"All Aboard the Online Express…Or Get Left at the Station"

Biographical Information

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Abstract

Online education continues to grow and expand at high rates. Results of a recent meta analysis announced by the U.S. Department of Education suggest that online learning environments are as equal, if not better in some instances, than traditional face-to-face environments. Yet, many in higher education still oppose online learning for a variety of reasons. This paper discusses potential advantages and disadvantages of online learning and explores possible reasoning for the negative view regarding online learning prevalent among many in higher education.

Educators have contemplated and debated throughout history about how to effectively deliver content to students. We in higher education keep abreast of current trends and the latest findings in our respective fields. We learn about the latest brain research or teaching strategy and reflect on how we can adopt some of those concepts and ideas and integrate them into our own classrooms. Yes, we debate whether or not some of the research is really anything new or insightful. We oftentimes debate whether the new ideas will actually be beneficial to us or not. However, rarely as educators do we wholeheartedly frown upon the research and totally dismiss that information without thought and consideration. We may

not agree with the findings of a particular study or fully embrace a new teaching strategy, but I believe it is fair to say that most of us will at least be open-minded enough to review the new information and give the information a fair assessment. During my career I have found this to be true regarding almost every single field of research and body of information with one major exception: online learning. Why are so many educators in 2009 still skeptical of online learning? In the day and age of online social networks, when e-mail, webcams, and online chats are the daily norm for many individuals, why do many in higher education still rebel against the integration and incorporation of the online environment into the curriculum? What is it about online learning that concerns many in the world of academia? In this paper, I will discuss some of the potential advantages and disadvantages of online learning, and from my personal and professional perspectives, offer some possible ideas about why many traditionalists in academia continue to view online learning in a negative light.

"Online learning has definite advantages over face-to-face instruction when it comes to teaching and learning, according to a new meta analysis released" (Jaschik, 2009). One of the biggest advantages of online learning is its flexibility and convenience for students. For people with busy lives, online learning can be ideal, especially for working adults. One simply needs to consider the amount of time a person can save by completing degrees through online learning. Students do not have to travel 30-60 minutes or more each way to reach traditional bricks and mortar campuses; those campuses can now be brought to their homes and offices. As the old saying goes, "time is money." Even if tuition for some online programs is more expensive than traditional face-to-face programs, people are still willing to spend a little more in order to save wear and tear on their automobiles, to save money on travel expenses, and to have that extra time to spend in their personal lives. Accessibility to higher education is another advantage to online learning. Online learning has opened doors that had been previously closed for many in our society. Gone are the days when higher education was a privilege for only a select few in our society. More and more people have access to educational opportunities than ever before in history. Isn't this a positive thing? If we are to agree with educational, business, and political leaders, a trained and skilled workforce is absolutely vital for our future growth and success as a society. Quality learning can

and does occur in the virtual environment. The adult who can work full-time while still advancing his/her education may not have the opportunities to do so without online learning. Moreover, segments of the population who traditionally would have had few, if any, options now have greatly benefited from online learning. One of the growing segments to benefit is active military personnel, due, in part, to the Montgomery GI Bill which has provided today's soldiers greater accessibility to educational opportunities than military personnel have previously had in the past (McMurray, 2007).

Another advantage of online learning is the interaction among fellow students and between students and the instructor. That's right—I said interaction! I have been both an online student and an online instructor. I have also attended classes under a traditional face-to-face model as well as have taught in the traditional environment. Whether a course is interactive or not depends primarily on the particular instructor and how the course is designed, regardless of environment. Nevertheless, I can honestly say from my experience, that more interaction generally occurs in online environments. Utilizing such tools as discussion boards and online chats, class discussions tend to be more thorough and meaningful. Many students who may never have spoken in front of a group of people in person feel much more comfortable to voice their opinions and ideas on the computer screen. The class discussions, then, really do become diverse, exciting, and stimulating. If the instructor is concerned about less than stimulating course discussions in online environments, certain guidelines can be established at the start of the course. Lamer (2009) encourages online instructors, especially adjunct instructors, to set basic guidelines for discussions, including establishing a policy for the minimal number of words per discussion posting required as well as requiring students to integrate practical examples into their discussion posts.

