Educational Considerations

Volume 37 | Number 2 Article 3

4-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Teresa and Ribble, Michael (2010) "Moving Beyond Bricks and Mortar: Changing the Conversation on Online Education," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 37: No. 2. https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1149

Moving Beyond Bricks and Mortar: Changing the Conversation on Online Education

Teresa Miller and Michael Ribble

Introduction

Online learning has changed education in many ways. This change was not mandated, but instead filled a need expressed by students. Picciano and Seaman (2009) estimated that more than a million K-12 students took an online class in 2007-2008. While this number may seem small compared to the 50 million students in K-12 schools, these numbers have grown rapidly in the past five years. Meanwhile, the education community seems unwilling or unable to keep up with this shift from traditional schools to online courses. In the *Guide to Teaching Online Courses* (2006) a guide collaboratively prepared by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), the National Education Association (NEA), the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL), the National Commission for Teaching and America's Future, and Virtual High School, Inc., the editors stated that "Teacher preparation programs rarely include courses about online teaching" (p.3). The result is that "Most of the 86,000 new teachers who enter the profession begin without online teaching skills" (p. 3). As the numbers of students taking online classes continues to grow, both practicing and future teachers must be trained in skills to teach online.

A problem with this shift toward online teaching is that it has happened randomly and irregularly within K-12 systems. Demands from students for online learning at both K-12 and higher education levels have not always been met with positive attitudes or proactive gestures. Recent calls for reform in teacher preparation (Levine, 2006) neglected to mention the need for online teaching and learning preparation. However, in order for schools to maintain relevancy and to prepare students for the increasingly online environments of the world of work, new teachers and professors must be trained to teach in these radically different environments. Richardson (2009) described the problem in this way:

> And when many of our students are already building networks far beyond our classroom wall, forming communities around their passions and their talents, it's not hard to understand why rows of desks and time-constrained schedules and standardized tests are feeling more and more limited and ineffective. (p. 3).

Preparing for the Future

How can educators begin making the changes that are necessary to make this educational paradigm shift and move away from a strict bricks and mortar concept? A proactive two-pronged approach is necessary.

First, teacher preparation programs in higher education must include cutting-edge strategies for online teaching and learning in order to even minimally prepare teachers to excel in these new environments. What are these strategies? The *Guide to Teaching Online* (2006) lists these characteristics: instructor-led but student-centered, collaborative, flexible, accessing all the new literacies, clear expectations, cognizant of the variety of student learning styles, using the latest best practices (pp. 6-7). While this description may sound similar to what's going on now, 'accessing all the new literacies' is not currently evident in many U. S. classrooms, at the public school level, or in university teacher preparation programs. Instead, visitors will continue to find paper/pencil assignments, old-fashioned chalkboards (or perhaps the new whiteboards), with Powerpoint presentations considered the 'cutting edge' as far as technology goes. And in many schools, "We take away the powerful social technologies our kids are already using to learn" (Richardson, 2009, p. 3).

Secondly, current teachers need to understand how quickly and significantly the world is changing to make online teaching such a popular choice for students at all levels. An analysis of online practices by Cavanaugh et. al., (2009) found that online students performed better and spent more time on task than those taking the same source with traditional programming. A recent study by Ambient Insight for THE Journal listed 450,000 K-12 students currently attending virtual schools full time, and another 1.75 million taking some courses online (Nagel, 2009). It is past time to look seriously at major revisions for teacher preparation programs.

A Need for Change

Reasons for resistance to these needed reforms must first be understood. Even as online education is different from the face-to-face classroom, there are similar issues between them both. Melanie Clay (1999) identified five reasons, supported by other literature, why higher education faculty members resist teaching online classes:

1. Increased workload (Betts, 1998; Dillon & Walsh, 1992; Eisenburg, 1998);
2. The altered role of the instructor (Dooley, (n.d.); Kaiser, 1998);
3. Lack of technical and administrative support (Betts, 1998; Clark, 1993);
4. Reduced course quality (Betts, 1998; Clark, 1993);
5. Negative attitudes of colleagues (Moore, 1997).

