Pedagogical Perspectives for the Online Education Skeptic

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While online programs continue to grow at an astounding rate in higher education, many faculty remain skeptical of the efficacy of online models. This article provides an overview of some significant benefits of online education while recognizing some common concerns. An examination of the current literature and the authors’ own online experiences enable them to identify significant benefits in online education and suggest five foundational concepts for best practice. First and foremost, the goal of the online or hybrid classroom should not be to replicate the face-to-face classroom but to offer an effective learning experience.

The debate continues. Online programs grow at an astounding rate, but skepticism as to their efficacy and a fear of losing the advantages of the face-to-face classroom persist. Online enrollment growth continues to outpace overall enrollment growth. In fact, a look at the data from a 2011 Sloan report shows that online growth has outpaced total growth since 2003 from at least 3.6 times (2008) to as much as 30.4 times (2005) (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

In a 2006-2007 study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, researchers reported that 66% of 2-year and 4-year Title IV degree-granting postsecondary institutions offered online, hybrid, or other distance education courses. Of these, 61% offered fully online courses, and 35% offered hybrid online courses (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). In addition, 74% of public institutions believe that online education is critical for their long-
term strategy, compared to 51% of private for-profit and 50% of private nonprofit institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2010). It seems apparent that considering online learning as a part of institutional goals is becoming necessary for universities that wish to remain competitive.

Even while articles such as “Tomorrow’s College” in the November 5, 2010 edition of The Chronicle of Higher Education (Parry, 2010) look at the mainstream trends in online education, and scholars such as Baglione and Nastanski (2007) point to the strengths of online teaching models, skepticism as to the efficacy of online and hybrid instruction modes persists. As the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities’ Sloan National Commission on Online Learning reports, “The views of the faculty suggest that significant challenges must be resolved before online learning is universally accepted across the academy” (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 4; Gose, 2010). As higher education experiences a major shift toward online education, educators are challenged to examine the online paradigm and direct its development so that it best supports learning in specific contexts.

This article began as a response to the demonstrated growth of online programs and the skepticism of some faculty about this mode of instruction, including our own colleagues. Bejerano (2008) addressed the increase in the number of college and university courses offered online and expressed concern about what education may be losing as it increasingly adopts online methods of delivery. Bejerano’s views are not unique (even five years later) and represent common opinions among many of those teaching in higher education. Because of this tension between skeptical faculty and university administrations that see online education as a critical part of the university strategy, online programs may be launched with little input from faculty. The result can be programs that are not as pedagogically sound as they could be.

Definitions of Terms

Before we begin a detailed discussion of the five foundational concepts in effective online education, it is important to define some central terms. People use many different terms when discussing online and hybrid education, and these terms are not yet used consistently. In this article, we use the definitions provided in Table 1, which are adapted from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. These definitions are reasonably representative of the usage of the terms in higher education today.

While we, as instructors, prefer web-assisted, hybrid, and online (synchronous and asynchronous) instruction modes and make our choice of instructional format based on course context, all methods can be effective
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of Instruction</th>
<th>Mode Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Face-to-Face</td>
<td>Course meets face-to-face for all of the course contact hours prescribed by the course type and units. Syllabus/grades may be posted online.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Web-Assisted</td>
<td>Course meets face-to-face for all of the course contact hours prescribed for the course type and units. Syllabus/grades may be posted online. Some course materials/activities are online and require active student access.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>Course uses both face-to-face and online instructional modes [asynchronous and/or synchronous] and meets face-to-face for 25%-75% of the course contact hours prescribed by the course type and units.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online (Asynchronous Local)</td>
<td>100% of the course instruction is delivered in an asynchronous instruction mode. Scheduled face-to-face meetings may be required for orientation and student evaluation.</td>
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<td>Online (Synchronous Local)</td>
<td>100% of the course instruction is delivered in a synchronous instruction mode. Scheduled face-to-face meetings may be required for orientation and student evaluation.</td>
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with the right preparation and delivery. Throughout this article, we use
the generic term online education to refer to all of the above modes of
instruction except face-to-face and Web-assisted. When we wish to point
to a specific mode, we use the terms above.

Using a critical analysis of current literature and applying our own
experiences, we suggest five foundational concepts for best practices in
online education:

1. The goal of the online classroom should not be to repli-
cate the face-to-face classroom but to offer an effective
learning experience.