With the many advantages of online learning, some potential disadvantages certainly exist as with almost everything in life. One of the potential disadvantages is academic integrity. Understandably, many in higher education are concerned about the assignments submitted by students. Is John Doe in Baltimore really doing his own work, or is someone else completing his assignments for him? However, if we think about it, though, do we know that answer even in traditional face-to-face classroom

environments? When it comes to one form of assessment, exams, yes we know that John Doe physically attended class and completed the exam himself. All of his answers are his own, unless he had wondering eyes and copied some answers from another student sitting next to him. But, I am sure that has never happened before in traditional classroom settings because instructors are able to monitor every single movement in the classroom. Yeah, right! Even on my best days, I am sure that I have taught some students in the past who still managed to sneak a look here and there without my noticing. We do not know if John Doe wrote his own term paper that he submitted, regardless of academic environment. We do not know how much effort John Doe exerted outside of the classroom when working with fellow students to complete a group project.

Many institutions have tried to resolve some of these concerns, in part, with hybrid courses. Having some on-campus class sessions throughout the term not only addresses academic integrity issues, but hybrid classes can also potentially strengthen and enhance the overall educational experience for students and instructors alike. According to the recent results of the meta-analysis study conducted by the United States Department of Education, "students who took all or part of their instruction online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through face-to-face instruction. Further, those who took 'blended' courses—those that combine elements of online learning and face-to-face instruction—appeared to do best of all" (Jaschik, 2009). On-campus class sessions can be used to provide students meeting time to collaborate with fellow students on group assignments, can expose students to information literacy resources within the library or learning center, in turn, fostering lifelong learning, and the on-campus visits can help to instill a sense of school spirit and unity that frequently is absent for online students who may never set foot on the campus.

One of the most frequently mentioned disadvantages of online learning seems to be the motivation argument. I would agree that 100 percent total asynchronous online learning probably is not the ideal learning environment for everyone. Contrary to a widely-held view by many in traditional academia, online learning is not easy. In fact, oftentimes the number of assignments increases dramatically in an online environment, and the assignments may even be assessed at higher standards, in

part, because of some of the academic integrity concerns mentioned earlier. Instructors want to uphold standards, and many believe the only way to do so in online environments is to increase the number of assignments and to lengthen the requirements of assignments. Therefore, the student's own intrinsic motivation level is even more critical for success in the online environment. While assignment deadlines exist, unlike the face-to-face environment, usually there is not a scheduled time set aside on a regular basis for attending class sessions to be reminded about upcoming deadlines and to receive in-depth feedback and guidance about the assignments due. There is nobody holding the student's feet to the fire so to speak. It is quite easy for the online student to grow frustrated and become a bit overwhelmed. Again, perhaps this suggests that a blend of online and face-to-face is helpful. Even so, a person's motivation level plays a huge role in the ultimate success in any type of academic setting. Maybe rather than viewing this as a potential disadvantage, we need to view this as a potential advantage. Online learning might help to foster a person's intrinsic motivation and drive, allowing the person to grow and develop as a whole person. This increased intrinsic motivation would certainly be a plus not just in future courses, but in the person's work environment and life as well. In traditional face-to-face, many times instructors play to the student's extrinsic motivation level by offering bonus points on the next assignment or passing around candy for a job well done. I would believe that all educators can agree that we would ideally love to see our students learn for learning's sake. An online environment might be a wonderful way to accomplish that in part.

