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The Virtual Classroom: An Enhancement or Replacement to Traditional Education?

The processes by which learners learn and teachers teach are about as ever-changing as the seasons. Throughout time, pedagogical researchers have developed new methods for the educational process, but none have been quite as revolutionary or as controversial as e-learning. E-learning, often referred to as distance learning or online learning, provides a platform that facilitates learning through communication without requiring a face-to-face contact in the same space and time (Wahlstedt 1021). Optimistic commentators see a new world of an educational process: “Every learner can, at his or her own choice of time and place, access a world of multimedia material…immediately the learner is unlocked from the shackles of fixed and rigid schedules, from physical limitations…and is released into an information world which reacts to his or her own pace of learning (Benjamin 49; Salmon 11).” However, is this view of education universally shared? Is distance education truly a “new world” of learning, or is it only the latest “miracle” that promises solutions to problems in education and training (Huett 66)? Perhaps, the most important question: Will this process replace traditional “face-to-face” methods of learning? The answer to all of these questions is no. E-learning has, indeed, redefined education, but it has not replaced class-based learning. Teachers and schools cannot simply ignore this new technology. Rather, e-learning should be used as an interactive enhancement to the established classroom. It is a bit outlandish to imagine the day when students will be taking most, if not all, of their classes online. It is also absurd to envision the vacancy of classroom buildings due to large numbers of students who have decided to go “virtual”. Or is it *really* outlandish and absurd? Quite

frankly, a number of students across the country are already contributing to this future rationale. For example, nearly 300,000 high school students attend online classes through the Florida Virtual Schools. Among these students, many are taking these online courses for the accessibility of classes not offered in local school structures (Wood, par.2).

Taking a few classes not offered by the public school system is one thing, but problems occur when a student's primary educational experience exists online. In his article, "Preparing Students to Join the Online Learning Community," Gregory A. Differding, a graduate student of SDSU Educational Technology, focused on the sense of isolation that students get when starting out in virtual schooling. He argues that the "comfort zone" factor is not a commodity and that these students "are missing the structure, the friends, [and] the camaraderie" of a face-to-face, classroom-based education (par. 3). This is true, as the design for many e-learning environments are not very student-friendly. This creates not only technical handicaps for the student, but also social inhibitions as well. In most cases, the student has no interaction with a real life teacher who can guide him or her through the aspects of an online lesson. The sense of community that a student shares with his or her peers who, too, are engaging in the same lesson is lost, due to the absence of synchronous time and space—the definitive nature of virtual learning.

In a three-part book series on the online classroom in higher education, editors Zane Berge and Mauri Collins make the statement that "historically, we [instructors] have not done a very good job of implementing the concept of learner-centered education in distance education" (3). In this statement, the researches have acknowledged the advancement in technology that has, in turn, enhanced the education process. However, with better technology comes a greater responsibility of facilitation, thus there is currently a need for improvement within the instructional design of the e-learning environment. Instead of focusing on the technical aspects of online education, it is necessary to

develop a better social interactive element. Researchers Ari Wahlstedt, Samuli Pekkola, and Marketta Niemelä state in *The British Journal of Education and Technology* that "e-learning environments are currently more like 'buildings', i.e., learning spaces, rather than 'schools', i.e., places for learning…designers and researches can justify the need and support for social interactions in learning spaces…and most importantly, supporting the development of a user-friendly and motivating e-learning place" (Wahlstedt 1020). The team of technology and pedagogical researches found that it is more helpful to the online student to create an environment that is engaging and interactive as well as technologically savvy. Unfortunately, the current state of the e-learning environment is more like a window where one can peek into, thus further alienating possible inhabitants (Wahlstedt 1021; O'Neil 150).