2. Online courses can be produced very well or very poorly.
The need for and development of online courses should
be evaluated in the context of the course, the program,
the students, the technology, and the faculty.

3. Thorough planning and a rich mixture of technology
enable effective learning.

4. Social communication is an important consideration in
online learning as it supports the effective transfer of
knowledge and the development of trust.

5. It is critical to address student, faculty, and admin-
istrative motivators in order to provide programs of
excellence.

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*Note. Definitions have been adapted from those used at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona ([http://www.csupomona.edu/~elearning/assets/facultycenter/online_hybrid_course_definitions.pdf](http://www.csupomona.edu/~elearning/assets/facultycenter/online_hybrid_course_definitions.pdf)).*
Working from these five foundational concepts, we address the nature and value of online education in order to contribute to a more informed process of decision making on the part of educators. While some serious concern regarding online education is generated by earlier forms of distance education, including correspondence courses and for-profit models, there is a rich and growing body of knowledge supporting the benefits of quality education delivered online.

1. Replication is Not the Goal.

The first of five foundational concepts for effective online education is that the goal of the online classroom should not be to replicate the face-to-face classroom but to offer an effective learning experience. While Bejerano (2008) indicates a few advantages to online education (such as the limited traditional classroom space and the conception—or misconception—that online courses are easier), she cites many problems with the online mode of instruction. She indicates that critics “question whether students who take online courses and programs are getting the same caliber of education as their face-to-face counterparts” and “argue that because of intrinsic differences, online education cannot possibly replicate the learning that occurs in traditional face-to-face classrooms” (p. 411). Though this argument is common, it is not particularly useful.

Replication of the face-to-face classroom should not be the goal of online education; rather, the goals should be better learning and higher quality education. There can be more than one path to these goals—one provided by traditional face-to-face education and another provided by online and hybrid modes of instruction. Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) encourage educators to think of online education differently than they do face-to-face education. In online education, electronic tools mediate communication and act as a screen through which communication must pass. Thus, the communication itself changes; however, the goal of effective education remains the same. Cargile Cook (2005) writes that a central issue of quality in online education is pedagogy over technology: “ . . . [D]istance education courses must be pedagogy-driven, not technology-driven—courses wherein instructors plan and implement pedagogically sound goals and appropriate activities that are supported by technology choices” (p. 65).

There is a tendency to look at new paradigms with suspicion, and rightly so. New paradigms do, indeed, need to be examined critically rather than accepted blindly. By carefully examining the effect of technology on pedagogy, educators can control the technology toward specific goals rather than being controlled by it toward no goal other than moving a course online.
In the case of online education, skeptics often point to a “gap.” This gap is usually interpreted as the physical distance between students and educators. Skeptics treat this gap as insurmountable. The truth, however, is that such gaps exist in all types of instructional modes. As Carter and Rickly (2005) write, “In online education, it is tempting to call the distance gap the primary ‘problem.’ However, . . . the distance gap is but one of many observable (and unobservable) gaps in both the online and face-to-face classroom” (p. 125). A student at the University of Central Florida once remarked, “If you want to encounter distance education . . . sit in the back of a 500-seat lecture” (Parry, 2010, p. B6). Carter and Rickly (2005) go on to point out that what is important is careful “minding” of those gaps, wherever they may be found, in order to implement any instructional mode successfully. In some contexts, online classrooms offer alternative forms of communication that are more effective than face-to-face classrooms in minding the gaps. For example, in asynchronous forums, students are able to spend some time thinking before they respond to prompts from the instructor. In turn, other students are able to formulate related responses that help them to connect with one another. Students often respond to one another with a care and encouragement that is not possible in the faster paced face-to-face classroom. The presence of this dynamic in the online classroom can contribute to an effective learning process.

2. Develop Courses in Context.

Online education can be delivered very well or very poorly. With an emphasis on context and minding the gaps, the potential exists to present online courses in such a way as to equal or exceed the student learning benefits of the face-to-face classroom. The context of any potential course includes the program, the students, the technology, and the faculty. All instructional modes are not appropriate in all contexts. Studies are gradually revealing a picture of online education showing it to be potentially very effective for student learning when contextualized properly. In this section, we examine a few of these contextual factors in more detail.

