

INTERNET RESOURCES AND DISTANCE LEARNING

7.1 INTERNET RESOURCES FOR WRITING WELL

The preceding chapters of this book have given you much information about research and writing, but the Internet offers even more. Particularly good places to start your Internet search for help in writing are Web sites known as OWLs (Online Writing Labs), such as the Purdue University OWL at (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>). Several universities now offer their own OWLs, and you may want to check your own college's home page to see if it provides one. At the Purdue University OWL home page you will find a lot of helpful information. First, for people in the Purdue community, the Purdue OWL offers the following:

- One-on-one tutorials
- In-lab and in-class workshops
- Study materials for English as a Second Language
- Conversation groups for English practice
- A grammar hotline
- A collection of reference materials
- Computers and a printer
- A quiet space to study

Second, for everyone who visits the site, the OWL offers:

- *The Writing Lab Newsletter* (including on-line archives of back issues)
- resources for teachers on using the Writing Lab and OWL, including using OWL in the new English 106/108 course
- Writing Across the Curriculum resources

The Virginia Tech OWL (<http://athena.english.vt.edu/~owl/index.htm>) offers similar sources, including the following:

- GRAM—The Grammar Hotline is an e-mail based service open to the public. Come ask GRAM Owl a question!
- KIO—The “Know-It Owl,” a self-help environment, is also open to the public.
- ETE—The Electronic Tutoring Environment is a one-on-one tutoring environment. Sorry, this area is restricted to Virginia Tech students, faculty, and staff. Note: if you need to make an appointment for the face-to-face writing center, you need to visit this page for details. This is only for on-line appointments.
- Links—The links lead to other places around Virginia Tech and the world that might be of interest to writers of all levels.

7.2 SOCIOLOGY RESOURCES ON THE INTERNET

Even large catalogs cannot now hold all the potential Internet resources for sociology. Fortunately, many Internet sites specialize in creating lists of links to excellent resources. Our purpose in this chapter is to help you get started in your Internet sociology research by providing you with a list of sites that will, when you follow their links to other sites and then follow the links you find there, lead you to thousands of sources of information for your research projects. As you have probably already discovered, your college library probably offers you on-line access to books, journal articles, and many other resources on-line.

For students using a text from one of the Pearson publishers (Prentice Hall, Longman, and others), *Research Navigator*TM (www.researchnavigator.com) may be the best first stop for information related to sociology. As stated on their Web page: Pearson's *Research Navigator*TM is the easiest way for students to start a research assignment or research paper. Complete with extensive help on the research process and four exclusive databases of credible and reliable source material, including the EBSCO Academic Journal and Abstract Database, *New York Times* Search by Subject Archive, “Best of the Web” Link Library, and *Financial Times* Article Archive and Company Financials, *Research Navigator*TM helps students quickly and efficiently make the most of their research time. Access to *Research Navigator*TM is free when purchased with many new Pearson textbooks.

Melissa Payton's (2004) booklet entitled *The Prentice Hall Guide to Evaluating Online Resources* (with *Research Navigator*TM): *Sociology 2004*, is an excellent resource for Internet research in sociology. She deals with: how to find and evaluate on-line sources in sociology; and how to use *Research Navigator*TM with ContentSelect, The *New York Times* Search, Link Library; and the World Wide Web in sociology. This booklet—a \$10 retail value—is free with adoption of any Pearson Publishing text in sociology, and students also receive free access to *Research Navigator*TM with the booklet.

Perhaps a mandatory stop for any serious student of sociology is the Web page of the American Sociological Association (www.asanet.org/), which offers

links to state and international organizations involved in sociological services, along with a wide array of sociological resources.

