

The Use of Online Learning Methods in the Traditional Classroom

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Introduction

The traditional classroom has changed over the last couple of decades. As new technology has been developed, the learning that takes place in a traditional classroom continues to evolve. The amount of technology that students have access to at the K-12 level continues to increase. There has also been an increase in the level of technology use at the post-secondary level. With the increase in the use of technology in education, we also have seen courses that had previously been taught in the traditional classroom setting being offered through distance education and using new presentation techniques and other instruction methods as ways of delivering content. As distance education courses continue to become more and more common, it is important that courses taught in what is typically considered a traditional classroom setting adapt and use instruction methods found in distance education courses. By incorporating a blended learning environment, an instructor can integrate the best of both the traditional classroom and distance education classrooms.

What is Blended Learning?

As distance education has evolved over the years, there has been a large number of innovative instructional techniques that have been developed to enhance student learning in distance education courses. Many of these techniques can be used effectively in a traditional classroom in ways similar to how they are used in distance education courses. The idea that distance education instructional methods are used in classroom that involve the traditional classroom setting is the heart of what is known as blended learning. In his article, "Blended learning: The convergence of online and face-to-face conversation," John Watson stated that "blended learning combines online delivery of educational content with the best features of

classroom interaction and live instruction to personalize learning, allow thoughtful reflection, and differentiate instruction from student to student across a diverse group of learners.”

A Need for Blended Learning

One of the jobs of K-12 schools is to prepare their students for postsecondary schooling. Online education at the postsecondary level has increased drastically during recent years. In their report, *Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008*, Allen and Seaman state that during the fall of 2007 there were over 3.9 million student that took at least one online course. The 3.9 million students represent over 20 percent of all U.S. higher education students. The 3.9 million students also represents a 12.9 percent increase in the number of U.S. higher education students who were taking at least one online course when compared to the previous year.

Another job of K-12 schools is to prepare their students to be valuable contributors in the work force. An increasing number of businesses are turning to blended learning as a means of training their employees. Susie Alvarez (2005) discusses three reasons that businesses are turning to blended learning for their training. These reasons include cost reductions that result from saving money typically spent on live training sessions and the expenses associated with those sessions, distance barriers eliminated as learners are able to access the information wherever they may be located, and time flexibility that allows the worker to learn the new information when it is most convenient for them. Those schools that incorporate online learning strategies, which include blended learning in various forms, are giving their students the skills necessary to be successful in the work place.

Blended Learning at the K-12 Education Level

In order to determine if blended learning can be effective at the K-12 education level, it is important to gain an understanding of where we are at in terms of online education at these grade levels in the United States. Seaman and Picciano created a report entitled *K-12 Online Learning: A 2008 Follow-up of the Survey of U.S. School District Administrators* which presents data about the usage of online education at the K-12 level. The report is based on information from a follow-up survey conducted during the 2007-2008 school year. Findings of the survey indicate that 75% of responding public schools had at least one student who was taking an online or blended course. In 2007-2008, there were just over one million K-12 students taking part in an online course. This number represents just under a 50% increase compared to numbers in 2005-2006. Two other important findings of the survey are that K-12 schools are using online education courses to meet the needs of Advanced Placement students as well as those students who need credit recovery and that small, rural schools are using online education to provide their students with a variety of course choices.

The table below indicates the breakdown percentages of students by grade level of the total number of students who are involved in online education courses at the K-12 level.

Grades K-5	14%
Grades 6-8	17%
Grades 9-12	69%

*taken from Picciano and Seaman

This information shows that while the majority of online learning experiences take place at the high school level, there is a large amount of online education experiences taking place at the elementary and JH level. As the technology continues to develop and new educational technological advancements are made geared towards the lower grade levels, we will most likely

see an increase in the number of students engaged in online learning experiences at the elementary and JH levels.

Online and Distance Education Resources in the Traditional Classroom

Based on the information presented in the first part of this paper, one can see the importance of incorporating online and distance education resources in the traditional K-12 classroom. One important point is that this paper is designed to discuss ways to incorporate distance education techniques in a traditional classroom. There needs to be support given from the administration and the resources need to be provided in order for online and distance education resources to be used effectively in the traditional classroom setting. Teachers also have to remove any reluctance they may have as some teachers fear that technology will eventually replace them. By being willing to incorporate distance education ideas into their classroom, the teacher is providing a valuable asset to the student and that is the idea that student learning is not confined to the traditional classroom. Students may no longer have to worry about what they missed during the lecture that took place during class if that if teacher decides to post that lecture on the web.

