communication issues

General delays in instructor-student communications contributed greatly to student frustration.

Recommendation:

- While much of this can be attributed to time zone differences, there was notably some communication challenges that might have been resolved if appropriate supports were utilized; Teacher/Mentors are encouraged to connect with students and instructors to make sure communication lines are open.
 - Notifying both the DLC Course Support staff and the course provider administration of a teacher’s lack of timely and instructive feedback would have allowed for pointed intervention and possibly the assignment of a new and more effective teacher. It is evident that there was inadequate awareness of these supports.

The importance of orientations

In hindsight, online course orientations and overviews were deemed very useful and in many cases, integral to the ability to adequately function within the course.

Recommendation:

- School staff on the Course Support team should encourage students to complete any available orientation prior to beginning their online course, if the orientation is not a specified course requirement. Without completing course orientations, students have a greater tendency towards falling behind in their assignments and feeling isolated within their course.

Technology skills

Despite the demonstrated desire for and need of online orientations, students generally shirked the suggestion of participating in computer skill development training with only a couple of noted exceptions.

Recommendation:

- This puts the onus on school Course Support team members to screen students' computer literacy: does the student know how to use a computer? How to send and receive e-mail and e-mail attachments? How to use the Internet? Load software? How to type? Lack of any of these skills wouldn't necessarily prohibit a student from succeeding in an online course, but given the inherent nature of the course structure, however having them is notably preferable.

Untapped resource: the Student Mentor Program

It was strongly evident that the DLC Student Mentor program is an untapped resource. While many students were unaware of the availability of the program and their instant association with it (students are matched with their Student Mentor upon registering for their online course), those who used it or were aware of it cited its importance and potential for beneficial assistance.

Recommendation:

- The DLC and schools need to coordinate a concentrated effort in making this resource known and used by online courses students.

Foreign language and the need for more support

Foreign language students, in particular, noted having benefited from the Student Mentor program. Foreign language students also noted the anticipated and experienced need to connect with their course instructor primarily for the purpose of speaking and listening to the course language; without occasion to do so, these students noted the need to "guess" how to speak and listen to the language. These students also expressed the need for more orientation to the content of their course work and materials. It seems that because of the presence of a foreign language within the course context, there seemed to be a greater alienation between students and the course content. In other words, due to the confusion in understanding a foreign language, instruction delivered in plain English was perceived less informative and understanding.

Recommendation:

- While many of the foreign language students in the focus groups participated in their online courses alongside local classmates, the benefits derived from camaraderie were witnessed by about only half; students enrolled in the Latin courses who worked together found having a local classmate in the same course to be a boon to their success while most of the students enrolled in the Spanish course working together floundered together.
 - However, it seems that the benefits of working together can prevail when other confusion-contributing factors are mitigated.

How focus group findings will be used

Orientations

While some DLC course providers already require the completion of the course orientation before a student is even allowed to proceed into the course content, some simply link to an orientation on the course login screen or within the course itself. DLC course providers will be encouraged to heighten the visibility of, if not incorporate a requirement for the completion of, course orientations. While online course timelines are generally no less rigorous than their local counterparts, the very nature of an online course as being taught within a course platform necessitates the need to learn “how things work”. And, since most providers operate within their own platform, even if a student has taken an online course, they may be new to the inner-workings of the course in which they are enrolled.

Spanish

Within a month of the student focus groups, in which DLC staff learned of the difficulties encountered by Spanish students, the DLC launched an in-depth review of the course and the provider’s policies and procedures. Upon unsatisfactory review of the course by DLC staff and evaluation consultants, the DLC hosted a feedback session with the provider. It was decided that until the provider could demonstrate the following modifications and improvements, the course would remain closed from registration in the DLC course catalog.

