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Advantages of face-to-face education over online education

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Abstract. Traditional face-to-face education has been a staple of advanced civilizations for over two thousand years (Shimahara, 2003); however, since the advent of the World Wide Web, online courses have begun to supplant a portion of the traditional educational format and function in the 21st century (Allen & Sloan, 2011). While there are obvious advantages of online education, such as convenience and reaching out to a wider range of people (Blair & Hoy, 2006), face-to-face (FTF) education has unique features that establish its superiority over online education. FTF education provides an excellent channel to retain information (Howard, 2009), interact socially (Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006; Wright, Knight, & Pomerleau, 1999), and develop accountability (Lowenthal & Thomas, 2010). It is through a combination of academic learning and social learning in FTF education that young adults could benefit the most from their valuable time and financial resources invested in their education.

Traditional face-to-face (FTF) education has been a staple of advanced civilizations for over two thousand years (Shimahara, 2003); however, since the advent of the World Wide Web, online courses have begun to supplant a portion of traditional education by changing the format and function of education in the 21st century (Allen & Sloan, 2011). People who would otherwise be unable to attend college now can earn college credit (Clark, 2001) and degrees online. Adult learners with fixed job and family responsibilities make up a considerable portion of online students (Cercene, 2008), and working adults seek not only degrees but also professional development and continuing education courses online (Anderson & Anderson, 2009; Karaman, 2011). Young adults who might have traditionally entered the workforce directly after high school are now sought after as ideal candidates for online education. Advertisements and commercials market online education as a convenient way for students to get a college degree or certificate on their own time. In a recent commercial, the consumer service Education Connection portrayed online education as an accessible way to get an education while wearing pajamas (Education Connection, 2010). The commercial, by citing a US census report that shows college graduates earn one million dollars more over their life time than non-graduates, implies that earning an online degree while wearing pajamas will result in a large increase in lifetime income.

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Convenience and flexibility are cited often as top reasons for pursuing online education (Daymont, Blau, & Campbell, 2011; Lee & Nguyen, 2007; Tabatabaei, Schrottner, & Reichgelt, 2006). Easy accessibility to online degrees and classes has attracted both traditional (ages 18-22) and non-traditional students to online education. More than 30% of college students have taken at least one online course, and the Fall 2010 semester saw just over 6.1 million students enrolled in online courses in the United States (Allen & Sloan, 2011). Despite the popularity of online education, Allen and Sloan (2011) found that more than two-thirds of chief academic officers think that faculty do not acknowledge online education as a legitimate and important method of education. As online education becomes more popular it is important to remember why FTF education is superior to online education: FTF education provides functional (technical/administrative) advantages and social (socialization/accountability) benefits that are not readily available in online education.

There are a number of functional advantages to FTF instruction. The most overtly observable strength of FTF instruction over online education is that it provides salience through interactions with tangible people and things. The availability of resources in classrooms, not the nature of course delivery, is the only limiting factor. Take a science course as an example. Although some argue histology can be taught just as effectively online as in person (Schoenfeld-Tacher, McConnell, & Graham, 2001), the elements of working in a lab cannot be recreated easily in a virtual environment. In addition to science labs, a number of other areas of study lend themselves to physical class, including, music performance, theater, physical therapy, veterinary medicine, etc.

Immediacy is another functional advantage to FTF courses over online courses. Aside from retaining information, students seek opportunities for formal and informal interaction with professors inside and outside of class (Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006). According to Howard (2009) it is easier to answer questions and take care of misunderstandings promptly in a FTF class because of the immediacy of social cues (e.g., students’ confusion can be seen on their faces). Expectations are also easier to convey FTF because professors’ tone of voice and facial expressions are overt (Howard, 2009). Additionally, a lateral advantage of being a FTF student is that on campus students have the benefits of being physically present for employer interviews and local job placement announcements.

While the aforementioned advantages of FTF education center mostly on the classroom experience itself, the social benefits of FTF instruction are more ubiquitous. Thriving in life and work is about much more than academic knowledge gained at college, and FTF education has an advantage over online education in the social arena because social models are not limited by the asynchronous interactions (e.g. discussion board posts, video posts, email, etc.) and anonymity that are common in online education.

According to Social Learning Theory, learning is a social process that involves observing and modeling the behavior of others (Bandura, 1977). College is a place to hone social and interpersonal skills like communication, working in groups, and self-management (Wright, Knight & Pomerleau, 1999) through interactions with peers and professors. To this end, the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) strategic plan for 2013 through 2017 includes in its Four Goals a goal of “Social Responsibility” that makes “civic inquiry, social responsibility, and democratic engagement across differences-in local and global contexts—a shared expectation for all college students” (AAC&U, Section, “Strategic Plan,” para. 7). This is important because social experiences with peers at college can influence and change a person’s worldview and views on diversity by widening their views from what they were in high school.
Analysis of the 2008 College Senior Survey (CSS) showed that 76% of respondents reported that they were more familiar with people of diverse cultures and races as seniors compared to when they first began college, and 64.9% reported that their understanding of people of different cultures and races had increased (Liu, Ruiz, DeAngelo, & Pryor, 2009).

One of the most important aspects of FTF education is the concept of accountability because it is the nexus of the functional and social advantages of FTF learning. In college, students learn accountability in two ways: a) by observing student/faculty model appropriate behavior, and b) through feedback from peers and superiors. Although these two methods of learning accountability may be present in online education, they are limited to the digital realm, which is only one aspect of social interaction in the modern world. For many traditional students, college is the first place where they have to rely on themselves without their parents monitoring their daily activities. FTF interaction leads to more accountability because of social pressure (Howard, 2009), and public interaction and feedback make students more accountable and create a model for the class (Lowenthal & Thomas, 2010).

One way this type of accountability can be established is through group assignments (Thomas & McPherson, 2011). Although group assignments can be given in online courses, they are easier to ignore in an online setting than in a FTF class. Social pressures from online group partners can be disregarded simply by not reading emails and discussion board posts or by not participating in more interactive sessions (e.g., Skype sessions). It is harder to ignore group partners while sitting with them in class because of the public nature of the interaction. Social accountability in FTF education also helps students establish discipline through routine, which is a skill that students will use for the rest of their lives. Less motivated students can be reminded easily by a FTF professor of assignments and organizational objectives (Howard, 2009), and FTF professors can aide students by asking them in person about missed assignments and absences, which can lead students to become more accountable due to social pressure. In online education, however, professors are limited to email reminders and other forms of electronic communication, which can be ignored easily by students.

While online education is convenient and serves populations that previously could not attend college (Blair & Hoy, 2006), face-to-face education is the superior form of education. FTF education offers interaction with professors and peers and hands-on experiences that simply are not available through online courses. FTF education better prepares young adults for life as contributing members of society by instilling them with the social responsibility, self-discipline and timeliness that are necessary for success in the modern world. FTF students learn non-academic skills that are a prerequisite to success in the adult world. They learn to navigate social situations with peers and superiors, to be responsible and accountable for their actions/inactions, to deal with disagreements that may arise from their actions/inactions, and to manage their time within the boundaries set by others. It is through a combination of academic learning and social learning in FTF education that young adults learn to maintain or transform society, and without social education, the world could easily evolve into a place that is quite different and not necessarily better than what it is today.

References