While in some contexts online courses may be less effective or as effective as face-to-face courses, in other contexts, online courses actually may be superior. Baglione and Nastanski (2007) suggest that the online environment encourages debate, evidence to support claims, rich discussion, and reflection. We have observed that online students are better prepared in terms of having read their material and having given it some thought beforehand than are their face-to-face counterparts. This observation is supported by Lineweaver’s (2010) experimental study. Lineweaver de-
signed an online component for her face-to-face courses and randomly assigned students to discussion groups. Students participated in the online discussion only for every other chapter so that she could compare ratings from a self-report questionnaire. She concluded that “online discussions improve student preparation for class, require students to actively engage course material, and ensure that students interact with each other about course content outside of the classroom” (p. 209).

It is much more difficult to pretend to be prepared in the online classroom than in the face-to-face classroom, where students can use their physical presence—non-verbals; verbals that indicate agreement, disagreement, or skepticism; and so on—without having to articulate a full thought. Of course, the face-to-face teacher can call on students to elaborate, but class size and other variables may make this difficult. In an online classroom, students may have only text and audio to represent themselves and, thus, that text must have adequate substance. The absence of substance becomes glaringly obvious very quickly to the teacher and other students. In addition, the semi-anonymity of the online classroom (for example, situations where students are represented only by their text) makes students much less reserved about speaking up. In the online environment, they are often more willing to respond to both the professor and each other, which leads to richer discussions. For example, depending on the semester, we have taught some courses in both face-to-face and online formats. Discussions in face-to-face courses often involve only a handful of students actively engaged (at least without our calling on specific students to contribute). In online courses, however, most of the students participate in discussions. While some student responses are short and address the topic at a surface level, many are longer and deeper, as students take time to think as they type their responses (in both synchronous and asynchronous discussions). The increased diversity of perspectives involved in the discussion makes for a richer experience for all students.

A meta-analysis of online education published by the U. S. Department of Education also sheds some light on issues of context:

- Students who took all or part of their course online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction. (p. 14)
- Instruction combining online and face-to-face elements had a larger advantage relative to purely face-to-face instruction than did purely online instruction.
- The effectiveness of online learning approaches appears
As point three above indicates, the online classroom is more accessible for different types of learning, but online classrooms also offer accessibility in other ways not possible in face-to-face education. Leaders at Corporate Voices for Working Families, a nonprofit group that encourages communication between education and the workplace, finds that “simply adding an online section or even a blended component to a course can significantly increase the likelihood that a working student or parent will not only attend but succeed” (Milliron, 2010, p. B31). Another effect of increased accessibility is the diversity that is enabled by the online classroom. Students can attend classes from anywhere in the world, contributing to international diversity. This flexibility also attracts older learners (Keller & Mangan, 2010), and the mixture of culture, age, and experience levels enriches the online classroom.

We can make the entire world available to our students using online learning. In fact, the first author often uses virtual teams as a tool to enrich her courses, whether they are delivered face-to-face, online, or as hybrids, and she even arranges for students to work on projects with students in other nations, enriching the learning experience so that it is situated in a real context that challenges students’ virtual communication skills as well as their intercultural skills.

Given such characteristics as have been discussed in this section, educators must make deliberate choices as to whether a course can be offered effectively using a fully online or hybrid instructional mode. Contexts that may be especially suited to online education include those where

- rich discussion is a goal;
- a level playing field is the goal;
- different learner types need to be accommodated;
- student accessibility, including globalization, is a factor; and
- diversity is a factor.

3. Plan Comprehensively.

Once a decision is made to offer a course online or as a hybrid, the
course must be planned with three things in mind: the course content, the student profile, and the effects of technology. Thorough planning and a rich mix of technologies are the basis of any successful online or hybrid course. The successful course can then support higher-order learning. Planning should include such issues as pace, class size, levels of student learning, feedback, and higher-order learning. The construction of online courses using a rich variety of media (for example, instant messaging, audio chat, asynchronous discussion forums) is imperative, and perhaps most significant in this construction is the choice as to whether to use a regular synchronous element as part of the media mix (that is, students and teacher are together in real time). Our experience is that the synchronous element often makes the difference between providing an excellent or a mediocre learning experience, largely because of the support for social communication that will be discussed in detail in the next section.