- Not allow DLC students to enroll as independent study students - student learning and experiences are much improved when they participate in the virtual chat sessions and should be required for taking/passing the course. It was suggested that this requirement be instituted into all of the provider’s language courses.
- Elevate and require the completion of the course orientation - the provider’s orientation was not required and was too hard to find. Many of our providers make the completion of the orientation the first assignment due for the course. It would be great if this was a requirement for all of your courses.
- Assign a new west coast instructor to teach DLC Spanish courses to help alleviate some of the response turnaround time issues that were observed.
- Designate predetermined virtual chat session time frames to allow better flexibility in scheduling virtual chat sessions. Also, include projected session time frames in course descriptions so that Teacher/Mentors and students can 1) anticipate the need to schedule these sessions with the course instructor and 2) coordinate local schedules, accordingly.

Appendix A

Student Focus Group Topic Guide and Questions

I. Introduction and Ground Rules (5 minutes)

- A. Moderator introduces her/himself. We're from DLC – from the online courses and the student mentor program
- B. Focus group description
 - Focus groups help us learn what people think about important issues and we can explore the questions in more depth.
- C. Purpose
 - We're going to be talking today about taking online courses through the Digital Learning Commons and what you like and don't like about it.
- D. Reasons for note taking
 - We want to have an accurate record of your comments.
 - What you say here will remain confidential.
- E. Rules of the session
 - Everyone's opinion counts. We want to hear from each of you.
 - No right or wrong answers. Not looking for consensus.
 - This is an open discussion but my job is to keep it moving and cover all the questions I have. So I may cut you off from time to time to keep us moving and get you out of here in time.
 - Feel free to volunteer information without being asked.
 - Please speak one at a time and don't get into side discussions.
- F. If you need to use the bathroom, feel free to leave and return quietly.

II. Self-introductions around the table (5 minutes)

- Give us your name and tell us what grade you're in and your favorite online course.

Brainstorm and Discussion: Why did you sign up for an online course?

- Needed the course to graduate but could not get it on campus for some reason
- Was interested in the topic as extra curriculum
- Wanted to explore the topic area to know if I liked it (college exploration, career pathway)
- Wanted to try online
- Other...

III. Worksheet: Messages (5 minutes) Expectations you had *before* taking your online course

- A. What were your *expectations* about learning online?
- That the experience would require more or less independence?
 - What about personal responsibility?
 - It would be easier or more difficult than on campus?
 - It would take less or more of my time than an on-campus course?
- B. What were your *expectations* in terms of the kinds of support you'd get?
- Course provider orientations/training?
 - What about assistance in developing tech skills?
 - Where did you expect to get your help from? The Internet? The library? The Teacher? Your Teacher/Mentor? Student Mentor?

IV. Discussion: How were your expectations different from your actual experience?

- A. What were the main challenges during the online course?
- With the computer technology
 - With the course content/organization
 - With organizing my time and getting motivated
 - With feeling alone/isolated from other students or teacher
- B. Did you have any surprising successes?
- Did you learn more than you thought you would?
 - Did you improve in an area you've previously struggled in?
 - Did you meet anyone you'll stay in touch with?

V. Discussion: The future (10 minutes)

A. Would you take another online course? If so, what would you do the same? differently?

- course subject area
 - computer training/tech skills
 - time management/organization
 - Student Mentors
 - Course provider orientations
- B. What can the DLC and your school do to make expectations align better with what it's actually like to take an online course?
- Course description info
 - Orientations to online learning? What would that look like?
 - Advising conversations – what your Registrar and T/M tell you

- C. What would help improve your online learning experience while you are in the course?
- More access to computers?
 - More support from your online teacher? Teacher/Mentor? In what way?
 - More training? What would that look like?
 - Tutorials on online technology?
 - Student support group? Local? Online?
 - Student Mentors?

VI. Wrap up (if time)

We're almost done here for today.

But before I let you go, I want to ask what you take away from this session. We've talked a lot about taking online courses through the DLC and what you like and don't like about it.

What will stick in your mind about our conversation?

Are there any questions you wished we would have asked?

Thanks for your time today. You've been very helpful.

Appendix B

Student Worksheet

- 1) What were your *expectations* about learning online? Did you think about:
- whether or not it would require more independence?
 - whether or not it would require more personal responsibility?
 - whether or not it would be more difficult than on campus?
 - whether or not it would take less time than an on-campus course?

