

# Trainer's Corner



## Online COR Courses: Going the Distance for Training

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**H**igh-quality teaching and training have always been about striving for excellence in educational practices and promoting meaningful professional growth—goals which are central to High/Scope's work. But, can these goals be achieved through online training?

In Ann Epstein's book, *Training for Quality: Improving Early Childhood Programs Through Systematic Inservice Training* (High/Scope Press, 1993), the author identifies various characteristics of effective training designs. These include connecting theory with real-life application, providing opportunities to dialogue with colleagues, and offering feedback in a supportive environment.

Online training (or "distance education" as it is often called) is an exciting and innovative way to meet these criteria for delivering quality training to early childhood practitioners and administrators. With the introduction of a six-week online course, "*The Preschool Child Observation Record (COR, 2nd Edition)*," High/Scope

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offers just such an opportunity. The course teaches trainees how to use High/Scope's observational assessment tool to effectively evaluate the progress and development of children aged two and a half to six in six categories crucial to school success (Initiative, Social Relations, Creative Representation, Movement and Music, Language and Literacy & Mathematics and Science). The online course adds a new type of learning mode to High/Scope's already existing and successful training models.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2001 there were more than three million postsecondary adults taking distance learning courses via the Internet, and the numbers keep growing. Why are online courses becoming an increasingly popular venue for taking classes? What are some misconceptions as well as advantages of learning online?

### **Not So Up Close (Geographically), But Still Personal**

Perhaps you've experienced the disappointment or frustration of wanting to participate in a course or workshop, then finding it's not offered in your geographical area or not enough folks signed up to fill the class. Perhaps you've planned a training only to have it cancelled at the last minute due to weather-related problems. In either case, you'll be able to relate to the benefit of online courses—they're available in spite of Mother Nature or geographic location. As the facilitator of the online COR course, I may be snowbound at home in the western Pennsylvania mountains but, via the Internet and e-mail, I'm accessible to students in the class any time, from anywhere—regardless of weather or road conditions.

It's also getting more expensive to travel, especially by car. If you normally need to drive or fly significant distances to take or teach classes or workshops, the online course saves on costly travel expenses. For a program whose staff has already gone through training, it's the perfect way to bring a new staff member up to speed.

### **Sounds Good, But...**

A colleague of mine was considering taking an online class, but had definite reservations. "I can't even get through Chapter Two of *Microsoft Word for Dummies*," she said. "How could I ever handle a whole

course on the computer!?" She's not alone in this initial reaction to the idea of learning online. Using computer technology to take a course can seem challenging, even daunting. However, as my friend soon discovered, most online classes are designed to accommodate computer neophytes as well as experienced technology practitioners.

Taking or teaching an online course may not turn you into the next Bill Gates, but it can enhance your knowledge of and comfort with computer technology. You'll have the opportunity to explore an Internet-based instructional site, simply by clicking on links to find and use course content; set

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up systems to track completed assignments and due dates; participate as an active member of discussion groups and chats; send and receive e-mails to and from classmates and trainers; and collaborate on small-group tasks.

The course is designed to guide the user through these activities with ease. In the High/Scope online COR course, for example, which runs for six weeks, a registration week offers plenty of time to explore various parts of the instructional website, including the syllabus for the remaining weeks. Designed in a user-friendly format, specific explanations of how to navigate the site (Translation: "What do I click on and where is it?") are included for each assignment. At the beginning of Week 3, for example, the facilitator posts an announcement about the week's activities, including

an introduction to the "group" feature with specific instructions on how to use it for small-group interaction: "Click on the 'Group' tab and find your name listed for one of the groups. Click on that group name and there will be options for e-mailing your group members." The accessible language and conversational tone make it hard for even the computer novice to go wrong.

All the articles and practice exercises are online, with the exception of the COR *Observation Items* booklet, which is mailed to each participant. (The booklet gives specific examples of child behavior for each COR item and contains the COR assessment tool.) Since the instructor, also known as the facilitator, is always just a click away, it's easy to get additional help via e-mail if assistance is needed.

You don't need much to get started, either. For the online COR class, for example, you only need a computer with Internet access and e-mail capability, and Adobe Reader (a free download) to enable you to read the course articles (if a printer is available readings can be printed out for future reference). Participants need to schedule about three hours a week on the computer plus have access to a real classroom for observing preschool children. Trainers need the same computer capabilities, plus time to give individual feedback to each student and small groups on a regular basis.

### **Am I Just a Faceless Number?**

Some people hesitate to become involved in distance education because it seems too impersonal. The lack of physical, face-to-face contact suggests an anonymous, distant relationship between student and teacher, student and student. "Not so at all!" said one of the online COR participants. "The

opportunities to share ideas with others on the bulletin board and in my small group were awesome. In just the first week, I had about twenty new ideas for taking anecdotes and organizing them.”

During registration week, students introduce themselves to one another via an electronic Bulletin Board. Every posting on the board has a “reply” button, so that all participants can respond to or comment on

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someone else’s posting. To further encourage student interaction, most assignments include a section requiring responses to other postings. This might involve, for example, giving feedback on the anecdotes that another participant has written from his/her observations. The facilitator also sets up small groups whose members work together on specific assignments. For example, in Week 3, group members are given a set of anecdotes for a hypothetical child and have to score them for that child’s COR. As a group they “discuss” their scores by e-mailing back and forth until the group comes up with one set of scores they agree on.