While there are factors to improve upon, problems with the e-learning environment design does not rule it out as a viable source of education for today's computer literate generation of students. Due to the fast-growing populations in public school districts across the U.S., the option of distance education serves students in areas where adequate funding to provide larger facilities is a scarcity (Huett 63). The lack of qualified, professional instructors to teach courses in the classroom for some local schools has also contributed to an increase in online education users. In fact, teachers facilitating virtual learning have responsibilities to their students beyond the traditional school day, allowing for more frequent interaction and one-on-one learning experiences. For example, Katarina Williams (a Florida Virtual School student) testifies: "My online teachers make me feel like they're my private tutor" (Wood, sec. 3, par. 2). This productive learning atmosphere may go to show that online learning, in a good course and with the right instructor can be even more immediate than some classroom instruction courses.

There is a down side, however, to the "private tutor" model of engaging students' personal needs in an e-learning environment. While teachers are showing dedication to their students' education in this new virtual world, they have to find the time to prepare sustained lesson plans and provide the attention that an individual needs outside of the classroom. This can be problematic or conflicting to the instructor's personal life. With such a demand in being an instructor for virtual students, there is a shortage of qualified teachers who can facilitate the online education environment as well as keep their students engaged in the learning process. And the costs required to train traditionally class-based teachers to adapt to virtual standards would be just another log in the furnace of e-learning's funding dilemma.

In fact, one of the major reasons why e-learning is not the best stand-alone option for students' education is because local districts simply do not have the financial flexibility or the wherewithal to fund distance learning outside of the traditional school. What contributed to the Florida Virtual School's initiative success was the dual-funding project that began in 1997—a $1.3 billion plan (Wood, sec. 2, par. 2). However, a similar program in North Carolina did not have the same luxury. Unlike the FLVS, the online course programs were not state sponsored, causing local North Carolina districts to pay for student's online courses (which inevitably reached into the pockets of parents and city-wide taxpayers). It can be a serious issue when local school authorities are torn between directing funds toward developing virtual courses and the betterment of local in-class programs. Consequently, virtual learning has not gained much significant national prominence among many state and local entities. Only in a few recent cases, such as in Florida, have efforts been made to find a cost-effective method of funding online learning (Huett 66).

It is important to remember that e-learning is a very new form of education. Thus, its effect on students has been a gradual process, serving, perhaps the least homogenous group than in any learning environment. Research collected from the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research indicates that virtual learning students tend to be older and more academically motivated than the traditional classroom-based (Prabhu, par. 4). This conjecture can be confirmed in the 2003 Current Population Survey tabulations conducted by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau. This statistical study focused on Internet users by persons ages 3 and over, by type of use and selected characteristics of students and other users in 2003.

(The highlighted section of the table on pg. 5A is NOT included in this electronic paper)

Under the column "Online Courses," the table shows that the numbers for Internet users reach its peak from ages 20 to 24, or collegiate upperclassmen and graduate students (see table). The numbers are rationally the same for young adult Internet users (ages 20-29) completing online courses, which bears a distinctive witness to the primary target of distance learning environment designers (see table). What these numbers show is that distance learning is not for everyone. Consequently, some of the most academically gifted traditional students may find it difficult to even pass an online course. The pressures and responsibility that online students must take on to work when not instructed to do so, can be overwhelming for those who may not be as motivated or self-willed. Even for those students who *are* responsible, the extent of flexibility is rather loose, making it easier to procrastinate or take the "easy burden" element of online learning for granted.

Positive reception for e-learning as a parallel and/or substitute to standard curriculum has contributed, in large part, to its growth. The National Education Technology Plan for the U.S.

