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Title
Distance Education Versus The Traditional Classroom

Distance Education versus the Traditional Classroom

Comparing the traditional classroom to the virtual one. Does being physically present in school make a difference?

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Take the student away from the classroom. Separate the teaching and learning by location and time. Forget face to face communication, stuffy lecture halls, or even peers. Is this really education?

Distance Education

Distance education is any form of learning in which the teacher is not present at the same time or place as the student. This includes instructional videos, CD-ROM programs, or interactive "real time" lectures and office hours online via webcam. The purpose of this kind of education is to deliver, through technology, education to students who are not physically in the classroom. Students do not attend classes in person but in a place and time of their own choosing. Teachers and students communicate on their own schedule, by electronic means (Keegan, 14).

Distance education traces its roots to the early 1700s when, for the first time, a university professor Caleb Phillips taught short hand by mail correspondence (Holmberg, 13). In the mid 1960s, Charles Wedenmeyer of the University of Wisconsin began a program entitled *Articulated Instructional Media Project* (AIM), which utilized a variety of communications technologies to provide education to an off-campus population. Its accessibility and groundbreaking use of electronic media such as television and radio was what made this project so innovative, securing its position as the model for future distance learning (Moore, 33).

With the advent of the Internet and webcam and the prevalence of computers and computer technolo-

gy, distance learning became more and more possible, as well as more and more and more popular. In 2006, the Sloan Consortium reported that more than 96% of the largest colleges and universities in the U.S. offered online courses and that more than 3 million students were taking at least one online course in the fall of 2005 (Sloan 2006). Although distance education has been praised for its growing population of off-campus students, its innovative pedagogy, and the advantages of learning away from the classroom, very little is known about the effectiveness of these methods in the long run.

Distance education is revolutionary in that it allows many freedoms and advantages that were never imaginable in a traditional classroom. Distance education allows those with disabilities to access education if they cannot attend a physical campus. It allows those in rural areas to attend schools "in the city" and to have expanded and enhanced access to postsecondary education and training opportunities. Those with financial difficulties may enroll in web-based courses offered at a more modest price. Distance education also makes completing a degree possible at any age regardless of lifestyle (Distance-education.org). Flexibility and convenience are some of the biggest advantages of separating the learning from the classroom and enable a greater proportion of students to continue their education who otherwise would be ineligible.

In addition, many proponents of distance learning argue that it is an even better mode of learning than in a physical classroom setting. The fact that you can pause lectures and rewind allow knowledge to be more readily absorbed and permit students to learn

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at their own pace. Also, holding a discussion in an online forum allows students to have a written record of the things said in class and allows students who are afraid of speaking in front of peers to communicate to fellow students and their professors through text emails, separate from the social environment of a typical classroom (Thrope, 271). Allowing students to respond on their own time produces more well rounded, thoughtful, meaningful, and reflective responses than does calling on a student in class and giving them only a small amount of time to come up with an answer (Hawkes 2001).
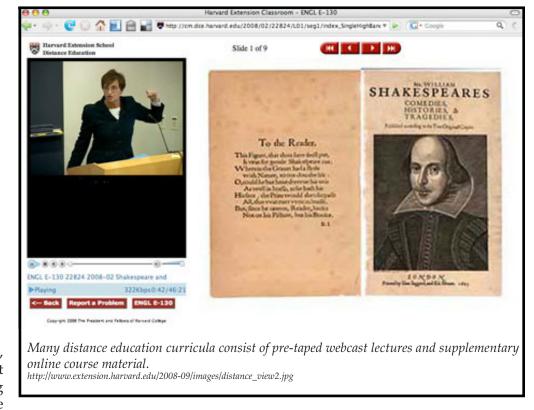
ELIMINATING THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

However, distance learning also has deep, ingrained problems. The separation of the action of teaching and the reaction of learning causes a myriad of problems. Having purposeful educational leadership, challenging students, actively involving student with teacher, and maintaining a positive and orderly climate comprise four of five components of the "five factor model" that has been used for decades as the basis of much school effectiveness research (Edmonds 1978b). Achieving all of those factors in distance education is difficult and strained, if not impossible. Evidently, there is a certain atmosphere in being physically present and interacting with a human teacher in a set time and place that is crucial to learning. When there is separation between

teaching and learning, the instructors' responsiveness to student needs is compromised, instructors are unable to be flexible in changing classroom dynamics, and communication is certainly inadequate compared to the traditional system.

