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The progressive movement of online education: A review of benefits

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Abstract. Since the 1990s, higher education has been implementing online courses and online degree programs into their curriculum. Consequently, the academic community began researching various domains of online education and researchers have continually demonstrated that online courses are comparable to or surpass learner outcomes in traditional courses (Bernard et al., 2004). The benefits of online education run even deeper than just learner outcomes. It enables greater scheduling flexibility for students, especially those who are gainfully employed or raising a family (Appana, 2008). Online education allows universities to maintain academic programs that may sink if constricted to an on-campus environment (Bartolic-Zlomistic & Bates, 1999). Additionally, online courses encourage a diverse academic setting not bounded by geographic region (Appana, 2008). On a deeper level still, the academic community has begun to focus on questions concerning which student learning styles “match” with the online learning environment (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Mabry, 2002). Cumulatively, research provides ample support for the growing benefits and need within academia for online education.

Humans often resist change, especially change that may transform traditional paradigms. Dating back to ancient Greece, students have sat captivated by their teacher’s spoken word and have dialectically interacted with their peers (Cubberley, 1920). In present day, technology has revolutionized educational tools and their employment in academic settings (Bartley & Golek, 2004). Due to the development of online education at major colleges and universities in the 1990s, researchers have asked many probing questions concerning the nature of online learning (Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000). The current paper will explore the online education movement with emphasis on its contribution to enable more people to attain a higher education, its flexibility to accommodate diverse student population, and its capability to deliver more customized education that is better suited for some students’ learning styles than traditional courses.

One advantage of online education is its mode of delivery. The growth of technology in the 1990s enabled institutions of higher education to provide online courses for the general population. The enrollment rate for postsecondary education increased only 9% between 1989 and 1999, but increased 38% from 1999 to 2009 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1

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This substantial growth may be due to several reasons including a societal focus on the importance of education, a depreciating economy, and the increased availability of a college education. Regardless, the demand for a college degree is high and one way colleges have met demand is through online courses. Over the last eight years, the growth of enrollment rates for online higher education has been substantially larger than overall enrollment rates in traditional higher education (Babson Survey Research Group & Quahog Research Group, 2011). Additionally, in 2011, 31% of all higher education students were taking at least one online course. Prolific growth in enrollment of online courses prompted the academic community to begin investigating student outcomes through a multitude of research efforts. For example, Bernard et al. (2004) reviewed over 200 studies analyzing the achievement, attitude, and retention outcomes of online education. The role of online courses in the attainability of higher education is undeniable. Though higher education has become more available through online courses, many are skeptical that online education does not parallel a traditional education. However, research has continually demonstrated that the effectiveness of online education is equivalent to or exceeds the outcomes of traditional education.

Navarro and Shoemaker (2000), for example, found that students who were enrolled in an online course that mirrored a traditional course, performed significantly better on the final exam, even when controlling for major, gender, and grade point average. Similarly, Reisetter, Lapointe, and Korcuska (2007) found that students in both traditional and online course settings made significant gains in course content knowledge and possessed no significant differences in content mastery across both pre and posttest assessments. Further, Reisetter et al. (2007) found no difference in pre and post attitudes of traditional versus online students involving course satisfaction. Neuhauser (2002) reported that 96% of students found an online course section as or more effective than their “typical” traditional course. Lastly, through an extensive meta-analysis, Bernard et al. (2004) revealed that despite wide variability in achievement in both online and traditional learning modalities, the two are comparable to each other. It has been critical for the academic community to identify support for the effectiveness of online education. Although this support grants credence to online education, researchers have begun answering more complex questions pertaining to why an increasing number of students prefer online courses as opposed to traditional courses.

One of the most readily identified reasons that students select online courses is flexibility. Flexibility manifests itself in several ways within online education. The first facet of flexibility involves the customization of time and learning within an online course. Appana (2008) asserts that an online education enables students to learn who must juggle employment and family obligations. Navarro and Shoemaker (2000) identified further support for this argument, finding that two of the most important factors for students selecting an online course were scheduling convenience and the ability to learn at an independent pace. Perreault, Wadman, Alexander, and Zhao (2002) found that 90% of professors believed that flexibility was the greatest benefit to students in online courses. These findings suggest that online courses allow people to receive a higher education who may not have otherwise been able to because of time or economic constraints.