Please provide a statement about the expectations you had about online learning before beginning your course:

- 2) What were your *expectations* in terms of the kinds of support you'd get? Did you expect to have:
- to complete a course orientation/training?
 - to have a minimum set of technology skills?
 - your help come from the Internet? The library? The Teacher? Your Teacher/Mentor? Student Mentor?

Please provide a statement about the expectations you had about the help and support you'd be getting while taking your online course:

Appendix C

Combined worksheet responses

Worksheet: What were your *expectations* about learning online?

- That the experience would require more or less independence?
 - What about personal responsibility?
 - It would be easier or more difficult than on campus?
 - It would take less or more of my time than an on-campus course?
-
- Before the beginning of the course, I thought it would be a lot more harder. I knew we would have to prioritize our time wisely in order to get the assignments in on time and do them correctly. I thought the course would take longer than an on-campus course because it takes longer to learn things when it is just out of the book instead of speaking it everyday.
 - I thought it would be more difficult based on what other students had told me about the class. But I didn't expect it to be as difficult as it is now. I also didn't think it would take up much extra time but later in the year I've had to work on it at school and at home so I can get the assignments done in time which isn't too different from other classes.
 - I thought that it would be very independent – that I could work on it whenever I wanted which wasn't the case. I thought the workload would be more and I was right, but the actual assignments themselves were not as hard.
 - Before this year, I had never taken an online learning class, so I didn't know what to expect. I was thinking that it would be more difficult learning a foreign language class online because you can't learn to speak it the same way without hearing it first.
 - I think that online learning courses would require more independence but I also thought that the instruction would offer more help than “this is wrong, this is right”. I thought it would be more difficult than an on campus class because there wasn't someone there telling you you have to get this in now. It does take less time than an on campus course. I finished all my assignments for a semester in 2.5 weeks.
 - I didn't have any expectations other than passing the classes. I knew it would take more responsibility and that it would be less difficult than non campus.
 - I was told that the class was hard and it takes a lot of time outside of the given class. I found out for me it takes a lot longer than a period a day to get your assignment. I found that my Spanish teacher is pretty lenient. I found out that I had trouble getting in my class and accessing some of the materials in my course sometimes.
 - I pretty much expected all of the above. I knew that I would be basically working on my own the whole time so I would need independence and personal responsibility. I also realized that it might take more time to be more difficult than an actual on-campus course
 - I thought it would be not as demanding. Small school like environment but it wasn't. I figured the teacher would help more. I feel it is way more difficult because I am used to one on one help from the teacher. It took more time than

I thought with sports there's no extra days like our school so it's more demanding and for me I had a problem with understanding most things.

- I thought it would take more independence and personal responsibility, and it does. You don't have a teacher standing over you telling you that you need to get your work done. And because you don't have that teacher, it's more difficult than an on-campus course. If you need personalized help, it's a little more difficult to get than on campus.
- More responsibility than regular classes. You have to learn it yourself. You don't have a teacher next to you explaining everything. I knew that it would be more difficult than a regular class, but it is harder than I thought.
- I believed that I would be responsible for everything, which is true. I think that taking French online is easier than a normal class. I think there is less work and less memorization. I think there is more material to learn because we actually get through the whole book, and we never have breaks.
- I thought that the class would be better than an on campus course because it is self paced and had only 2 assignments per week.
- When I first signed up for the course, I figured it would be easier than my other classes since creative writing is my thing. I thought I would have help whenever I needed it from my teacher. I didn't know about the mentors and I only talked to mine a little. I thought it would be easy to navigate the site and find time to finish my work.
- I thought that it would be harder than my on campus classes because I didn't know the teacher, but I like it better because all the assignments are posted ahead of time so you can work on them more when you have time and you can go ahead. I like the independence.
- I expected it to be a class where I was on my own learning German. I thought it would be harder than taking a class in the school with a teacher there to help you because of that help right there when you needed it.
- I knew it would take more independence. Also it would require me being more self-motivated and responsible. I thought it would be the same as on campus. I did think it would be shorter.
- I expected that I could learn more than on campus and have a challenging course.
- I didn't feel it would take as much independence that it did. I also had not thought the homework would be a shard. I don't feel it would be as hard as on campus. It would probably be less time.
- I wanted the classes to go more in depth than they do at this school. I wanted it to challenge me and teach me more than my past science courses at Tonasket.
- I expected it to be more on the computer, rather than printing off documents and scanning them to turn them back in. I expected it to be that independent.

