

A Consideration of Online Learning

by Theresa Capra

Online learning has become a permanent fixture on college campuses. For the past decade, enrollment in online courses has grown faster than the overall student body throughout higher education.¹ This phenomenon is not surprising and, in fact, is part of a history of people seeking more flexible alternatives to traditional, face-to-face instruction. For example, the University of Chicago began to offer correspondence courses through the mail in the 1890s. Then, during the 20th century, people experimented with radio and television to deliver instruction. But when a browser for the World Wide Web was developed in the 1990s and Internet courses with images and audio ensued, many people believed they would leave traditional courses in the dust.² However, like their predecessors, it's probably a case of trial, and mostly error.

The benefits of online learning are undeniable. Barriers inherent in traditional learning such as time, space, location, and access are eliminated with asynchronous Internet courses.³ But all that glitters is not gold. In its present form, online learning is far from a substitute for traditional instruction and may be damaging to certain students, even faculty. In a previous *Thought & Action*, Susan Meisenhelder exposes the fallacies and problems swirling around massive open online courses (MOOCs).⁴ This article will further the discussion by showing that the issues are

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“Phone Booth” is part of a series of photographs titled *Kid City* by Suzanne Camp Crosby, a full-time faculty member at Hillsborough Community College in Florida. For more of her work, visit www.suzannecampcrosby.com.

not limited to rogue MOOCs, but instead permeate an established and lucrative staple on most college campuses: online courses.

INCREASED FAILURE AND ATTRITION

Similar to MOOCs, credit-bearing online courses are exacerbating achievement gaps, particularly for academically weak students. Immense investments in technology, training, and technological support for students have resulted in well-oiled machines that are not always pedagogically sound.⁵ Their singular mission—to increase student access to education by providing asynchronous courses—may not be feasible for many students, especially low-income, first-generation, academically underprepared, inner-city and rural students, according to several studies from the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University.⁶ Ironically, many institutions tout the ability of online learning to overcome the obstacles generally encountered by nontraditional students (e.g., no transportation or child care) when pursuing higher education.

This problem is not exclusive to community colleges. For many institutions, including four-year universities, online education is creating an interesting paradox: growing demand and enrollment coupled with higher withdrawal and failure rates. The Babson Survey Research Group, which has tracked online learning in the U.S. for the past decade, reports that retention in online courses is a growing concern for college administrators.⁷ Additionally, those for-profit, fully online institutions that instigated the virtual craze are leaving a dubious track record. The largest of the pack, the University of Phoenix, was placed on probation by accreditors in 2013 due to multiple issues including low graduation and retention rates, and high incidences of defaulted student loans.⁸

Coincidentally, many studies have presented a positive response by students to online learning. Often they favor online learning and perceive it to be just as good, or even better, than traditional classroom settings.⁹ Additionally, the Babson Group has reported that faculty and academic officers increasingly believe that online learning is tantamount to traditional instruction despite issues with retention.¹⁰ These factors, coupled with unyielding student demand, have generated the perception that online learning is the wave of the future, the conqueror of those “talk and chalk” ways. But it may be preemptive to put down the chalk. As it turns out, this perception is overstated. The Community College Research Center has also uncovered that much of the favorable research about online education deemed “rigorous” by a U.S. Department of Education meta-analysis was based upon “high-achieving” students, or “abridged” educational settings (e.g., professional development activities).¹¹ Furthermore, upon closer examination, the large body of literature concerning online education is conflicted, inconsistent, and even exaggerated.¹²

The question of whether or not online learning is rigorous has been a common subject for researchers.¹³ Perhaps a less investigated question is whether or not online courses are perfunctory. Anyone who has taken or taught an online course

has probably found it, at least to some extent, to be a monotonous experience. Of course, we all have endured a snooze fest or two in face-to-face settings, but the nature and design of most online courses can amplify the tedium that often results from regimented learning. It has been demonstrated that online courses typically keep students quite busy with layers of similar assignments that require hours of typing and reading but provide little opportunity for deeper application or cognitive stimulation.¹⁴ The posting of lecture notes that mirror the textbook; the creation of PowerPoints that speak key points; quizzes generated from test banks; and superficial discussion board questions culminate to produce a perfunctory, dry

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experience. In this case, managing the workload becomes the learning objective. Courses designed in this manner may appear rigorous because of the amount of work required, but they are not rigorous in a cognitive sense. For teachers, it is a similar situation; reading repetitive discussion threads and answering copious e-mails from faceless students can be a burdensome task.