While we prefer to construct our online courses with a strong synchronous element that allows us to integrate more real-time interaction, courses based only on asynchronous communication also can be effective. This instructional mode can be tricky, however, because a fully asynchronous format removes some richness of communication and, thus, creates a greater learning gap. Barbour, McLaren, and Zhang (2012) found that most students were satisfied with their asynchronous online experiences. “They liked their online learning because they felt their teachers were well prepared and it offered a greater level of independence and control over their own learning” (p. 235). However, the researchers did find that students were distracted by off-task behavior during asynchronous classes by as much as 20-50% of their allocated time. Furthermore, “They indicated the reasons for this off-task behavior were the fact their asynchronous course content was not engaging and teachers often assigned more traditional seatwork (e.g., questions or activities from the textbook or written assignments)” (Kock & Lynn, 2012, p. 235). It may be that educators face a greater challenge providing an effective online learning experience in an online (fully asynchronous) instructional mode because of both the reduced media richness and reduced social connections.

We require that students in our online courses meet online with us and their classmates for an average of two hours per week. We use some type of Web conferencing tool for these synchronous meetings, during which we can lecture, discuss, present slides, have students present (a valuable skill for them), and ask students to work in small groups. A combination of synchronous and asynchronous elements provides a very rich flexibility that accommodates different learning styles (for example, putting introverts on a more equal playing field). We have also used a 3D world
to support synchronous and asynchronous modes of instruction. The 3D world has the additional advantage of providing a place where students can run into each other serendipitously, giving them the opportunity for social/informal communication.

**Pace**

One issue that should be addressed in online course planning is that technology slows the pace of online synchronous meetings as compared to face-to-face meetings. This is the result of slower turn taking due to the sharing of technologies, such as the microphone and the typing speeds of participants during text chats. These factors lead to less material being covered during a synchronous online meeting than a face-to-face meeting. We estimate that online synchronous meetings may move at about two thirds the pace of a face-to-face class, although we have not gathered empirical evidence of this estimation. Such a difference in pace must be mitigated with careful planning, both of the synchronous meeting and the variety of supplementary techniques that are used. These supplements can include asynchronous discussion forums, instant messaging between students and between students and professor, and online office hours. In addition, the professor must plan the synchronous sessions carefully with a combination of media including such elements as text chats, podcasts, slides, and so forth.

**Class Size**

The pace of an online course is also affected by class size. In suggesting a framework for evaluating class size in online education, Taft, Perkowski, and Martin (2011) argue that class size depends upon the educational framework. For instance, they suggest that an objectivist instructional approach (all one-way) allows for very large class sizes, but a constructivist approach (all interactive) calls for small- to medium-sized classes (≤ 20-25 students). They also suggest different class sizes depending on the level of Bloom’s Taxonomy into which the teaching and learning fall (see Figure 1). Thus, depending on the intensity of the teaching and the type of learning expectation, Taft, Perkowski, and Martin would recommend different online class sizes. We find that our approach (more constructivist, cognitively present, at the mid- to upper-level dimension of Bloom’s Taxonomy) falls into the smaller class size recommendation.

**Feedback**

Incorporate feedback into your plan. Because online education is
distance education, and problems in the communication loop can go unidentified more easily in online than in face-to-face communication (Lipnack, 2008; Priest, Stagl, Klein, & Salas, 2006), instructors should make a conscious and sustained effort to get continuous feedback. Begin by having a conversation with students about the experiences they have already had (or not had) in online education and what their communication preferences are. Continue these conversations throughout a course, asking at the end of each synchronous class meeting how the class worked from a student perspective. This formative collection of student opinion (similar to participatory design) is yet another element that can make the difference between a poor and an excellent online course. Continuously involve students with each other and the professor in meta-communicative activities so that any problems can be quickly and effectively dealt with.

Figure 1
Bloom’s Taxonomy

Note. Source: http://ww2.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm)
Higher-Order Learning

The ability of online education to support higher-order learning is another issue that concerns many instructors. Higher-order learning, as defined by McLoughlin and Mynard (2009), refers to “skills such as comprehension, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application. These skills involve the manipulation of information, not simply memorisation” (p. 148). Can online courses encourage and teach such skills? Yes, with planning.