You may not be aware that often a good starting place for research in sociology is your own college library or sociology department home page. Many colleges and universities have established sociology resource pages that are constantly changing to provide you with updated resources. Some of them are also highly entertaining and creative. The resources page entitled Sociology in Cyberspace (<http://www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/>), sponsored by the Sociology Department at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, provides a good example. Sociology in Cyberspace was established by Professor Michael C. Kearl of Trinity University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology. On the site's home page, Professor Kearl states:

I am most interested in the potential of this cyberspace medium to inform and to generate discourse, to enhance information literacy, and to truly be a "theater of ideas." This site features commentary, data analyses (hey, we've become a "factoid" culture), occasional essays, as well as the requisite links, put together for courses taught by myself and my colleagues. Additions and updates are made daily.

Among the information available on Professor Kearl's site is the following:

- General sociology resources
- Sociological theory
- Data resources and some useful Web tools
- Methods and statistics
- Guide to writing research papers
- Exercising the imagination: Subject-based Inquiries
- Op-Ed
- Search engine for site—improved for the new millennium
- Sociology of Death and Dying. The premier tour.
- The Times of Our Lives: Social Contours of the Fourth Dimension. This path takes you just about everywhere, from circadian rhythms to the implications of historical ignorance.
- A Sociological Social Psychology. Another far-ranging tour, from the nature-nurture controversy to history's thumbprint on generations.
- Marriage & Family Life. On life's home base.
- Social Gerontology. We're in the midst of an aging revolution whose impacts will be felt for centuries to come.
- Social Inequality. Reflecting on the growing gap between America's haves and have-nots.
- Gender & Society. Have gender inequalities decreased or increased with social evolution?
- Race & Ethnicity. How well is the American melting pot dissolving inequalities between racial and ethnic groups?
- Sociology of Knowledge. To what extent are different types of knowledge socially constructed?
- Demography. Are social processes ultimately demographically determined?

Sociology students may now access international resources much more easily than in the past. The United Kingdom, for example, offers a wide array of resources, including The Social Science Information Gateway (<http://sosig.ac.uk/>). The Gateway's home page describes its services as follows:

- *What Is SOSIG?* The Social Science Information Gateway (SOSIG) is a freely available Internet service that aims to provide a trusted source of selected, high-quality Internet information for students, academics, researchers and practitioners in the social sciences, business, and law. It is part of the UK Resource Discovery Network.
- *SOSIG Internet Catalogue* The SOSIG Internet Catalogue is an on-line database of high-quality Internet resources. It offers users the chance to read descriptions of resources available over the Internet and to access those resources directly. The catalogue points to thousands of resources, and each one has been selected and described by a librarian or academic. The catalogue is browsable or searchable by subject area.
- *Social Science Search Engine* This is a database of over 50,000 Social Science Web pages. Whereas the resources found in the SOSIG Internet Catalogue have been selected by subject experts, those in the Social Science Search Engine have been collected by software called a "harvester" (similar mechanisms may be referred to as "robots" or "Web crawlers"). All the pages collected stem from the main Internet catalogue. This provides the equivalent of a social science search engine.
- *Social Science Grapevine* Grapevine is the "people oriented" side of SOSIG, offering a unique on-line source of career development opportunities for social science researchers in all sectors. Grapevine carries details of relevant training and development opportunities from employers and training providers. Researchers can also make their CVs available on-line and freely accessible to all visitors to the site. Grapevine's Likeminds section provides a forum for exchange of ideas and information about potential research opportunities and partnerships. If you want to find contacts in your field you can also check the social science departmental database.

7.3 A GUIDE TO DISTANCE LEARNING

7.3.1 For Students Considering Distance Learning

Perhaps you are apprehensive about taking a distance learning course, or perhaps you want to take one but simply do not know where to begin. In either case, this introduction will help you. You will have some important questions to ask before you sign up, and this section will address some of them.

Are distance learning courses effective? Initial studies indicate that if the amount of material learned is a valid criterion for effectiveness, then the answer is yes! After reviewing more than four hundred studies of the effectiveness of distance learning courses, Thomas L. Russell, Director Emeritus of Instructional Telecommunications at North Carolina State University, concluded that distance learning and classroom courses were equally effective (Young 2000).

