



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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CHALLENGING THE MYTHS ABOUT ONLINE LEARNING

Myth 1: Classroom learning is superior to online learning.

The quality of learning experiences in general is often unmeasured and unknown, and it varies widely based on class size, student preparation, instructor skills, the quality of the curriculum materials, and a host of other variables. Just as there is good and bad classroom instruction, there is good and bad online learning. Moreover, there is a large and growing body of evidence (www.nosignificantdifference.org) that demonstrates that, generally, there is no significant difference between classroom instruction and online learning. This is not surprising given that online learning at many institutions is simply delivering the classroom course with the aid of technology. The real question should not be whether online learning (either fully online or as a hybrid companion to in-class instruction) can be as good as classroom-only learning, but rather whether it can help improve learning overall. Can the effective use of online tools help our students' learning experiences be more engaging and customized, less passive and time constrained, and better adapted to the knowledge and learning styles of students?

Myth 2: Online learning lacks important interaction with faculty and other students.

Again, this myth depends on the course and the provider. Some large classroom courses have 100–300 students in an auditorium and provide very little interaction with faculty. In smaller classes, many times the instruction is lecture-based with limited time for questions and inconvenient faculty office hours for out-of-class dialogue—particularly for commuter students. It is true that some online learning courses are structured as independent study without faculty or student interaction, but an increasing number—particularly with the rise of social networking expectations in the NetGeneration—have a high level of interaction built in, including collaborative projects, study groups, instant messaging, and threaded discussions. One can argue that in well-designed online learning, there is actually more collabora-

tion and interaction than is found in most classroom courses—particularly those that rely on lecture and mid-term/final frameworks. Indeed, professors are often shocked to learn that it is much more work to teach online, because they have more and deeper interaction with students (via e-mail and phone).

Myth 3: Online learning works well for some subjects/degrees but not for others.

This myth may still be true in limited areas, like laboratory science or engineering which require expensive equipment. But as technology advances, it is becoming less and less the case. In fact, much of the science and engineering in the world is now done via computer simulations, often among workers at a distance, so online learning increasingly resembles the workplace more than classroom learning. There are now high-quality online programs in most areas, including highly interactive/clinical disciplines like teacher education, nursing, and even Ph.D. programs.

Myth 4: Online learning works well only for certain types of students.

Online learning today includes every imaginable kind of student. It cuts across all age groups, ethnicities, degree levels, and geographies. It is providing unprecedented access to education by allowing students to learn at places and times convenient to them. It provides huge advantages for working adults who cannot fit traditional classroom schedules into work and family life. Studies note that it has significant advantages for minority students because computers do not discriminate and students engage more with ideas than with personal characteristics. Moreover, students who are dead quiet in a classroom often come alive online when given the time to respond to questions thoughtfully. In addition, learning to learn online is fast becoming a needed skill for most learners as they move on into other learning environments or into the workplace.

Myth 5: Employers do not value online degrees or courses.

Some employers still discount the value of online learning, but this mindset is changing rapidly as more corporations turn to online learning for their own internal training. Research from Eduventures shows that 62%



of employers believe online learning is equal to or better than classroom-based learning. Many employers have come to value the traits exhibited by holders of distance degrees: maturity, initiative, self-discipline, and strong goal orientation. Generally, corporate tuition reimbursement programs treat all accredited programs equally, whether delivered online or not.

Myth 6: It is difficult to measure online learning.

Our traditional classroom system is based on students spending a certain amount of time in the classroom. Measures of learning are credit hours or clock hours. As a result, we tend to feel we have lost something if we cannot measure the time students are investing in their coursework. However, even in traditional education, attendance often is not taken, and students may or may not be in class. Ultimately, if they pass the test we assume they put in the time. Online learning mirrors that system, awarding credit hours when students complete the assigned work and generally not trying to measure time. To tackle the cheating concern, online learning efforts are as varied as in-class methods. For example, Western Governors University (WGU) requires online students to take exams in secure, proctored testing centers. All writing assignments are checked for plagiarism. Many students have an oral defense (via telephone) of their capstone project. At Rio Salado College (AZ), testing for online courses occurs on campus.

Myth 7: Online learning is a quick and easy way to get a degree.

A few unscrupulous “diploma mills” have damaged online learning’s reputation. These programs were never accredited and do not reflect the general quality of online learning degrees. Students may be able to earn a degree more quickly in some online learning programs, not because less work is required, but because they are able to move at their own pace. Generally, though, the evidence is that students take longer, read more, write more, and do more research than a classroom student (they obviously sit in a classroom for less time, leaving more time for these other activities).

Myth 8: Online learning diminishes the teacher’s importance.

Much of today’s online learning simply is delivering classroom instruction via technology. In such cases, the faculty role does not change much, except that faculty report it is even more work to teach online because students expect more responsiveness and interaction via e-mail. The faculty role is generally different but often enhanced and even more important in redesigned online and hybrid learning courses that take advantage of the technology. Online learning can free faculty to do what is uniquely human and more interactive, rather

than simply deliver lectures. Faculty have more time to interact personally with students, to mentor, advise, review individual work, and answer questions.

Myth 9: Online learning is less expensive to provide.

In most cases, online education costs are comparable or slightly more costly than classroom instruction. Institutions that have built successful, high-quality online programs have found that the costs of faculty, course development and maintenance, assessment, and especially student services and system support, are significant. Certainly, technology has the potential to lower the cost of higher education significantly as it has improved productivity in so many other segments of society. The National Center for Academic Transformation (www.center.rpi.edu) has demonstrated with 30 different institutions that undergraduate courses redesigned for technology delivery resulted in an average 37% cost reduction, with significant increases in most cases of both student learning and retention.

Myth 10: Online learning will make traditional classroom-based education obsolete.

While online education provides advantages of access, and potentially lower cost and higher quality, this does not diminish the value of face-to-face student services and learning. Particularly for underprepared and returning students, the classroom and the campus provide necessary connections and resources that help them on their learning journeys. It is likely that many of these students would be better served beginning in face-to-face courses, then moving to a hybrid environment, and then progressing to learning purely online (if there is a need or wish to learn in that way). Moreover, online learning is more often than not blended with classroom teaching. Rather than making traditional instruction obsolete, it simply gives us an interesting and possibly transformative tool to apply to our modern teaching and learning contexts.

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