I had an email from a freshman roommate today, in which she told me that I have a reputation for not responding to emails. I laughed in a moment of self-recognition; it’s true, I’m hopeless. Not that I’m a technophobe. I spend my working day in front of my PC – I work for an IT company, after all. Every morning I log on and find a full in-box, half of which is unsolicited spam destined for immediate deletion. Personal emails are optimistically saved with the intention of one day answering them. But email is work, and there are some things, like talking to friends, that you just really shouldn’t try to do on-line, right?

So for me to end up taking an on-line course was a most unlikely conspiracy of events. First, I didn’t just delete the email from AllLearn: Alliance for Lifelong Learning without reading it, or consign it to the ever-growing “later” file. Second, I actually followed the link to the website. Third, the woman who is notoriously terrible with “non-essential” on-line communications signed up.

Try this. Go to http://www.alllearn.org and fail to find something that makes you think “yep, I want to do that.” How about a course on September 11 and its aftermath? Or one on Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro? I was seriously tempted by one on 20th-Century Irish fiction or “Shakespeare from Script to Screen.”

The course catalogue is like a gloriously skinny Blue Book, all pedigree professors and sexy titles. The one that I finally chose though, “eClavdia: Women in Ancient Rome” was irresistible. The strapline “E tu, Bruta, what was your contribution to the Roman Empire?” was like a call to arms. The faculty author of the course is Professor Diana Kleiner, Deputy Provost for the Arts at Yale. The lectures have titles like: “Women Movers and Shakers in Pompeii”, “Divas in the Second Century” and “Brainy and Battered Third-Century Women”. I struggled for, oh, five minutes.

A quick cost benefit analysis: can I afford it? Isn’t that what American Express is for? Do I have the time (4-6 hours a week)? No. Really, no, no, no. But can I manage it? Me? The Queen of all-nighters? What’s the return on investment? Ah, now there’s a question.

If, like me, your “learning experiences” these days are usually along the lines of “Finance for non-financial managers”, “Strategic Management” and “HTML for dummies”, then you are probably used to looking for the RoI. If the last thing you deconstructed was a balance sheet, you’ll understand my moments of scepticism. Learn something, just because I want to? I won’t have to show how I can put it to use? There’s no purpose, except the sheer pleasure of learning? Hefty concepts, indeed.

Still a little uneasy about the idea of on-line learning, I was reassured when the course materials arrived the week before the course started. There were two books, a set of two CD-ROMS, and instructions about when and how to start the course.

The first thing that happened was that I received an email from Katrina Dickson, the course moderator. After that, for the eight weeks of the course, Katrina sent a weekly email with details of the coming week, including assignments, discussion topics and technical advice. Our assignment for the first week was to choose an avatar, or on-line identity. This was a lot of fun, as we were choosing from Roman names and identities, and we all explained on the message board why we chose the identity that we did. I loved it that Sabina Nutrix, imperial wet-nurse, was a lactation...
I think there were about 30 of us, and the beauty of the virtual classroom became very quickly obvious as we made our introductions. We covered the globe, from North America to Taiwan, and a small European contingent including two in Italy. Ages ranged from those who graduated in the 50’s to a high school senior. There were lawyers, a doctor, teachers, entrepreneurs, a museum curator, full-time mothers, the lactation consultant: even at Yale, we could never match that kind of diversity.

The course is structured around the assigned readings and the CD-ROM lectures by Professor Kleiner, but the real backbone is the message board. Katrina initiated various "threads", posing questions for us to discuss. Some of the topics were directly related to the week’s assignments, but often they were general discussions about Roman society, Roman art and Roman women. Sometimes people really researched their posts, and Katrina would often point us in the direction of websites where we could find out more.

The stars of the show, of course, were the Roman women whose lives we looked at through the art that portrayed them, their cities, their homes, their children, their men, and their professions. From the impossibly good Livia, model of Roman feminine virtue portrayed on countless monuments and coins, to Caracalla’s poor wife Plautilla, condemned to death for being implicated in a coup attempt, and subjected to indignity even after death when statues of her were brutally defaced and left on display, we came to know the women at the top of society. From the midwives to the prostitutes who advertised their wares on shop signs at the baths in Pompeii, we became acquainted with the women at the bottom of society. Along the way we learned to appreciate how much can be said with a hairstyle, how a Roman city is put together, and about ancient birthing techniques.

The other two "Roman women" were Professor Kleiner and Katrina, Clavdia Maior and Clavdia Minor respectively. Professor Kleiner’s lectures were a joy; well-produced, authoritative, and beautifully structured. She also has a delicious line in dry professorial wit, like when she drops in a picture of Hillary Clinton when talking about Roman Empresses with attitude, politicos in their own right.

And the wonderful Katrina, on-line diva, goddess of the ether, she made it fun, she encouraged and chivvied with grace, humour and boundless knowledge.

Ditch the cost benefit analysis and take it from me, this virtual learning thing has a lot to recommend it. Doing it for fun has a lot of advantages – you can spend a lot of time pursuing threads that take your fancy, without worrying if they will come up in the mid-term. You won’t wake up in a cold sweat if you can’t finish this week’s assignment. But remember this: all-nighters are a thing of the past. Since eClavdia has finished, I have a big hole in my life, but my goodness, I’m enjoying my sleep.