Some scholars are skeptical and posit that online education is suitable only for lower-order cognitive learning. For example, lower-order cognitive tasks would include the ability to recall and comprehend basic facts, while higher-order learning would include the ability to evaluate and synthesize. However, evidence is emerging that supports the ability of online education to mediate higher-order learning quite successfully. For example, in a face-to-face classroom, students are challenged to respond more immediately than they are online. Thus, online class discussion allows for reflection and more thoughtful responses (Avery, Civjan, & Johri, 2005). Conducting peer reviews online may be more effective than conducting them in the face-to-face classroom, because, as Breuch (2005) and other scholars mention, online peer reviews help apprehensive students perform better. Students may also benefit from increased time for reflections, an increased tendency to offer more focused and direct comments, an increased tendency to criticize honestly, and the ability to archive (Breuch, 2005).

One component contributing to higher-order learning online is the ability to discuss and process complex subjects. In a study of 122 faculty who were experienced with both online and face-to-face instructional modes, Baglione and Nastanski (2007) found that “three quarters of those educators believe the online environment facilitates more substantive discussion [as compared to face-to-face]” (p. 139). In addition, the authors commented that “the primary student benefit of threaded discussion is that it supports the flexibility needs of the adult learner, while allowing time for research and reflection and reducing participation anxiety for shy students” (p. 140). They go on to describe other characteristics of online learning that support higher-order learning, such as the opportunity to research, share substantiated ideas, recognize such ideas from others, prepare thoroughly, reflect, synthesize, and identify patterns. Online environments are places where “students can develop strong analytic and critical thinking skills based on inherent time, reflection, and distribution of advantages” (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007, p. 149). Online affordances that support reflection, synthesis, and pattern identification contribute
to the success of online learning, as reported in a study based on the results of a survey of approximately 17,000 students at 45 baccalaureate degree-granting institutions (Chen, Guidry, & Lambert, 2009). Chen, Guidry, and Lambert (2009) concluded that

not only do students who utilize the Internet and online technology in their learning tend to score higher in the traditional student engagement measures (e.g., level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and supportive campus environment), they also are more likely to make use of deep learning approaches like higher-order thinking, reflective learning, and integrative learning in their study. They also reported higher gains in general education, practical competence, and personal and social development. (p. 19)

Key elements in the work of scholars who recognize the ability of online education to support higher-order learning are the flexibility of this form of education to meet the needs of many types of learners (something that has always challenged the face-to-face classroom) and the time afforded to students to think through their responses and synthesize them toward more depth in learning. In a well-planned online course, students can choose to communicate in synchronous audio or text chats, in asynchronous discussion forums, in small and large groups, and so on. Students often have a choice to rely more heavily on the medium with which they are most comfortable.

Cargile Cook (2005) observes that while technology may easily meet objectivist learning theories, it is more challenging to use technology to meet dialogic and collaborative activities. Technology, though, has continued to evolve in such ways as to support a diverse collection of learning activities. With attention to the specific goal of higher-order learning and its accompanying elements, instructors can use the online classroom to challenge students’ higher-order learning skills.


Social communication is an important consideration in the online learning process. Studies support the importance of social communication in building trust, transferring knowledge, and supporting satisfaction in online teams (Chung, 1995; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997; Priest et al., 2006; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Likewise, social communication is likely to be of significance in the effective transfer of knowledge in online learning contexts. Some scholars have established that this important indicator of student success (that is, social integration with other students and
faculty) may be missing or be more challenging in online education (Bejerano, 2008; Cargile Cook, 2007). Synchronous meetings help to create the following benefits:

- establish a class as its own community,
- encourage social communication and trust,
- serve as a forum for questions and answers to which everyone is privy in real time, and
- provide some similarities to the traditional classroom environment.

Leh’s (2002) research indicates that an advantage of synchronous courses over asynchronous is that they strengthen the sense of belonging that students experience. In Leh’s (2002) research project, one student stated, “although we do not see each other every week, the real-time communication makes me feel we belong to the same class” (p. 35).

While research supports the importance of social integration, online education doesn’t mean that students “miss out” on social opportunities, but such communication must be constructed differently online. For example, Walther (1996), who developed seminal theories in computer-mediated communication, refers to a potential for online interactions to surpass face-to-face interactions in social effectiveness with his hyper-personal theory. In comparing face-to-face groups with computer-mediated communication groups, he found that though online social connections took more time to develop, they could ultimately be more effective.