The facilitator provides individualized feedback on the anecdotes students submit as part of assignments and can also add comments, questions and clarification to questions and issues that come up on the bulletin board or in participants’ e-mails. As facilitator, I also answer questions about “quiz” exercises and specific assignments; suggest topics for discussion that expand

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on students’ comments; and “nag” students with reminders of weekly assignments that need to be completed.

Since e-mail offers a private, direct link between participant and facilitator, students often feel more comfortable asking questions without worrying about how others will react. Participants who might not speak up in a conventional group setting can take advantage of the one-on-one direct facilitator access to express their thoughts, indicate confusions, or ask for clarifications. Questions that occur to them

## Week 1: Observing Children and Writing Anecdotes

Each week students log on to the COR course at their convenience. All of their work is listed weekly under the Assignment button. Each week they have a reading assignment, a learning unit covering the content for the week, 2–3 exercises, discussions, group work or activities, and an opportunity to receive feedback. The following is a sample of objectives and activities for the first week of class:

**Objectives:** Participants will be able to observe children and write anecdotes that are objective and follow the COR format.\*

### Assignments:

**1. Reading:** Read the article “Anecdotes: Focusing in on Children.”

**2. Learning Unit:** Click on the link to review this week’s learning unit: *Observing children and writing anecdotes.*

**3. Discussion Board:** Sharing hints for collecting anecdotes.

When in the classroom, your primary job is to support and interact with the children. It’s important to fit your anecdotal note-taking in with what you normally do with the children. Remember, you want to record what they are typically doing during their play, not some special testing situation you have set up for them. You will want to plan ahead:

What will you record your notes on?

What will you use to write with?

How will you have these materials available during all parts of the day?

How can you keep your anecdotes brief so you can get back to supporting and interacting with the children?

- Please go to the Discussion Board, under Hints for Taking Anecdotes, and post an idea that you have for **two** of the above questions. These ideas will give others hints or tips on how to record information on the children.
- Respond to at least **one** other idea from someone else in the group. Remember to scroll down to look at all the ideas and to check back at the end of the week to see what’s been posted.

**4. Quiz: Identify the objective anecdotes.**

Click on the link for the quiz. All of these anecdotes are written about Latrice. Some are complete and are written objectively. Others need some work. Decide if each anecdote is objective and complete. Mark *true* if the anecdote is fine and *false* if it needs some work.

**5. Classroom Activity:** Write 5 anecdotes.

- Collect 5 notes on preschool-aged children from your program.
- Formalize them into anecdotes, using the format discussed in the Learning Unit, making sure your anecdotes are written objectively.
- E-mail your anecdotes to your instructor by the end of Week 1.

**6. Reflection and feedback:** Click on the link and share your reflections and feedback of this week’s work with your facilitator.

\*In High/Scope programs, anecdotes are brief written records of classroom incidents that highlight a child’s growth and development.



in the middle of the day (or night) can be sent right off via e-mail with the expectation that before long they'll have a response in their "Inbox." As one High/Scope online COR participant said, "The feedback from the instructor (and others) is wonderful. I never expected such individualization from an online course!"

Another participant offered these comments: "I not only learned a lot from both my instructor and 16 classmates during the

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course, but I've stayed connected to many of them by e-mail. We still talk about ideas or problem-solve issues that come up with the COR even though we live in different states and the class ended months ago."

### **It's Your Life!**

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of online learning for everyone involved is the flexibility and convenience that it offers. In the online COR class, for example, you can log on night or day to view the work

for that particular week: reading articles, completing informational "practice exercises" and activities, or sharing ideas with others about specific topics via discussion boards. Very few tasks require you to be online at a particular time. There are only two officially scheduled one-hour "chats" during the 6 weeks, but even these are optional for participants. The facilitator posts an announcement about date and time and invites students to "drop in any time during the hour" to ask questions, share stories, or "just say 'hi.'"

Similarly, as a trainer, you can respond with feedback in a timely fashion that also accommodates your schedule and style. Early bird? Log on at 5 AM. Night owl? Burn that midnight oil online.

Though students must "turn in" assignments by specified due dates, they can work toward those deadlines at their

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own pace. With an online course, doing the "school" work and studying can fit easily into busy lives. In fact, the National

Center for Education Statistics reports that most online students tend to be those with family and job responsibilities and limited time. So, take the dog for a walk; hang out at your children's (or your own) sporting

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events; go on that romantic picnic; or do your grocery shopping. You'll still be able to fit your online class around your personal schedule!

### **We're a Learning Community**

In the last several cycles of the online COR course, there have been participants from the East Coast, West Coast and small and large towns in between. We've interacted with students from Finland, Canada, England, Ireland, and Italy. We've enjoyed the participation of folks from geographically isolated Native American reservations and those from multicultural communities in the heart of teeming cities. Our classes have included teachers with many years of experience and those just starting out,

supervisors, classroom assistants, and administrators. The online format has allowed and encouraged us to become a diverse and vibrant learning community. The "discussions" and ideas shared every week via discussion boards in large- and small-group work offer a range of perspectives that might not be possible in regular classroom settings. Thought-provoking questions are raised and thoughtful suggestions and answers are offered by many voices.

### **Active Learning—Always the Bottom Line!**

The online educational model is a perfect fit with High/Scope's philosophy of participatory learning. Self-motivation guides the process for all learners. A supportive and individualized learning environment provides the balance and comfort needed for effective personal and professional growth. The interactions within this unique learning community facilitate change. An online educational experience is an exciting aspect of High/Scope's present and future commitment to excellence in training. Being part of this adventure in learning is one way to build and share our knowledge and skills—at our own pace, in our own place. ■