Navigating the Online Learning Landscape

Wendy Drexler, Ph.D.

Preparing students to learn in a new and different way

Online learning is grabbing the headlines and gaining renewed attention in K12 and higher education. From flipped classrooms to massively open online courses, the landscape is evolving. Navigating course options is particularly challenging in K12 as many states are launching virtual schools, changing graduation requirements, partnering with for-profit ventures, and experimenting with blended models. Considering the tremendous growth, most people have little if any exposure to online learning environments. As a result, perceptions are informed by a single experience, negative hearsay, or an imagined concept of online learning based on memories of the traditional classroom. Video lectures and multiple-choice quizzes come to mind. Yet, the highest quality online courses may not include lecture or video. How can parents, students, and school administrators make good decisions with so many confusing options?

Many flavors of online learning

There are as many different forms of online learning as there are classroom models. General opinions about online quality vary. Yet, a 2009 US Department of Education meta-analysis found "on average, students in online learning conditions performed modestly better than those receiving face-to-face instruction" (US Department of Education, 2009, p. ix). Quality truly depends on the course design and teacher facilitation. This is true whether in a classroom or on a computer, on a mobile device, in a virtual world, or playing an educational game. Well-designed learning experiences happen in all environments just as poor teaching takes place in classrooms and online. This is not to deny online learning presents new and unique challenges.

The language of online learning

The first step toward a better understanding of online learning is a grasp of the terminology. Online learning and eLearning refer to all forms of computer or electronically supported teaching and learning. eLearning is often used in corporate training environments whereas online learning is used more in academia. Some people use these terms interchangeably. In formal education, online learning is usually delivered via an online platform known as a learning management system (LMS). Examples of learning management systems include Moodle, Sakai, Blackboard, Canvas, and a host of other proprietary platforms.

Blended or hybrid learning refers to a combination of classroom and online learning in which students spend some period of time face-to-face and conduct the remainder of activities in an online space. A flipped classroom is a model in which students watch video lectures, how-to videos, or other content delivery as homework and spend class time working in small groups, problem solving, or completing relevant projects that apply the content. In essence, the traditional classroom/homework model is flipped.

While there are many formats for online courses, most include some combination of lessons, activities, projects, discussions, and graded assignments. They may or may not include lecture videos, real-time conferencing, video chat, interactive simulations, or games. Again, it depends on the instructional design. Massively open online courses (MOOCs) are free courses in which students from around the world are welcome to join. MOOCs have been offered with as many as 50,000 students enrolled. These formats get a lot of attention based on sheer numbers, but don't represent the same format experienced by students in a typical for-credit course. It's impossible for an instructor to respond personally to a class of thousands. In high quality, for-credit courses, the student-to-teacher ratios are similar to the traditional classroom. There is considerable interaction with the instructor. Students

WENDY DREXLER

Director of Online Development
Brown University
Providence RI

are encouraged to communicate with the instructor and each other as they are guided through the learning process.

Why should K12 students consider an online course?

A few states require completion of at least one online course as a requirement for graduation. Online courses provide more subject options, especially for students in smaller schools with limited course availability. Online courses can free-up traditional classroom time to participate in other activities such as travel, sports, music, arts, advanced course work, and hobbies. Options for students who wish to take online courses include state-supported virtual schools, for-credit and non-credit courses offered by colleges, and a growing number of independent school offerings. A few examples include the Online School for Girls, KiSKI Virtual School for Boys, and Global Online Academy. State-supported examples include Florida Virtual School, Michigan Virtual School, and Colorado Virtual Academy. There are many more. The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) developed a series of questions for school administrators to consider when contemplating online learning. They support a thoughtful, strategic approach that covers teaching and learning, professional development, ethics, assessment, marketing, and infrastructure. Schools are becoming more flexible in awarding credit and recognizing online courses taken from other accredited institutions.

How can students be more successful in online courses?

Online course offerings are often asynchronous. This means the learner determines when and where he or she will do the work. For traditional students accustomed to a highly structured, class-period model, it can be difficult to adjust to the self-directed pace. Time management is critical. Conversations with instructors and classmates often take place in text-based discussion forums. Solid writing skills are required for effective com-munication. Students should schedule dedicated time to complete course requirements and take the responsibility to reach out early and often to instructors and classmates who will serve as partners in the learning process. The amount of time spent online and the need to research topics beyond the boundaries of the learning platform demand increased digital responsibility and digital literacy skills. Students should learn to respectfully contact experts and behave responsibly with fellow students. Organizing and synthesizing content takes on a whole new meaning when most of the world's information is at your fingertips.

It is curious how much time is spent supporting faculty in online teaching and how little is spent preparing students to learn in a new and different way. The benefits of online learning, however, are worth the effort. Well-designed courses are more student-centered, offering a project or activity-based approach in which students are actively engaged versus passively sitting back and listening. Written communication is enhanced and digital literacy increased. This article represents a moment in time poised for even more rapid change. The foundational skills required to learn successfully in this evolving environment should be supported in both online and face-to-face classrooms.

Resources

US Department of Education Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies

http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf

NAIS Online Learning Guide

http://www.nais.org/Articles/Pages/Online-Learning.aspx

NAIS Case Studies of Exemplary Blended and Fully Online Learning

http://www.nais.org/Articles/SiteAssets/Pages/Stories-of-Excellence/NAIS-Excellence-Booklet-0924.pdf

International Association for K12 Online Learning iNACOL

http://www.inacol.org/

Virtual Independent School Network

http://www.vis-network.org/