In her survey of online students, Ouzts (2006) confirmed the importance of student interaction and a sense of social integration to the online learning experience. Classes that had been designed to support such connections were much more successful from a student perspective than classes that did not support such connections. In our own online courses, we encourage this social integration deliberately in a number of ways. First, we require that students post introductions of themselves on an asynchronous Web board prior to the start of a course. Then, during the first class and during all subsequent classes for very short periods of time, we begin by engaging students in casual conversation in a synchronous chat. These conversations allow us to begin building trust, which supports successful online teams (Chung, 1995; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997; Priest et al., 2006; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Thus far, we have been able to support only casual chats in small to medium classes, because using audio with larger groups still becomes confusing in terms of individual
identification. Even in the smaller classes, we find that many students prefer text chat over audio.

We also assign projects that require students to work in small groups using their tools of choice. They may use Facebook, Twitter, Google Drive, e-mail, and so on to support not only their work but social interaction. They communicate some of this social interaction to us when they say things like, “Yeah, we are getting to know each other,” or “We spent some time together on Facebook the other night.” These social interactions include discussions of family, friends, and extracurricular activities as well as course assignments. We also notice signs in synchronous class meetings that students are bonding when the casual conversation increases. Hung and Yuen (2010) found that students connected with one another and expressed favorable feelings towards their learning experience when social networking was used as a supplement in courses. Social communication greatly enhances knowledge transfer, trust, and satisfaction among people who work online together. Synchronous opportunities, however they are structured, support social communication.

5. Address Student, Faculty, and Administrative Motivators.

Student, faculty, and administrative motivators must be addressed in order to provide programs of excellence. The costs of fielding online classes as well as the motivational factors for students and faculty vary significantly when comparing online to face-to-face education. In the following sections, we review some of the significant differences.

Student Motivators

Students may view online programs with some skepticism, as do some in higher education. A study by Leonard and Guha (2001) revealed skepticism by students but subsequently showed that the “majority of students [in an online education program] taking online courses find that [online courses] meet their academic needs and improve their technological skills” (p. 51). Eaton (2005) found similar results in a study where students identified what they like most about the online classroom. While convenience and flexibility were high priorities for students, they also identified diversity among classmates and the ability to prepare in advance as significant advantages of the online classroom. In this same study, students were asked what they disliked about the online classroom. Most often mentioned was a lack of face-to-face communication with classmates and professors. However, the response rates for dislikes were much lower than for likes among students (Eaton, 2005). For example, of seven specific
“likes” for online education, five of those likes were recognized by 65% or more of participants. Of six specific “dislikes,” only one dislike was recognized by 65% of participants. The other five specific dislikes were recognized by an average of 19% of participants (Eaton, 2005).

A value of online education that students may not readily perceive is that many core abilities necessary to success in the workplace are also necessary in the online classroom. Leadership skills and self-motivation are highly valued by employers and are important for student success in the workplace. In the online classroom, students have the opportunity to practice and hone these skills. Some would argue against online education, linking higher attrition rates to a lack of self-discipline and the ability to learn independently. However, linking the development of self-discipline and independent learning required in online learning to valuable workplace skills could be a motivator for students. If students do not have these skills, it is not a reason to avoid online education, but it is a call to instructors to recognize a need of students that must be addressed, regardless of instructional delivery mode.

Online education, in fact, demands that students become proactive and organized. It has been our experience that students rise to this challenge with little increase in attrition over the traditional classroom. A study at the University of California, Irvine supports this view. Researchers collected data over a two-year period and found that “the total drop-out rate in this two-year study, before instruction as well as after course start, is 21 percent in online classes and 16 percent in on ground classes” (Frydenberg, 2007, p. 12). Furthermore, they found that “there is no striking difference in attrition after instruction has begun; in fact, there is no difference at all” (Frydenberg, 2007, p. 12).

Online instruction presents challenges similar to those encountered in the workplace. Because of this, students are receiving an educational experience in a compelling and real context, a characteristic of best practices in undergraduate education (Eison, 2002).

Faculty Motivators

Faculty motivation, satisfaction, and support certainly are concerns when considering the growth of online education. In a 2010 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education devoted entirely to online learning, one article reported the following: “A 2007 survey of more than 10,000 faculty members at 69 public colleges and universities found that more than two-thirds of professors thought online learning was inferior or somewhat inferior to face-to-face instruction” (Gose, 2010, p. B10). These results are significant and not to be ignored. Our experience certainly confirms such results:
Many of our colleagues at various institutions view online instruction with this same sense of skepticism. However, when we enter into conversations with them, we find that three factors often play a significant role in this skepticism: misconceptions about what constitutes an effective online course (colleagues often group all online instruction together and view it as if it were all the same); fear of the unknown if they themselves have not taught online courses; or concern about higher attrition rates they have experienced. When we continue the conversation with them and acknowledge the importance of contextual factors (for example, not all types of courses may be suited to online delivery), faculty often begin to consider online opportunities more seriously.