This does not mean, however, that the two methods are the same in every respect. When they compared distance learning and classroom introductory

psychology courses, Texas Tech psychology professors Ruth S. Maki and William S. Maki found that distance learning students scored from 5 to 10 percent higher on tests of knowledge, but that they expressed less satisfaction with their courses (Carr 2000). Furthermore, whereas students in classroom courses appreciated having more contact with their professors, their distance learning counterparts observed that on-line courses required more work than their comparable classroom experiences.

If you are a bit uneasy about taking a course in which your only contact with people will be through e-mail or over the Internet, you have a lot of company. New experiences are almost always a bit unsettling, and you may not be as comfortable with a computer as some of your friends are. The good news is that institutions that provide distance learning have gone to a lot of trouble to make your introduction to their courses as trouble-free as possible. After entering their Web sites, you will find easy-to-follow, step-by-step instructions and other sources of help on every aspect of your new education experience.

You may want to visit such a site to see what it is like. A good example is World Campus 101 (WC101), established by Penn State University and located at the following Web address: www.worldcampus.psu.edu. World Campus sociology course offerings include the following:

- Rural Organization
- Introductory Sociology
- Sociology of Aging
- Social Influence and Small Groups (On-Line Individual: one-semester delivery)
- Work and Occupations
- Gender, Occupations, and Professions

Are you likely to succeed in distance learning courses? The answer to this question depends on a number of factors, and every student will react to distance learning situations at least a little differently than any other. Among the factors that will influence your chances of success, however, are how comfortable you are with the following:

- Working alone
- Communicating with people without seeing them
- Accomplishing tasks without reminders from others
- Using computers
- Solving occasional technical problems on computers
- Learning how to use new software

How is distance learning different from classroom courses? Everything considered, distance learning and classroom courses are probably more alike than they are different. Like classroom courses, distance learning courses have an actual, living person as an instructor; actual, living people as students; and printed or printable course materials. In both classroom and distance learning,

individual initiative and responsibility are required for success, and in both settings the quality of the course depends in large part on the competence of the instructor.

The primary differences are that in distance courses you will work alone on a computer and spend your course-related time according to your own schedule, rather than attending classes. While in classroom courses other students and the instructor have a physical presence, in distance learning your contact with others is in electronic form. Interestingly, many students report spending more time on their distance learning courses than on their classroom courses.

Distance learning, therefore, offers several advantages over regular classroom courses. You don't need to commute or relocate; your learning schedule can vary from day-to-day and week-to-week; you can connect on a whim or wait until something awakens you at 2 A.M. and you are unable to get back to sleep. In addition, the interaction with other students in on-line courses is often more satisfying than you might first suspect. As messages start streaming back and forth, each student's personality is revealed. Some students send photos of themselves so that others have a better idea of who they are.

There is also a down side to on-line learning. The one factor that seems to irritate distance learners most is that they cannot get instant feedback; you can't just raise your hand and receive an immediate answer to your questions, as you can in a classroom. A related drawback, subtle but profound, is that the non-verbal responses that students unwittingly come to count on in a classroom are missing from an on-line course. Is your on-line instructor frowning or smiling as she makes a certain comment? In other words, the act of communication is sometimes more complex than we think. In addition, sometimes on-line course instructions are not sufficiently focused or specific, and it may take several communications to understand an assignment.

Another potential difficulty with distance learning is that on-line students are less likely to appreciate their options than students in classrooms. Rather than welcome the chance to make their own choices, they tend to want to do exactly what the instructor wants.