Resistance to online learning results in fewer opportunities for students, related to not being able to have access to courses online, but also by not having models for effective online teaching. As a general rule, teachers continue to teach the way they were taught, so instead of making change, the traditional forms of teaching

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continue to be practiced. Such resistance provides insights as to why pre-service teachers are not prepared or comfortable teaching in an online setting. Because of this resistance to changes in practice, the quality of online teaching is not adequate to meet the needs of future online students.

There is some hope for the future. Some schools and colleges of education are now requiring that faculty members teach at least one course online so that they can begin to at least understand the differences in teaching and learning online. Many colleges and universities are adding degree programs focused on teaching online courses (Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004). The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (2009) has reviewed multiple online programs and found that "Highly effective online teachers are the result of an effective instructional delivery model aligned with the selection and preparation of effective teachers...[and] requires a highly interactive classroom" (p. 4). Further, such teachers are closely connected with their students, highly responsive, adept at using web-based technologies and collaborative communication tools to offer active, constructive, and cooperative experiences for their students (Collins & Zacharakis, 2009).

Previously, students viewed institutions of higher education as the holders of knowledge, but now they require more from their universities than just information. Higher education needs to begin adjusting for a new generation of learners who do not wish to waste their time sitting in lecture halls (Clydesdale, 2009). Online education is an integral part of this transition. Until the teaching of online courses is seen as a priority and schools with colleges of education begin making serious changes in their own teaching, as well as requirements for their graduates, they will continue to turn out teachers trained the same way as decades before.

Support for Online Learning Programs

As budget and accountability concerns continue to cause investigations into cost-saving instructional methods, educational leaders are likely to focus more attention on online opportunities. Difficulties in finding highly qualified teachers to meet state and national requirements may result in an increase. One school district in Maine uses distance education when they "Simply cannot find qualified teachers" (McClure, 2006, p. 2). Imperial County, California, set up a local network to "Use the technology to bring resources to their geographically isolated area" (McClure, p. 4). As costs of updating old buildings (or building new ones) increase, the idea of creating online degree programs to fill the gaps become more enticing. This timing may force educators to move beyond a vision tied to 'bricks and mortar' and into the world of online teaching and learning. Institutions of higher education are also beginning to feel pressure and competition from for-profit organizations, such as Phoenix Online ®. Previously, online degrees were seen as less rigorous than face-to-face; however, online courses are becoming more respected as valid educational alternatives to on-campus degrees. Online learning today includes various tools such as instant messaging, discussion threads, online tests, and video interaction, with new applications being developed daily. The benefits of not being confined to certain times or locations, are powerful and can be exemplified by MIT's OpenCourseWare with multiple options for learners around the world, free of charge (Richardson, 2009).

With all these options, higher education institutions are attempting to support faculty members to get them over those five areas of concern mentioned previously. The variety of support ranges from websites with tips of how to teach online, to instructional support personnel to help faculty to set up and organize online courses. Clay

Table 1
Instructor Stages in Online Instructional Productivity

Faculty Stage	*Faculty Concerns*	*Faculty Needs*
Awareness	• how distance courses are offered • why distance courses are offered • how distance program relates to university mission	• general information • opportunity to separate fact from fiction • opportunity to ask questions
Consideration	• quality of distance instruction • drawbacks and benefits of distance teaching • availability of assistance	• consultation with experienced distance faculty • published research and articles • opportunity for hands-on practice
Implementation	• time • course design • student interaction • quality standards	• coaching from other faculty • one-on-one intensive training and course development support • incentives • job-imbedded opportunities
Innovation	• improvement • contribution • recognition	• opportunities to assist and mentor others • recognition • ongoing training and follow-up

https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations/vol37/iss2/3
DOI: 10.4148/0146-9282.1149

(1999) identified four stages for instructors (See Table 1) that lead to accepting and being able to use these tools productively with an online course, (loosely based on Hall & Loukes [1979], model of teachers adopting a new practice).

Support needs to be provided to faculty so that they can begin to innovate by using these tools in the classroom. Leaders must also realize that not all instructors will accept these stages quickly, and some type of phased training will be required to allow for these differences.