THE SOCIAL ABYSS

It might seem logical to presume that modern students, especially Millennials for whom texting and status updates are preferred over conversation, would naturally mesh with online learning. This is not true. Online courses can be isolating, impersonal, and disengaging, even for tech savvy young adults. Research has suggested that high rates of failure and attrition in online courses may result from a sense of perceived isolation.¹⁵ Many instructors attempt to produce social interactions by creating mandatory discussion boards that require a minimum number of peer responses. However, these boards frequently end up being a detached chore.

Instructors are not inoculated from this social anonymity. In contrast to face-to-face teaching, faculty rarely engages in pedagogical dialogue about online instruction. Observations in online classrooms are not common resulting in limited opportunities for reflection. Online professors tend to “teach” and “develop” courses in isolation.¹⁶ These practices contradict some of the basic tenets underpinning the teaching profession, which suggest that reflection and collaboration help us develop our practice.

Research that has examined the impact of online learning on student achievement and satisfaction has consistently demonstrated the significance of the course instructor.¹⁷ But what makes an excellent online teacher? Most research that has attempted to address this question has based the answer on best practices. These

practices, which include prompt e-mail responses, timely grades and feedback, and a steady presence within the course shell, are helpful. However, they do not necessarily produce a high-quality learning experience. Other research has noted that students have extreme difficulty perceiving instructional presence even when an instructor is following best practices.¹⁸ According to Mark Edmundson, a professor of English at the University of Virginia, online teaching is a “one-size fits all endeavor.” There is nothing that an online teacher can give a student that a good book can’t.¹⁹

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their favorite teachers, their descriptions usually reveal the importance of intangibles; abstract and elusive qualities that great teachers exude: passion, enthusiasm, humor, just to name a few. Unfortunately, this dynamic is very difficult to transport to an online classroom. As Edmundson pointed out, “online teaching is a monologue.” Thus, great online teachers are defined by unmemorable best practices such as answering emails, updating announcements, or submitting grades.

MANAGERS OR TEACHERS?

In her *Thought & Action* article, Meisenhelder pointed out that faculty are largely absent from the discussion of MOOCs and their place in higher education.²⁰ Well, the problem is a lot closer to our front door; standard online college courses may be diminishing the value of faculty. Many institutions are removing the need for faculty expertise during the course-design process. Colleges are moving more toward the creation of cookie-cutter, ready-made courses that can be rolled over to anyone, anytime. Textbook publishers are also aiding in this effort by supplying most of the material necessary to develop a fully online course—plug and play compatible with the major learning management systems.

On the one hand, these prototypes can ensure consistency for students, on the other, they completely remove any individual contributions that faculty can, and should add. And while it’s true that even face-to-face courses are bound by a designated curriculum and course outline, this is merely a skeleton; in person, the teaching and learning process is dynamic and fluid with instructors who consistently add, subtract, enhance, or extend, based on the contours of the classroom.

When a course has been prefabricated, an instructor is immediately removed and disconnected from its content. Some institutions, especially for-profit ones, realize this, and consequently try to track instructional time the same way some

instructors tally (and attempt to force) student participation. This usually entails a minimum amount of online activity and forum postings—a tangible footprint to “measure your teaching.” These policies attempt to define efficacy, for both teacher and student, with a rubric built around compliance rather than depth of learning or individual development. Of course teachers and students must be present, regardless of the type of classroom. But under these circumstances, learning becomes sterile; a business model that is boxed and packaged, limiting the potential for emergent and profound learning experiences.

