

Hot Topics

Face-to-Face vs. Online Education, which is better? The topic has been debated for several years. Since the past decade college faculty members, school teachers, administrators, and corporate trainers have looked at the implementation of online courses as a new method of learning. Although the popularity of online programs has increased in recent years, its effectiveness remains unclear. It has been proven by several research studies that traditional face-to-face education is more efficient than online education. Students tend to be more satisfied with the traditional way of teaching because it provides a personal connection between teacher and students, through class discussions, and it builds social relationships, which are key factors that benefit student learning. While Online classes may be cheaper, more comfortable, and can fit anywhere in your schedule, you will never learn the same as in the classroom.

In 1999, an empirical study called “Comparative Analysis of Online vs. Face-to-Face Instruction” was presented during the WebNet World Conference on the WWW and Internet Proceedings. The research study compares a graduate online course with an equivalent course taught in a traditional face-to-face format. The compared areas in the two courses are student satisfaction, course interaction, course structure, and support; the traditional face-to-face course showed as superior in all of these areas. The course interaction area had the most significant difference between the two course formats. According to the authors Scott D. Johnson, Steven R. Aragon, Najumuddin Shaik and Nilda Palma-Rivas, “Students in face-to-face courses can more easily get together for an extended period of time to discuss class projects, work out any differences of opinion and build social relationships. In contrast, online students do not have

similar opportunities, although the technology provides a surrogate form for similar interactions”

(6). All these kinds of social interactions among the students are necessary to benefit the learning environment and this research study suggests that in an online course students may not be taking advantage of that “strong social dimension” offered by the traditional face-to-face instruction. If the students are able to communicate with other students in the class, share learning experiences, and work in teams, then they will be more likely to comprehend the content of the class. Also, the instructor support towards the students was an area in which face-to-face instruction had a remarkable difference favorable to the course. The authors believe that the main reason for this huge difference is that “The face-to-face setting allowed the instructor to vary the nature and type of feedback as needed. In the online course however, the instructor feedback was limited largely to e-mail, fax, uploaded files, and periodic telephone conversations as a means of delivering feedbacks” (6). Professors are vital for the students’ learning because they assist students to find their weaknesses and improve on those, so if the communication between teacher and students is being limited, it is probable that the students’ performance would be reduced; this provides another plus to the traditional way of teaching.

In addition, those who want to replace the traditional way of teaching, and believe that online education is the future, should consider that some groups of students perform notably worse when they take an online course. According to The New York Times article “Live vs. Distance Learning: Measuring the Differences” by Gabriel Trip, “Hispanic students watching online earned a full grade lower, on average, than Hispanics who attended class, and all male students who watched online were about a half-grade lower” (1). For some groups such as minorities and immigrants who are maybe not used to, or don’t have enough knowledge of that kind of technology, online teaching can present a serious threat for their grades. Earning a full

grade lower can affect the grade point average of the student who might be trying to get into a graduate school where only a few students are accepted.

In my personal experience, I have noticed that some courses just cannot be replaced with an online alternative. For example, right now I'm taking a "Public Speaking" course, where the main purpose of the class is to improve our speaking skills by giving speeches in front of our peers. How would you replace that moment, the feeling when you stand in front of 30 other students and all the symptoms of communication anxiety start coming to you? With an online course that would be unthinkable, and the class would lose its essence, because that moment may be the hard part, but also the fun part of the class. Overcoming the fear of speaking publicly is another purpose of the class, how would you accomplish that with an online course? I don't think you can, you would need to be "Skyping" (having an online video conversation) with 30 other students at the same time, or give your speech 30 times (one for each student), because isn't it an advantage for online courses that you can work at your own pace? In many cases, people take online classes because they have a family and need to work full-time jobs. Therefore, if every single online student has a different schedule, then it will be impossible to reunite every single one of them just to attend a speech.

On the other hand, online courses are more affordable, that includes more opportunities for those who are struggling to access higher education. Many people face tremendous challenges while trying to access higher education because they may not be able to afford campus living or pay transportation expenses. In that situation an online course would be a great alternative, because the course could give an equal opportunity to those individuals who are having a hard time, making higher education more accessible for them. Yes indeed, online courses have many other advantages besides being more affordable, during the forum

“Perspectives in Higher Education”, analyst Judy Heiman provided lots of information and statistics about a study that she made last year, during her participation at the forum, she presented all of the advantages of an online course, but concluded by saying that “there are also some concerns about things like cheating. How do you know who is actually sitting behind the computer taking the test”. This means that even though online courses can be superior in some fields, the course is not reliable, because the professor cannot make sure who is really doing the work.

In conclusion, although there are pros and cons for each one of the formats, the face-to-face instruction remains superior and more reliable. Students in the traditional face-to-face format can take advantage the social interaction among the class, facilitating the retention and comprehension of the material presented by the teacher. If college faculty members really want their students to take advantage of the technology, then they should look at the implementation of “Hybrid Courses”, which is a combination between face-to-face and online courses, not to the 100 percent online courses. In my opinion an online course should be considered as a second alternative just for the people who are having a hard time trying to get access to higher education.