It is important to note here that because students, too, are often skeptical of online instruction, their skepticism has an impact on faculty. Cowan (2011) claims that “digital natives” are not necessarily digital learners. Though students use technology to accomplish a myriad of tasks each day, they do not necessarily want to learn via technology. Students’ skepticism can be a de-motivator for faculty unless they are willing to see it as a challenge instead of a stumbling block. Cowan (2011) states that “learning depends on the teacher’s skill and the student’s motivation, not on the technology involved” (p. B35). As teachers, we have the opportunity to use online education to expose students to and help them learn to use the technologies they will encounter in the workplace.

To a concern that faculty may find online teaching relationally unrewarding, we respond that this is true: Not everyone is suited to online teaching. On the other hand, online teaching may complement the styles and personalities of some professors better than face-to-face interaction. Some professors, like David Hailey of Utah State University, are enthusiastic about online teaching. In a discussion on the listserv of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, he said, “I love my online classes. I would rather teach online to these students than any other kind of teaching I can imagine. And the students seem to like the classes. My evals are typically a standard deviation above average, and I honestly believe the students learn twice what they could learn in a normal seminar” (D. Hailey, personal communication, June 12, 2013). Gina Greco of Hudson Valley Community College loves teaching online, even though she may have initially been skeptical (Greco, 2009). She found that using natural language, eliminating anxiety for students, adding some humor, and planning effectively led to an online experience that is successful and in which she and her students feel connected. Many faculty and students have captured this connectedness online. In a focus group study of faculty motivators and de-motivators in teaching online, Hiltz, Shea, and
Kim (2010) found that faculty teaching online courses were motivated by such factors as increased flexibility, improved personal interaction, and increased “reach” in the ability to include a more diverse student group. De-motivators included inadequate support and limitations of the technology.

Another concern faculty have expressed concerns evaluation of online and hybrid courses, both by peers and students. Bennett and Barp (2008) argued that peer observation needs to keep up with the trend toward blended learning. Thus, we need to develop guidelines for online peer observation and evaluation. Many students (and faculty) have participated in online surveys. Completing course evaluations online should be no different. In fact, there may be an increased sense of anonymity for students using online evaluations because there is no faculty or proctor presence. Some faculty have expressed concerns that teaching online will lower their student evaluations. However, Dziuban and Moskal (2011) compared student response patterns to an end-of-course rating system for face-to-face, blended, and fully online courses and found that “students do not consider course mode an important element when defining the dimensions by which they evaluate their educational experience” (p. 239). This brings us back to Cowan’s (2011) assertion that it is not the technology used but the skill of the instructor that is important.

Online models also may open up more opportunity for faculty to travel and research as well as to involve students in their research. As Conley (2010) discusses in his article on blending 18th-century traditions and 21st-century technology, online education offers professors the unprecedented opportunity to replace repetitive tasks such as lectures to large bodies of students with alternative delivery methods like video, freeing up more time for mentoring relationships, research, and travel. Just as the face-to-face classroom presents benefits and limitations, so does the online or the hybrid classroom. While some faculty may find it difficult to design online instruction and feel satisfied with it, others find the potential of online courses to be satisfying in new and rich ways.

Administrative Motivators

Administrators are naturally interested in the revenue and cost factors of online and hybrid education. A recent study of “virtual” campuses of Texas schools concluded that “the TeleCampus has a cost of delivery that is within the range of what was found for delivery costs of face-to-face, but it is close to the lower end of that range” (Coppola, 2011, p. 178). This study focused solely on delivery costs. In another study of online course costs, Schiffman (2005) noted that online courses are often offered at an
average faculty to student ratio of 1 to 25. In addition, Schiffman points out that online course offerings may delay on-campus construction costs. While this study is limited in scope, it does indicate the potential for online education to be cost competitive. However, it is not a miracle of cost savings.