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THE FUTURE OF ONLINE LEARNING

Despite these many challenges and limitations, many college administrators have declared the expansion of online learning as paramount to their institution’s futures.²¹ Online courses can potentially attract new students, boost enrollment, increase revenue, and use instructors from remote locations—without much in the way of infrastructure costs. Additionally, their convenience and flexibility are irrefutable. However, putting more courses online is unlikely to benefit anyone without acknowledgement and closer examination of the issues that impede student success and diminish their retention. So, as colleges all over continue to roll out online offerings, what can be done to engage and retain students?

First, institutional efforts should move beyond prepping and orienting students for an online course and examine the depth and level of learning that is occurring. Although significant attention has been paid to the role of orientations and readiness surveys for improving retention, research warns against an over-reliance on these items because students may not participate or perceive them to be beneficial.²² Additionally, most orientations are designed to facilitate an understanding of the technology and learning platform rather than the actual expectations of the learning environment, and more specifically the instructor. And while orientations are definitely important; we need to move beyond them to more consistent support mechanisms that can sustain student success throughout the semester. For example, assigning stronger and more seasoned students as peer leaders for some incentive, and providing mentoring for inexperienced online learners can decrease withdrawal and attrition.

Next, common practices that underscore the design of online courses should be reviewed and revamped. It’s true that the asynchronous nature of online courses

limits the scope of interactions while activities are constrained by technology. But current design practices may amplify these inherent weaknesses. Often, instructors begin the design process by considering the content and learning objectives—usually embodied in the textbook. Activities, assignments, and assessments are then built around these items and minimally determine whether or not a student did his or her homework. Student interactions are manufactured with mandatory discussion boards that are typically repetitive and dull. Instead, a less-is-more approach should be applied, with fewer, more substantial activities.

Similarly, the principle of engaged learning can help improve the design of online courses. In simple terms, all activities and assessments should be designed to challenge and engage students on the upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.²³ With engaged learning, creative uses of technologies such as videos, virtual chats, and discussion boards are viewed as vehicles of expression rather than the main teaching tools.²⁴ Engaged learning also allows students to establish their own learning goals, to seek out and evaluate appropriate sources for learning, and to share them with peers.²⁵ An example of this can be posing a question for the weekly topic and asking students to track down sources to aid in its understanding instead of composing canned responses. Students can share sources, perhaps in a class repository or even on a discussion board, and collectively determine their worth.

Why have a discussion board if a primary objective is to ascertain whether or not a student read a textbook chapter? There is probably little need for students to select and discuss varying chapter questions when the goal is to assess individual understanding. Likewise, if there is a designated truth or series of facts a student must arrive at, as is the case in many survey courses, a discussion forum is unsuitable. Problem-based learning, which is a constructivist approach that presents an ill-structured problem leading to multiple perspectives, has been found to be an effective way to engage online students in the course material.²⁶ With this premise in mind, perhaps mathematics and science courses could reserve discussion boards for mandatory postings about a struggle, strategy, or eureka moment rather than rote answers of textbook questions.

Conclusions about the rigor of an online course should not pivot on the amount of tasks that are present; a meaningful workload should be the preferred goal. Of course, college courses require work and college itself requires time management and discipline. But many undergraduate online courses may be serving up busy work to compensate for the time that students would have spent physically in the classroom. Instead, the depth of the learning should take precedent when evaluating rigor.

Presently, online learning is the most viable alternative to face-to-face instruction on a college campus. Even hybrid and flipped models, which are gaining popularity, still require a consistent campus presence.²⁷ As a faculty member in a community college who has taught online for 10 years and conducted extensive research on the topic, I have witnessed both the potential and detriment to online learning. I have come to believe that it's not the renaissance of learning so fre-

quently extolled, at least for most undergraduates. It's becoming painfully clear that we need to rethink Internet courses across the board. 