Incorporating Blended Learning in K-12 Education

As the information stated in this paper shows, it is important that blended learning methods be incorporated into K-12 education. While it may seem to be questionable on how these methods can be used at the lower levels, it is never too early to get students involved with learning methods usually associated with distance education.

At the primary grade levels, many of the instruction methods associated with blended learning will not be able to be used. With that being said, teachers at this level can begin to incorporate some of these instruction methods into the curriculum. There are many resources

available on the Internet and through various software programs written for the primary grade levels that allow the instructor to use technology as a form of reinforcement that takes place after traditional in-class instruction has taken place (Scott, 2003). Another tool that can be used to incorporate online learning strategies into the primary grades would be the introduction of a student information web site in which the parents of the student would be able to go and communicate with the teacher as well as perform other tasks such as checking the student's grades and seeing if the student has any assignment missing. In South Dakota, an online package called Infinite Campus is used to perform many of the tasks listed as well as numerous other tasks that keep the parents informed about how the student is doing and information about school happenings. Infinite Campus is used as a communication tool at the K-12 level and has become a very valuable tool for teachers, students, and parents.

As students move into the upper elementary classes, new technology driven instructional methods can be used. Teachers can continue to use online resources and software packages to help enhance student learning. This can continue as the student moves on from elementary to junior high and on into high school. Since students in this age group have begun to develop a more complex vocabulary and are able to carry on more complex conversations, communication tools can be introduced that can be used by the students to enhance their learning. It is during this age group, that many of the students will get their first email account at home. Teachers of these students can build on that and teach the students how email can be used to enhance their learning. One method that can be used to teach the students how to appropriately use email as well as teaching them writing skills is to have the students foster a relationship with an online pen pal. There are a variety of websites that are designed to help students communicate with other students from both around the country and around the globe. It is important for teachers

that use an online program to research the website and make sure that they are legitimate and are designed for the right purpose.

Research has shown that students who have access to laptops and technology during the middle school years are more likely to show continued academic development than those students at this age level who do not have access to laptops and technology (Belanger, 2005). Beginning with the middle school years, teachers can begin to incorporate tools that enhance the communication and collaborative learning through the use of technology. One possible way that this can be accomplished is through the use of online course management systems, such as WebCt and Desire2Learn. Through programs such as these, the instructor can set up areas that are designed for students to collaborate using methods such as discussion threads and chat rooms. These online course management systems also allow for the students to take assessments online and receive their grade as soon as they finish for instant feedback and also allow the students to submit their assignments when they finish them without having to wait until they are in the teacher's actual classroom.

While most students at the high school level need the support that comes along with the direct contact with a teacher in a traditional classroom setting, many students at this age level are ready for the advanced learning that can take place using distance education and blended learning. One of the key areas in which distance education and blended learning comes into play is the increased availability of a variety of classes. Students are no longer restricted to the courses that are offered at their particular high school. If the student wishes to take a class that is simply not offered at their school, they will likely be able to find access to a course that is offered through distance education. This also gives advance students the capabilities of taking Advanced Placement courses that are not offered at their school as well as providing the

opportunity to get a head start on their postsecondary schooling. Instructors at the high school level can also expand on the use of online course management systems in their classrooms and to further foster collaborative learning experiences. Those teachers that are comfortable with using technology can also create podcasts of their class sessions which will allow students to download a particular day that they were absent or in which they simply feel they need a refresher on.

Conclusion

As technology continues to develop, it is important that K-12 schools get on board and provide their students with an education that is going to prepare them for life once they graduate from high school. In order to do this, teachers need to incorporate a variety of technology tools into their curriculum in a way that is going to enhance the traditional classroom learning that takes place. The concept of blended learning is one that is used at the postsecondary education, as well as in the business world. While teachers should not have the expectations that all of their traditional classroom instruction needs to become offered exclusively online, those teachers that are able to create a blended learning environment are best serving the needs of their students and that should be the main goal of education.

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