These are some of the advantages and potential disadvantages of online learning from my perspective. So, what is it that many traditionalists in higher education despise about online learning? In my opinion, it is not so much about what they know about online learning that irritates traditionalists, but rather, what they don't really know or understand. As with so many things in life, change is never easy for people. One has two choices related to online learning: embrace it, or at the very least recognize that it is not going away anytime soon and make the best of it, or fight and rebel against online learning for as long as possible. Most traditionalists who take the latter view do so because, more often than not, the online environment is almost totally foreign to them. They attended a traditional bricks and mortar school

in person for a long period of time. Most of these same academics possess graduate degrees that were earned in the same manner. These individuals spent great amounts of time, money, and mental energy pursuing their college educations. Many served as graduate assistants or graduate fellows. They struggle with the idea that a person could complete a graduate degree, for example, from an online school in a shorter period of time than they did and never be physically present on campus. How could that be possible? This is where a little higher education snobbery comes into play, and I speak from personal experience. I have my Ph.D. from an online institution which is accredited by one of the U.S. regional accrediting bodies. In several interviews throughout my career, the topic almost always arises. I have been asked why I did not attend a traditional doctoral program. I have been made to feel less than equal by some in these situations, not because I don't possess a terminal degree, but because I received mine from an online school. Oh, my goodness! I must be subhuman! My answer to the question is that I was employed full-time as a working adult when I began my Ph.D. program and that the closest university that offered terminal degrees was two hours away at that time. I would have spent a lot of my time and money simply driving back and forth for years. Graduate assistantships and fellowships were not a reality for me at that point in my life. I enjoyed my job, and I did not want to leave. Plus, I had bills to pay. I normally quiet most of the doubters in the room when I inform them that the chairperson of my dissertation committee had earned multiple graduate degrees from an Ivy League institution.

Surely, the online school, then, must be cutting corners or does not have the same academic standards as the traditional brick and mortar environment. Again, the structure of the course and the methods utilized are vital (Glenn, 2009). A well-designed and well-developed online course should mirror its on-campus face-to-face counterpart. The goals, objectives, and learning outcomes basically need to be similar. Assignments might differ somewhat, and the mode might differ, but ultimately the courses should, in essence, be the same course. Some online opponents believe that is not possible. However, I would ascertain that it is not only possible, but it should be the standard that we follow in higher education. If someone is concerned that a student in an online environment will not be able to hear his lectures, the instructor can record the lectures and include them in the online course. If an instructor is

concerned that her online students will not be able to ask questions for clarification regarding an upcoming assignment, the instructor should plan on keeping virtual office time to answer questions from online students. Again, instructors at many institutions are already doing these types of things. Perhaps the traditionalists who are anti-online learning should become a little more open-minded about the concept and be willing to learn about it. Mentoring from respected colleagues who are advocates of online learning can be one way for that dialogue to begin.

The bottom line is that, like it or not, online learning is here and it is here to stay. Many traditionalists seemingly struggle with that notion. We are so far beyond the debate of whether or not online education should exist. Online learning is not going to magically disappear so we can all return to solely bricks and mortar. Commenting about the results of the recent online learning meta analysis, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated, "This new report reinforces that effective teachers need to incorporate digital content into everyday classes and consider open-source learning management systems, which have proven cost effective in school districts and colleges nationwide" (Jaschik, 2009).

Some in higher education cringe when they hear that we are in a business setting competing for students, but we really are basically in that situation today. With more and more private for-profit institutions emerging as global leaders within the online arena, smaller, private non-profit institutions as well as large, public institutions have begun to enter the online learning environment in order to be competitive. There are cases of failures and there are success stories. The lesson here is for people to do their homework before jumping into online learning head first. However, once research is conducted and a school knows what its strategic plan is for online learning, opportunities are abound. The one thing that institutions cannot afford to do is sit by while others are getting on board in some fashion with the online express! It is moving forward rapidly and will only continue to do so in the foreseeable future. If the results of the recent meta analysis are accurate, many institutions not only can become more competitive by expanding online offerings, but they also might even be able to improve and enhance what is currently being delivered on their campuses. All aboard and full-steam ahead!

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