Department of Education has developed an action plan composed of 7 key fundamentals for implementing technology within the curriculum. One of these key fundamentals is "Support E-learning and Virtual Schools." On the official website for the U.S. Department of Education, the organization encourages states, districts, and schools to implement e-learning to meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements (i.e. qualified teachers, parental observation, and supplemental services). Sue Collins, one of the authors of the report *KCH Strategies*, and Senator of Maine, observed a rural high school in Pennsylvania. A German language teacher had resigned over the summer, leaving a vacancy for an instructor when school began in the fall. The dilemma faced here was how a German II class of 15 seniors was going to fulfill their foreign language requirement while meeting NCLB curriculum standards in order to graduate. The following excerpt depicts a hypothetical solution:

> An online German II class solved the problem. The students "attended class" in the computer lab, submitted their homework and took exams online, and participated in online discussions. With a staff member acting as a mentor, the students kept up with their studies and continued learning. At the end of the year, staff and students judged the replacement class a success thanks to the students' efforts, the quality of their online course, the skill of their online instructor, and the support of their in school mentor.
>
> (Collins)

This case study and hypothetical solution demonstrates only a fraction of the effort that the U.S. Department of Education has been making to support e-learning and virtual schools. Adamant governmental backing such as this, gives the distance learning phenomenon considerable advantages. It paints an image of the progress that can be made when e-learning is implemented within the traditional learning curriculum as a way to improve education.

The best approach to online education is the implementation of virtual learning communities. A virtual learning community, as defined in *Web-Based Intelligent E-Learning Systems*, is a group of learners who interact in a common online environment to gain understanding of subject matter (Zongmin, Ch.4; Augar 305). This e-learning environment creates that sense of presence—the sense of community that is often described as a lacking component of e-learning environments. Virtual learning communities are more like places of learning without the physical restrictions. These learning communities may provide everything needed to fully engage the learner in a virtual educational experience. Unfortunately, these communities are a rarity, thus leaving most students to fill the social void with face-to-face classroom-based learning.

The use of media (i.e. LCD projectors, DVD players, PowerPoint, streaming video, graphing software) in addition to the Internet will all improve the class-based learning experience. To give a relevant historical context, Thomas Edison stated this during the early stages of cinema: "Books will soon be obsolete in the schools. It is possible to teach every branch of human knowledge through the motion picture…our school system will be completely changed in the next 10 years" (*Integrated Media*). Nearly one hundred years since the statement was made, there is a degree of truth that books have become somewhat obsolete within the learning process. If not obsolete, the written word is definitely becoming secondary to the high tech software, fast-moving graphics, and explosive sounds used to further engage students in today's modern classroom. According to Levie & Lentz, authors of *Effects of Text Illustrations*, students who study using illustrated material versus text alone "will score 36% better on tests" (200; *Integrating Media*) Richard Mayer, another researcher, discovered even higher statistics to compliment the former: "...42% higher on test scores" (*Multimedia Learning; Integrating*

Media). So, it goes without saying that there are a number of ways for the traditional classroom to improve how students learn, in addition to incorporating distance learning within the pedagogical equation.

It cannot be denied that schools are an important and essential institution to American society. Online learning has redefined and revolutionized that institution. Considering both the advantages of e-learning versus the classroom and vice versa, it is best assumed that some form of blended learning will take place as the normal form of education for students in the classroom (Wood, sec. 5, par. 3). Students may take one or two of their courses online as a supplement for a class-based routine. Ray Shroeder, director technology enhanced learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield, states that as online learning expands, blogs, wikis, Second Life, and other virtual worlds will give way to this "mode neutral" teaching, allowing students to choose how they obtain their information, whether that be online, in the classroom, or a combination of the two (Cleaver, par. 8).

E-learning is not a solution to facilities that are run down or inadequately sized (Wood, sec. 4, par. 2) It can't be the quick fix to under funded local school districts. Online instruction also can not be the alternative to a shortage in qualified teachers. It is when the classroom—a learning foundation—is present and stable that a virtual learning community can be implemented to enhance the education process. And it is true that traditional education is slowly moving away from pen-and-paper correspondence courses, allowing for a more interactive, integrated learning environment (Berge, Collins 3:4). However, to choose one learning initiative over the other does not offer the best educational balance for most students who not only appreciate personal convenience, but also personal connection.

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