Faculty members in K-12 schools also need to be afforded opportunities on how to best utilize the new literacy tools in a classroom setting. Educators need to understand why online learning is becoming an acceptable option for students, as opposed to traditional schools. Proponents of online education need to show how it adds value to the current educational process, and can result in improved student performance. Finding other options, such as a blended approach may bring the best of both models for students (Reynard, 2009). If less experienced teachers are not being exposed to online teaching and learning, it can be assumed that experienced teachers are not prepared for online teaching as well. Some teachers may have taken online classes for recertification or degree programs, but still may not be aware of the issues that go along with management of their own online courses.

Just as in higher education, staff development and resources are needed to help bring faculty and staff along to move through their concerns with online teaching. Unlike higher education, K-12 classes seem to have fewer incentives for utilizing online teaching as a component of regular teaching. Some schools are utilizing the online component for dropouts and credit recovery, and only in dire circumstances (e.g., declining enrollments, rising costs, loss of specialty teachers – foreign language, upper level math and science) have online schools become widespread. One student group that has seen increases in online learning are students being home schooled. A wide range of quality curriculum and online offerings are now available to home-schooled students. The structure and support universities are already actively pursuing online options for their students in increasing numbers (Clark & Mayer, 2003), and Stanford University President Gerhard Casper, predicted "Shifts from in-residence learning to on-line learning" (p. 12).

To help with the growth in online courses, organizations have emerged to help K-12 online schools. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning has been particularly supportive by providing research and resources for the growing number of online schools. According to Cavanaugh, et. al., (2009) one of the most critical aspects for those interested in delivering quality online learning is the identification of specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are required for 'highly effective' online teachers.

Not all teachers have the skills or temperament to be online instructors. Just as some people are not destined to be classroom teachers, there are some who should not be online teachers as well. Fuller et. al., (2000) identified these requirements for effective online teaching:

- be able to sit in front a machine for at least an hour or two every day,
- enjoy one-on-one interaction (as opposed to lecturing or group presentations),
- be flexible in teaching approach and willing to experiment, and
- be prepared to do a lot of writing/typing. (pp. 13-14).

Just identifying whether or not someone is interested in teaching online is not enough. There needs to be adequate professional development on the differences in teaching online classes. A number of tools need to be accessed, along with lessons in when to use which tools for the most effective teaching. Too often new teachers in online classes get excited about the new literacies and attempt to use too many tools at once. It is better for new instructors to select one or two tools to focus on and gradually move to adding new skills when they feel they have mastered the others. Blomeyer and Dawson (2005) concede "While most universities and colleges have established programs to prepare their faculty to teach online, school systems are just beginning to address this need" (p. 67).

Many research articles identify that the skills for teaching online are similar to those for teaching face-to-face. While this is true, the differences need to be addressed and resources provided to help teachers to deal with them. Schools and colleges of education need to be held accountable to prepare their teachers for a future with increasing numbers of students taking classes online. While there is no governmental movement for the dissolution of brick and mortar schools, online classes are providing a resource for students who do not fit into the traditional school, and many schools are using online classes to supplement the courses for students to expand beyond the limited curriculum of their schools (especially in rural and impoverished areas). To achieve this end, there needs to be changes both in teacher preparation as well as in the staff development that teachers are receiving in their districts. Another important aspect of teaching online is the support from administrators who can see the need and potential for this method of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Even though there have been few longitudinal studies into online learning (somewhat because of the short time that online education has been a factor), there is more than enough empirical data to provide a starting point for how to prepare our teachers to teach and work online (Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004). Online learning can no longer be considered a 'fad' that may quickly pass. It is likely that the delivery methods will continue to change as new and different tools are created and used, but the future appears to favor those who wish to teach and learn online. It is important that new teachers entering the profession be exposed to the process of learning online, but beyond that they need to understand the process as well. Once they have these skills, schools and districts need to utilize these tools for their students in regular K-12 classrooms. Teaching online does not limit the educational process and, in fact, allows teachers to be creative and expand beyond their classrooms. Students in schools need to understand how and when online courses can benefit them. If schools and teachers wish to stay relevant in these changing times, they cannot see online education as an option, but as a requirement to prepare students for their future, as described by Richardson (2009):

> [We] wonder whether, 25 or 50 years from now, when 4-5 billion people are connecting online, the real story of these times won't be the more global tests and transformation these technologies offered. How, as educators and learners, did we respond? (p. 4).

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