Other problems occasionally appear in on-line courses. Sometimes course materials provide ambiguous instructions and out-of-date hyperlinks. Testing can be complicated and may require special passwords. Some students must go to their local community college to take examinations, but other on-line colleges simply remind students of their academic integrity statements. If you are social by nature, you may suffer from feelings of isolation. You may find that it takes longer to establish rapport with on-line students with whom you have little in common. There may be some initial confusion as you learn how to run the system and interact effectively, or you may have difficulty interpreting messages from other students. And, a problem you may encounter with your on-line teacher may also arise with your classmates: Lack of visual contact means a loss of inflection. Humor and sarcasm are more difficult to detect in written communications. Finally, you may face what seems at times to be an overwhelming volume of e-mail featuring a lot of repetition (Hara and King 1999).

This brief survey of characteristics of distance learning may help you deal with a range of on-line situations as they arise. All in all, if you assess your own personality correctly, your chances of success in distance learning are substantial.

7.3.2 Sociology Distance Learning Courses and Distance Learning Resources On-Line

New distance learning courses are appearing daily. In 1998, in its second survey of distance education programs, the U.S. Department of Education (1998) identified 1,680 programs offering 54,000 on-line courses and enrolling 1.6 million students. These figures represent a 72 percent increase in distance learning activity from 1995 to 1998. The number of sociology courses offered on-line, however, is not extensive, but here are some tips for locating those that do exist.

Your local bookstore (as well as amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com) offers several guides to distance learning. Your Internet search for a suitable course may take some time, since offerings change continuously. You can find links to many colleges and universities at Web U.S. Universities, by State (www.utexas.edu/world/univ/state/). You will also find that Western Governors University (www.wgu.edu) provides a list of sociology courses available at several other colleges. The list of general distance education resources on the Internet changes almost daily, but here are some that you may want to examine:

Resource	Internet Address
American Distance Education Consortium	www.adec.edu
Chronicle of Higher Education	www.chronicle.com
Distance Education at a Glance	www.uidaho.edu/evo/distglan.html
Distance-Educator.com	www.distance-educator.com
International Center for Distance Learning	www.icdl.open.ac.uk
Web-Based Learning Resources Library	www.knowledgeability.biz/weblearning/
World Lecture Hall	www.utexas.edu/world/lecture

7.3.3 For Students About to Take or Taking On-Line Courses

Once you have decided to take a distance learning course, decide to study effectively. Studying for distance learning courses requires the same sort of discipline as studying for classroom courses, with one notable difference. For some people, class attendance is energizing. It helps stimulate their desire to study. This stimulus is, of course, absent for distance learners, but e-mail communication with other students and the instructor may serve the same purpose for some. In general, the same study habits that lead to success in regular courses

also lead to success in on-line courses. In order to make the point with perhaps a little humor, we offer the following scenarios about two distance learners, Sidney and Jan.

Sidney spends twenty hours per week studying for his on-line course in animal husbandry. His friends affectionately call his room at the Queens YMCA "Pompeii," for Sidney's course materials, when they can be found at all, are likely to be located under piles of laundry, empty cereal boxes, or bags of cat litter. Sidney is a night person. His most productive hours, when he is most alert, are from 8 P.M. to 1 A.M. He reserves this prime time for playing video games and watching his favorite videos, stacks of which help to keep his floor, except for an occasional few square inches, invisible. Sidney always studies in the morning, when, bleary-eyed, he most enjoys the cacophony created by his electric fan, the television, four parakeets, three cats, and his pet armadillo. Sidney studies sporadically, and the morning hours drag on as he anxiously awaits the mail, praying each day for the overdue check from his uncle Rudolph, who has promised to fund Sidney's education if Sidney would stay at least fifty miles from Rudolph's home in Casper, Wyoming. When Sidney reads the text for his on-line course, the words all slide through his field of vision without effort and without effect, and he is rarely able to recall content five minutes after it has been perused. Interruptions in study time always take priority, especially when Sidney's friend Morris, who is determined to teach Sidney's cats to play badminton, comes to visit.