Teaching online is time-intensive and can be intimidating to novices who do not yet have a clear concept of what a successful online course might look like. As we discussed earlier, class size should be determined by the teaching methods and learning goals of the course. Academic administrators who want to field quality programs need to keep this in mind as part of the infrastructure costs of providing online programs. Schools do not have to provide classroom space for online courses; however, to accommodate and encourage instructors they should consider course loads, training, active technology support, and class sizes if they wish to field online programs of excellence. In addition, some schools are finding that allowing sponsoring programs/departments to reap some of the monetary profit from growing online programs encourages growth (Keller, 2010). Working with an eye toward excellence can also help in garnering faculty support.

**Conclusions**

*Effective* online programs are approached with thorough research and constructed with care in specific contexts. Educators who have not yet experienced online teaching or who have observed poorly launched programs may question online constructs. Whether a course is face-to-face, has an online component, is a hybrid, or is fully online, quality is vital. Determining quality based on student outcomes is tricky. Does quality depend upon delivery method? Does it mean that students have received and “learned” specific content? Does it mean that students have developed critical thinking and communication skills? Does it mean that students have shown a grasp of interpersonal and social awareness so as to be prepared to contribute positively to society? Educators have long struggled with determining outcome expectations and assessing success. Developing a quantifiable rubric, while important, may be difficult; however, changing perceptions may be even more of a challenge.

A number of researchers in online education emphasize the importance of pedagogy over technology in planning and implementing online courses. As Rude (2005) notes, “... the time is right for this pedagogy [online]. . . . But success also follows from planning with emphasis on pedagogy and sustainability” (p. 67). Rude’s emphasis on planning and
sustainability are central to the notion of quality online education. Her use of “sustainability” refers not only to the stability of the program but the ability to sustain the interest and regard of both students and faculty. Ascough (2002) also confirms the importance of placing pedagogy before technology in order to “insure quality education no matter what the content or mode of delivery” (p. 17). While we may lose some of the advantages of the face-to-face classroom when we teach and learn online, we gain other advantages because online programs are paradigmatically different than face-to-face programs; in both cases, programs can be delivered very well or very poorly.

In a recent discussion of online education on the Association of Internet Researchers discussion list, one correspondent pointed out that the discussion of whether online or face-to-face education is better is actually a false dilemma. The issue is meaningful only when analyzed within context; neither mode is inherently better. The perceived value of degrees that have been earned online will continue to grow as it becomes clear that online education can be done very well, indeed. Savvy employers will look closely at the program, the institution, and the graduate in question. In turn, educators must focus on the pedagogy, not on a perceived need to replicate the face-to-face classroom. Researchers need to mind the research gaps and produce data that guide recommendations on the components of the online classroom, such as pace, class size, modes of instruction in specific contexts, attrition, evaluation, and media mix.

The most useful avenues of future inquiry lie not in a discussion of online versus offline courses but in a discussion of two issues: (1) which instructional modes are most effective in specific contexts and (2) how to facilitate excellence in learning within a given context. Thus, in planning online curricula, educators should begin with the goals of those curricula and courses. They should consider both the strengths and weaknesses of the online and the face-to-face classroom as well as other contextual issues such as the characteristics of students and expert faculty. Based on these factors, an informed decision can be made as to whether a course or a curriculum should be offered in online, hybrid, or face-to-face instructional modes, and what gaps most need to be addressed based on factors of student learning.

Online course design, when planned and delivered well, is time consuming—more so than face-to-face course design. Of course, time commitment decreases somewhat once a faculty member has experience with an online course. However, keeping a sense of immediacy with the students in the online environment does tend to be time intensive, especially as class sizes get larger. Just as in a traditional classroom, the
instructor—not the technology—is the driving force in a successful online course. Faculty can provide a well-planned course that has been constructed within the living context of the program, the course, the institution, and the student population. In her study of the sense of community in online courses, Ouzts (2006) found that students emphasized the role of the teacher: “In courses rated as high [in] sense of community, the teacher was described as a positive force in the class: interactive, present, guided instruction, spent time, open, honest, and human. As one student said, ‘It is the instructor!’” (p. 291). In addition, because there is such a dependence on computer-mediated technology, Baglione and Nastanski (2007) point out that “faculty participation, setting standards, and using the technologically inherent advantages of asynchronous environment are crucial to the success of online discussions” (p. 141). It is the teacher who, through careful planning, can ensure that an online course is pedagogy driven and contextually sound.

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