ENDNOTES

1. Allen and Seaman. "Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States."
2. McGivney, "Adult Student Persistence in Online Education: Developing a Model to Understand the Factors that Affect Adult Student Persistence in a Course."
3. Smith and Stephens, "Marketing Education: Online vs. Traditional."
4. Meisenhelder, "MOOC Mania."
5. Stanford-Bowers, "Persistence in Online Classes: A Study of Perceptions of Community College Stakeholders."
6. See Jaggars and Bailey, "Effectiveness of fully online courses for college students: response to a department of education meta-analysis" and Jaggars and Xu, "Online and hybrid course enrollment and performance in Washington State Community and Technical Colleges."
7. Allen and Seaman, *op cit.*
8. See Blumenstyk, "Panel Recommends Reaccrediting of U. of Phoenix, but Notes Concerns" and Kirkham, "University of Phoenix Accreditation Hits Snag as Panel Recommends Probation."
9. See, for instance, Brophy, "The Impact of E-Learning on Student-Engagement," Reisetter and Boris, "What Works: Student Perceptions of Effective Elements in Online Learning," pp. 277-91, and Menchaca and Bekele, "Learner and Instructor Identified Success Factors in Distance Education," pp. 231-48.
10. Allen and Seaman *op cit.*
11. Jaggars and Bailey, *op cit.*
12. See, for instance, Herbert, "Staying the Course: A Study in Online Student Satisfaction and Retention," Jaggars and Bailey, "Effectiveness of Fully Online Courses for College Students: Response to a Department of Education Meta-Analysis," and Street, "Factors Influencing a Student's Decision to Drop-Out or Persist in Higher Education Distance Learning."
13. See, for instance, Park and Choi, "Factors Influencing Adult Learners' Decisions to Drop Out or Persist in Online Learning," pp. 207-17, and Rolfe, "Getting the Bugs out of the Distance Learning Experience," pp. 1-35.
14. See Capra, "Online Education from the Perspective of Community College Students within the Community of Inquiry Paradigm," pp. 108-21, and Stanford-Bowers, "Persistence in Online Classes: A Study of Perceptions of Community College Stakeholders."
15. See Morris, "Anytime/Anywhere Online Learning: Does it Remove Barriers for Adult Learners" and "Exploring Community College Student Perceptions of Online Learning: Community of Inquiry."
16. Duncan and Barnett, "Learning to Teach Online: What Works for Pre-Service Teachers."
17. See, for instance, Aragon and Johnson, "Factors Influencing Completion and Non Completion of Community College Online Students," pp. 146-58, Capra, "Online Education from the Perspective of Community College Students within the Community of Inquiry Paradigm," pp. 108-121, McGivney, "Adult Student Persistence in Online Education: Developing a Model to Understand the Factors that Affect Adult Student Persistence in a Course," and Herbert, "Staying the Course: A Study in Online Student Satisfaction and Retention."
18. See Capra, *op cit.* and Stumpf, McCrimon, and Davis, "Carpe Diem: Overcome Misconceptions in Community College Distance Learning," pp. 357-67.

19. Edmundson, "The Trouble with Online Education."
20. Meisenhelder, *op cit*.
21. Allen and Seaman, *op cit*.
22. See Harrell, "Increasing the Success of Online Students," pp. 36-44, Lorenzo, "Online Education Learner Engagement and Academic Success Strategies at Community Colleges," pp. 2-3, and Wilson, "An Investigation into the Perceptions of First-Time Online Undergraduate Learners and Orientation Events."
23. For a description of Bloom's Taxonomy, go to: ww2.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm.
24. Brinthaup et al., "What the Best Online Teachers Should Do."
25. Stanford-Bowers, *op cit*.
26. Amelink and Hall, "Problem-Based Learning: Designing Online Courses Using a Constructivist Approach."
27. For definitions and descriptions of hybrid and flipped classes, visit: www.eclass4learning.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Blended-Learning-Keynote.pdf

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