Worksheet: What were your *expectations* in terms of the kinds of support you would get? Did you expect to have:

- To complete a course orientation/training?
 - To have a minimum set of technology skills?
 - Your help come from the Internet? The library? The teacher? Your Teacher/Mentor? Student Mentor?
- I wanted my online teacher to be friendly and helpful. I wanted to get quick responses to my e-mails and good help when I needed it. I also hoped the online school would be set up to help students when they had problems.
 - I didn't expect to have a student mentor, but I did, which was sometimes helpful.
 - I expected it to have self-contained information.
 - I had very little help but the help that I did have was very helpful. I also wasn't prepared to have everything come off the internet. I was really happy to have the student mentor.
 - I didn't think that the mentor would be able to help me much because it was an independent study type of class. I did have problems with the computer and half way expected it because it was new to the school and all of the requirements for the class wasn't available at first.
 - I didn't know what to think. We had to look over the course for our orientation. I knew I had to be on the computer a lot. Mrs. Garner helped with Tech stuff.
 - I expected the help would come from my teacher. Any help I had was from Mrs. Wigen or Kevin could help me. My mentor and I rarely talked mostly because of the course I was taking. I was wary of sharing my work. In my lessons I would from time to time have to consult the internet to research authors or poems.
 - The support I got is really about what I expected. I didn't know there would be an orientation, but it was nice to help get me ready for the class. I haven't really needed help from anyone so that's kind of what I expected. The class is easier than I thought it might be.
 - In the very beginning it was difficult because none of us had a clue about the format of the site or how to get around. Eventually, with numerous e-mails to our teachers, we eventually got started. Mrs. Crooks is a great mentor and always helps us with our technical problems. I think all the DLC students rely on her.
 - When I signed up for this course I was told that I could get all the help I would need. The support system was non-existent at our school, I could not reach our teacher nor could I reach my student mentor. One of the biggest problems I found was the ability to transmit and receive data with the teacher.
 - I thought that the teacher would be there to answer questions whenever but it seems to take longer. My help comes from the internet and a little from other students in school.
 - I did not know that we would have student mentors. I did not know how to get into my class and what to do, so the orientation helped a lot

- I had talked with students who had taken the same course already, and they said that there isn't much help. It is true. You do have a mentor, but my mentor was a college student. So he also has assignments to do and finals to study for. So there is some help, but not near as much as an on-campus course.
- I didn't really get help from my mentor, but my friends did so they just passed on what they learned from their student mentor.
- I expected to have support from my student mentor and site coordinator. But I didn't get as much as I wanted. I didn't know that I had to be that skilled in technology. The actual set up is fairly simple, but trying to find everything is actually pretty challenging.
- I didn't expect to have to take an orientation. The classes did not require technology skills. My help came from the internet and my teacher.
- I thought that there would be a better explanation about how it worked, how the specific site for that class worked. I kind of just had to figure it out myself. There were a lot of technical problems that I didn't expect. I thought that I would receive more help from my teacher.
- I thought we would have a lot more one-on-one time with our Spanish Teacher. We have to ask to get any feedback at all.
- I expected our help to come from our teacher but it ended up that I'm getting more help from the student mentor. I also thought that the books would be really helpful but they don't seem to really explain what everything means.
- I thought I'd get a lot of help from the teacher – that expectation probably comes from going to a small school. I didn't think about having an orientation – I thought it would be pretty self-explanatory.
- I wasn't expecting training and orientation and I knew that I could use the Internet as a tool for my learning, but I was worried that I would have to have technology skills and have to take a technology class because I am not good with computers at all.
- Emily-didn't know what to expect, or what she would be doing. Knew she could use internet as a tool