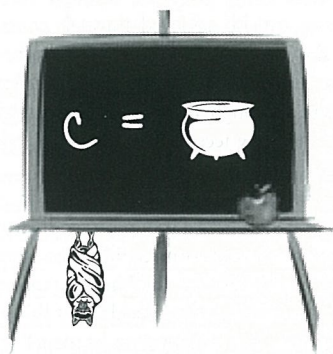# COMPUTER APPRENTICE
Pagan Schooling Online

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Thinking about taking some classes online? There's a pretty big variety out there for you to choose from, not to mention the disparity in program type, quality and how the lessons are delivered. Moreover, price is not a reliable indication of an online course's value. Making a decision about what kind of program is easier if you look at it as a progression from the self and then outward.

First of all, do a self-assessment – online learning is not for everyone. Are you comfortable using a computer? Have you had any experience with online classes? Can you manage a backup computer to use – at work maybe – if your primary one goes offline? Aside from the technology: are you self-motivated and self-disciplined? These latter factors often prove to be the most important. It can be hard to stay motivated to do daily reading and writing, or to do offline exercises when no one is 'checking up' on you.

Next, pay attention to the format of the classes: is it all text reading followed by multiple choice questions to verify you learned the material? This is the least useful type of education. Is there student-teacher interaction on a regular basis? Is the teaching/communication entirely asynchronous or is there 'real time' communication as well? Will there be exams? Can you see a syllabus beforehand so you know what you will be learning, or should be? Similarly, will you be working with other students or is your training going to be entirely solitary? There is a lot that can be learned from sharing perspectives with other students. Are study groups encouraged? How about conversations outside of the classroom?

Then take a look at the teachers. Are they former students? If so, how long has it been since they were students, or are they from other traditions? What are their credentials to teach this subject, course or program? I know it is a touchy subject in the Pagan community to question someone's training, but it shouldn't be. Do the instructors have experience teaching online (which is vastly different from traditional teaching)? How available will they be to student questions? How many students are in each class? Programs that deliberately keep the student-teacher ratio low, improving the experience for students, will often mention that; programs that go for quantity will avoid the subject.

Finally, does the school itself have a reputation, maybe name recognition? Look into that a little deeper. A glitzy ad touting how easy it is to become a witch ('Three easy lessons!') is more of a warning than an endorsement. How long has this program been online? Experience, and research based on non-Pagan programs, indicates that it takes several years to design the best courses, train faculty and implement the best technology for students. What standards are there? It's not a great sign if every student passes the first time through – that is more likely due to low standards than excellent training. Are there evaluations? What happens if you need to drop out part of the way through the class or program? Do you get a refund? Will your payment be credited towards returning to finish or to another offering?

At last, after all of these questions have been answered, you can take a look at the curriculum itself. Here there is a lot of practical knowledge gleaned from decades of research into online teaching. A great class may not translate very well to the virtual classroom – herbalism comes to mind as an example. It can be done, but a lot of thought and design needs to go into it, and that is irrespective of the teacher's skill. Well-designed online courses combine the talents of the faculty, hands-on teachers, graphic designers, instructional designers, programmers, and experts in web programs.

A great online class will have the following characteristics . . .

➤ Organisation, including a well-developed syllabus, goals and objectives as well as measures to verify those objectives have been achieved.
➤ Thorough instructions for all assignments and other course logistics.
➤ Instructionally appropriate media – graphics, audio/video, animations etc.
➤ Opportunities for interaction.
➤ Activities that encourage students to be active learners.
➤ Student resources – library, tutoring, technical support etc.
➤ Comprehensible content that's easy to read and aesthetically pleasing.

A poorly designed course will have . . .

➤ Unclear content, organisation or navigation.
➤ Unclear expectations and learning objectives.
➤ No clear communication plan.
➤ Few opportunities for students to interact with other students, instructors or the course material itself.
➤ Poor content presentation – typos, errors, text-heavy and difficult-to-read materials, technical problems etc.
➤ Few, if any, student resources.

A PRACTISING WITCH FOR MORE THAN 25 YEARS, TEACHING ONLINE FOR THE LAST DECADE, LISA IS THE AUTHOR OF MAGICKAL CONNECTIONS: CREATING A HEALTHY AND LASTING SPIRITUAL GROUP (NEW PAGE, 2007) AND THE VIRTUAL PAGAN: EXPLORING WICCA AND PAGANISM THROUGH THE INTERNET (WEISER, 2002). THE SENIOR EDITOR AND OWNER OF FACING NORTH: A COMMUNITY RESOURCE WWW.FACINGNORTH.NET, SHE IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO OTHER PAGAN PUBLICATIONS AND CAN BE REACHED AT LISA@CYBERCOVEN.ORG.