Jan is a tank commander in the Israeli army reserve. When she awakens at 5 A.M., her golden retriever, Moshe, delivers the newspaper to her bed, turns on the coffeemaker, and sits at attention, awaiting his first command of the day. Jan's most effective hours are in the morning, and three days a week she spends three morning hours concentrating intently on the materials for her on-line course in financial planning. Her Jerusalem condominium is quiet during her study time not only because Jan's only electrical appliances are her coffeemaker and microwave oven, but also because her neighbors have learned that life in the neighborhood is much more pleasant if Jan is not disturbed. As she studies, her room floods with morning light, and Jan methodically crosses off her well-planned list each successive course requirement as she accomplishes it.

Sidney and Jan may not be exactly typical students, but you get the idea. To study effectively you must be organized, set aside prime time in a quiet place, and concentrate completely on your study materials.

Morgan (1991) has identified two approaches that students take to distance learning. When following the first, less effective method, which Morgan calls the *surface approach*, students focus on the signs. This is to say that they see the trees rather than the forest. They concentrate on the text or instruction itself rather than on catching the idea or spirit of what is going on. They focus on specific elements of the task rather than on the whole task. Less effective students like to memorize data, rules, and procedures, which become crutches, substitutes for the more important task of understanding concepts. They also unreflectively associate concepts and facts, failing to understand how specific facts

are related to certain concepts, and therefore confusing principles with evidence for those principles. Moreover, they consider assignments as mere tasks, or requirements imposed by the instructor, instead of as ways to learn skills or understand concepts that meaningfully relate to the goals of the course or to the realities of life.

As an alternative to this surface method, Morgan proposes a deep approach, in which the student focuses on the concepts being studied and on the instructor's arguments as opposed to the tasks or directions for assignments. The deep approach encourages students to relate new ideas to the real world, to constantly distinguish evidence (data) from argument (interpretations of data), and to organize the course material in a way that is personally meaningful.

Brundage, Keane, and Mackneson (1993) have found that successful distance learners are able to do the following:

- Assume responsibility for motivating themselves
- Maintain their own self-esteem irrespective of emotional support that may or may not be gained from the instructor, other students, family, or friends
- Understand their own strengths and limitations, and ask for help in areas of weakness
- Take the time to work hard at effectively relating to the other students
- Continually clarify for themselves and others precisely what it is that they are learning and become confident in the quality of their own observations
- Constantly relate the course content to their own personal experience

One final thought: Studies indicate that the drop-out rate for distance learners is higher than that for students in traditional courses. In part this is because distance learners tend to underestimate their other obligations and the time it will take to successfully complete their on-line course. Before you begin, be sure that you allow enough time not only to complete your course, but to do so with a reasonable measure of enjoyment. Good luck in your adventure in distance education. Armed with the information in this introduction, your chances of success are good.

DOING SOCIAL RESEARCH

Social analysis is the systematic attempt to explain social events by placing them within a series of meaningful contexts. We call this activity *social science*, and we conduct it using methods that are often quantitative in nature. These quantitative methods of research are much the same in social science as they are in any other scientific field. To understand them, we should begin with a brief look at what we mean by the terms *science* and *scientific method*.

8.1 THINKING SCIENTIFICALLY

We tend to use the word *science* too loosely, referring to things that are not strictly science. Hoover and Donovan (1995:4–5) describe three common uses of the term *science* that divert our understanding from what science really is. First, people often—and wrongly—think of science as technology. In fact, technology is a product of science. Technology results from the application of science to different tasks. For instance, the technology involved in sending people to the moon came into existence, over time, as people decided how to use discoveries they made through the application of scientific principles. Although the lunar module that landed in the Sea of Tranquillity is definitely a “piece of technology,” it is not “science.”

A second misconception is that science is a specific body of knowledge that discloses to us the rules by which the natural world works. To say that “science tells us” something is misleading. For example, it is not science that “tells” us smoking is dangerous to our health. It is people, who, investigating the effects of smoking tobacco on a variety of human pathologies, conclude that smoking is a very harmful practice. The body of knowledge these people produce is evidence,