Similarly, directing student discussion and com-

Many distance education curricula consist of pre-taped webcast lectures and supplementary online course material.
http://www.extension.harvard.edu/2008-09/images/distance_view2.jpg

munication through the Internet is challenging and different from dialoguing face to face. A study done by Mary Thorpe analyzing a group of London students showed that in a distance education classroom participation waned, with most students participating in group projects at the last minute and ignoring the online discussion features designed to house an interactive forum.   Collaborative work between a group

of students was a near failure, since each student was still going by their own schedule and would wait until the due date to turn in any individual work, defeating the purpose of a collaborative group project (Thorpe, 276). Those groups that met face to face to work on their projects did significantly better, made more progress, and had a definite direction throughout their timeline compared to those who were communicating solely through their computers (Thorpe 280). In distance learning, the idea of the classroom as a community is shattered, with each student's achievement perceived as independent rather than as part of a class working towards a common goal. It has been argued for decades by some of the biggest names in education like Hull and Vygotsky that the greatest learning and personal growth comes from cooperation and group work. Learning can be viewed as "a social-cognitive interactive process," (Vygotsky, 76) with intellectual growth inexorably tied to social interactions. But this important pillar in furthering education is ignored because it is very difficult to coordinate effectively through distance learning.

Additionally, the individualistic aspect of distance learning, as much of the process is a solo one, does not work for all students. Many students require an authoritative figure's presence in order to motivate them to participate actively, to pay full attention to lectures, or to invest more in study or assignments. When these students are under the conditions of perceived control and are aware of outcome expectations, power dynamics, or other social pressure, they tend to perform better than if left to self-efficacy (Schunk 221). With the majority of the course going unsupervised (including test taking, in some cases), distance education requires much self-control and self-motivation, which are traits not all students have developed.

DISTANCE LEARNING VS. THE PHYSICAL CLASSROOM

Surprisingly, some of the most alluring features of distance education—the ability to do work on one's own schedule and freedom from a physical classroom—are, in practice, not entirely true. In the same British study by Thorpe, students complained that time constraints were much heavier than they thought. While books could be taken anywhere, students had to sit at home in front of their computer (282). Heavy timelines were mandated to ensure the students were being held accountable for their work (since all the learning was unseen by the instructor). Manda-

Much of intellectual growth is a social process, shaped through face-to-face interactions with both teachers and peers.
http://www.pacificu.edu/admissions/images/admissions_main_03.jpg

tory discussions held at certain times became the norm since students, left to their own time scale, would not participate effectively otherwise. It appears that freedom to choose the time and place for learning, which is thought of as the core advantage of distance education, is actually somewhat still limited (Thorpe 276). In some aspects, the foundations of a physical classroom are simply being reproduced (and complicated). While more convenient in some ways, distance education poses many hurdles that seem to be regressive.

In a comprehensive review of 86 studies dated from 1990 to 2002, Shachar and Neumann found a significantly lower achievement level for students in distance education classrooms compared to physical classrooms (Shachar 2003). In a larger study summarizing over 500 studies, traditional physical class-

rooms were more effective than their distance education counterparts in terms of student attitudes and retention (Bernard 28). Besides raw data, a study done by Allen in 2002 summarized 25 studies on distance education, and results showed that, after completing a distance education course, the greater majority of students favored the traditional classroom instruction (Allen 90). This preference for the traditional classroom was seen again in the Bernard study (28). The mounting evidence in favor of the physical classroom, however, is definitely not a permanent phenomenon, and these studies do have their limitations (with some studies, using different criteria, showing contradictory data, etc.)

THE FUTURE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Prejudice regarding the legitimacy of distance education is a huge hurdle to overcome. However, with knowledge of the shortcomings of distance education also come new tools to help overcome these obstacles. Better, more interactive technology is being invented and/or utilized. Different methodology and pedagogy are being implemented, and better regulations over pacing and control are just beginning (Thorpe 275).

The ever-growing popularity of distance learning is a work in progress, and there are definite advantages as well as disadvantages to this education phenomenon. Online education is no longer a radical idea but a reality, with people completing classes, programs, and degrees at a rapid pace. Distance learning is drastically changing the way education is perceived, managed, and received, both now and in the future for years to come. Though there are many difficulties and shortcomings facing distance education, it is still in its prototypical stages. Many leaders in the distance education movement are confident that in time, distance education will be as good an alternative (if not better) than the physical classroom. The evolution of this revolution still remains to be seen.

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