Online Education: The New Classroom?

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Within the last 10 years the internet has exploded into our society and changed many facets of everyday life from shopping to paying bills. The internet has taken the word convenience and brought it to a whole new level. But when it comes to online courses in higher education where do we draw the line from convenience to an unethical method of maximizing dollars and minimizing space on our campuses? Some may say that from an ethical perspective, online education is a utilitarian approach to learning, "…the greatest benefits with the least harm" (Andre, Meyer, Shanks & Velasquez, n.d.). But who benefits and who is harmed in this relatively new way of learning- students, faculty, administrators?

Brooke (2000) claimed that online courses originally tended to cater to adult learners, people who had careers, family and other obligations such as military service. However, according to a 2003 study by the Sloan Consortium "…more than 90 percent of public institutions (including four-year schools) offer at least one online course" (Bagnato, 2004, p. 6). The demographic of the online learner seems to be changing, but is this learning environment the best method to educate the traditional undergraduate student who is between the ages of 18-24?

According to a survey conducted by MIT (Stahlman, 1996, p. 126):

…students participating in an intercontinental and experimental class…the off campus students are substantially less likely than in-class counterparts to ask questions or positively identify with their peers or teacher…Interviews with students revealed their frustration with the lack of give and take in the electronic classroom, and regrets missing the rest of campus life

Part of the academic experience is to not only be *trained* in a specific area but to become a well-rounded, *educated* individual, to learn from not only professors but peers. Institutions of higher education should be held to a high ethical standard for contributing to the intellectual growth of students. An online environment can inhibit this process and prevent students from developing the much needed social skills that will aid them in their success once they leave their institution. In addition, while cheating is prevalent in a face to face classroom, it is even more so in an online environment. It allows too much independence and may compromise the student's academic integrity. There will be no professor to determine if the work and tests that are being administered are actually completed by the student or by a friend that took the class the semester before.

However, it may be argued that the online method may be more conducive for students who have difficulty interacting in a traditional classroom. In fact, one student was quoted as saying, "I find it allows me to participate in class more than the traditional classroom. I was the one who didn't like being called on," (Dibiase, 2000, p. 130). When this student graduates and gets a job, there may be times when he/she may be called upon in front of a group to express ideas or opinions and if so, will that student truly be prepared? Obtaining a college degree requires students to move beyond their comfort zone and challenge themselves so that they may grow as individuals not hide behind their computers.

Then there is the issue of students being used as experiments for online education. According to David Noble (1998), "Few students realize that their computer-based courses are often thinly-veiled field trials for product and market development, that while they are studying their courses, their courses are studying them." Because online learning is relatively new, is it ethical to treat students as guinea pigs so that the administration can increase their profits and limit the number of students and faculty that are on campus? Faculty also seem to be questioning the effectiveness and ethical nature of an online learning environment. According to another study by the Sloan Consortium (Bagnato, 2004, p. 8),

…faculty remain unconvinced that the quality of online education is up to the same standards as face to face learning…(However) administrators believe that in a few years, the quality of online learning will meet or surpass that of traditional classes.

Clearly, there seems to be a difference of opinion among faculty and administrators. However, for faculty in addition to feeling as though online learning is not as effective as the traditional classroom, it may also be perceived as a threat. According to David Noble (1998), Robert Heterich, the President of Educom, an academic-corporate consortium, felt the potential to remove the human mediation in some areas and replace it with automation - smart, computer-based, network-based systems - is tremendous. We are a society of extremists, when we observe something that has some good qualities we exploit it until it is unrecognizable. Perhaps, we will become a society that no longer has professors or universities but rather living rooms that are classrooms and Bill Gates as the universal professor.

That said, it is unrealistic to think that online education, a highly profitable form of learning, will be eliminated completely from undergraduate curriculum. There are a few alternatives so that faculty, administrators and most importantly, students can experience the greatest benefit from this new technology. The following alternatives can help to reform online education:

1) Prohibit freshman and sophomores from taking online courses. Allow them to adjust to campus life and to the academic rigors of a face to face classroom before allowing them to participate in an asynchronous learning environment.

2) Provide a face to face orientation and take students through exactly how online classes work and what will be expected academically and the consequences if someone is caught cheating.

3) Give faculty more control over the curriculum and the way in which their online courses are conducted. Perhaps scheduling meetings one or two times a semester in order meet with students face to face and connect with them on a more personal level might be a more suitable practice.

College can be the greatest time in a young person's life, a time of exploration, change, and growth. Society today is currently dealing with a new generation of students growing up with cell phones and video games, lacking the social skills needed to be successful. One of the most fundamentally important aspects of higher education is developing a sense of community, and helping others feel connected to peers and professors. Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to help shape the future of tomorrow, not through impersonal technology but through actively engaging student's minds and contributing to their overall success.

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