A second facet of flexibility may be viewed from an institutional perspective. By developing online courses, institutions have the opportunity to revive sinking programs by enabling people to enroll who may not have the ability to attend on-campus courses (Bartolic-Zlomistic & Bates, 1999). Further, after reviewing several different categories of costs pertaining to starting and maintaining online courses, Bartley and Golek (2004) argue that the economic
benefits outweighed the costs. It follows that institutions who invest in online higher education create greater flexibility in their futures concerning the ability to provide services to students and helping to maintain academic programs, which may otherwise perish.

Lastly, flexibility manifests within the connectivity among cultures and diverse groups of online learners. Appana (2008) reported that online education supports the collaboration of students and faculty across cultures and varying demographics. Such possibilities may be critical for the growth of ideas and solutions to global problems. Without online higher education, cross-cultural sharing of knowledge becomes limited to an institution’s geographic location. These three facets of flexibility are major benefits of online courses.

When evaluating the effectiveness of online education, one critical underlying question is whether online courses are comparable to traditional courses in terms of students’ success. Perhaps the more relevant question pertains to which students are online courses most beneficial? Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, and Mabry (2002) stressed the need to explore the “match” between learning style and students who select an online education. Online higher education may serve as a medium that better accommodates the learning styles and personal characteristics of certain students than traditional higher education.

Reisetter et al. (2007) found that students in both online and traditional courses viewed discipline and responsibility as important, but each set of students interpreted these terms differently. Online students valued their self-reliance, focus, and preparation skills in order to succeed in class whereas traditional students relied more on the accountability to attend class and interacting well with both peers and instructors. Such attributions may be a factor to explain why Neuhauser (2002) found no significant differences across course unit posttests and other course assignments between traditional and online course sections. Both sets of students may have succeeded because they were in an environment that matched their learning styles.

Further, Tsai and Chuang (2005) showed a significant correlation between epistemological beliefs and predisposition in selecting an online learning environment. Epistemological beliefs involve peoples’ beliefs on the nature of learning and knowledge. Tsai and Chuang (2005) found that students who hold a constructivist oriented epistemological belief system tended to prefer online education. Specifically, significant relationships existed between constructivist beliefs and an online educational environment that encourages independent investigations and thinking deeply about one’s own understanding of material. Together, these findings indicate that certain students who value discipline and individual centered learning tend to gravitate and thrive in online courses. One may rhetorically inquire; is not the goal of education to spark independent and motivated thought while promoting strong learner characteristics such as self-regulation? This question does not aim to portray online education as superior to traditional education. Rather, it should highlight the critical issue that some students may benefit more in an online environment with a curriculum distinct from a traditional paradigm.

Undoubtedly, traditional higher education possesses strong positive characteristics such as face-to-face interactions with peers and instructors, high accountability for doing one’s own work, and high achievement outcomes. However, online education has experienced unprecedented growth over the last 15 years and this trend will likely continue. It has received a large amount of empirical support concerning its effectiveness in comparison to traditional education. In addition, online education offers a flexible learning environment for people with employment or familial obligations. Further, it grants security to academic programs that may otherwise collapse. As time progresses, researchers are shedding light onto the types of students
that benefit most from online education. Reisetter et al. (2007) points out that the academic community has spent considerable time and money in devising ways that online learning may emulate a traditional classroom. Perhaps, it may be more prudent to focus on ways in which online education “matches” the learning styles of students who enroll in online courses rather than to focus on finding ways for online education to mimic traditional education. In conclusion, research on online education over the last two decades continually demonstrates its capability to ignite growth on both institutional and individual levels. Therefore, it will be prudent for the academic community to continue offering and researching online courses that have already provided millions of people with one of the noblest pursuits in life, an education.

References


