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DISTANCE LEARNING

... For Educators, Trainers, and Leaders

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PURPOSE
Distance Learning, an official publication of the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA), is sponsored by the USDLA, by the Fischler School of Education and Human Services at Nova Southeastern University, and by Information Age Publishing. Distance Learning is published four times a year for leaders, practitioners, and decision makers in the fields of distance learning, e-learning, telecommunications, and related areas. It is a professional magazine with information for those who provide instruction to all types of learners, of all ages, using telecommunications technologies of all types. Articles are written by practitioners for practitioners with the intent of providing usable information and ideas for readers. Articles are accepted from authors with interesting and important information about the effective practice of distance teaching and learning.

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In Upcoming Issues

The Best of *Distance Learning*

The next three issues of *Distance Learning* will provide a collection of the outstanding articles written by our regular columnists, beginning with Errol Craig Sull. Subsequent issues of *Distance Learning* journal will feature a collection of Natalie Millman's "Ends and Means" columns and a collection of Simonson's "And Finally" columns. We hope you will enjoy this slight change in the journal's content.

Managing the Stacks of Students' Papers to Grade Without Going Crazy

Robert Hill

> After that first or second year, the workload becomes more manageable, but the hardest—and, to me, most stressful and distressing—part of the job remains: grading students' work. It's the part of the job that, in my opinion, induces the greatest uncertainty, discomfort, and angst. (Tierney, 2013, para. 3)

One of the onerous and least attractive parts of being a faculty member or teacher, no matter what the level of education, is grading students' papers. While a necessary and vital part of our professional duties and responsibilities, no one eagerly awaits the arrival of the first set of student papers once the semester begins. However, there is no need complaining about or loathing this routine part of academia as it comes with the territory. It would be analogous to doctors talking about their profession but complaining about having to see patients. I do not know anyone who actually enjoys reading and grading a class set of students' research papers. It is often tedious and time-consuming work that not all of our students appreciate. Yet through mostly trial and error, I have gleaned some successful instructional strategies over the last 30 years of teaching that I hope will help others get through their own grading, assessment, and evaluation of students' work while also managing their own stress levels. While teaching is both an art and a science, grading (especially students' writing) can also be quite subjective. I hope, though, to impart here some practical tips to readily take away and put to good use this semester.

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First of all, some context: I currently teach doctoral-level students mostly online via Blackboard in three 15-week trimesters. Often, I teach two or three courses that include live interactive synchronous class sessions. I routinely assign one collaborative "team assignment" at the end of the semester where all the two to three member teams present to the rest of the class on

a case study or a current topic via Collaborate Live. This group activity is usually a Powerpoint or Prezi presentation amounting to 10-15% of the overall semester grade, but it is not a formal academic paper to grade. I also do not give formal tests or quizzes to doctoral students. I would not do this even if had a face-to-face class or a blended/hybrid class, although I know there is now technology that would safeguard this type of online activity. I want graduate students to exercise critical thinking (analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating) rather than to merely utilize lower level skills (such as remembering facts, definitions, etc.), only to regurgitate information in a timed test and then forget later.

Consequently, most of my students' grade is determined through written work—whether it be on the class discussion board via the typical threaded discussions where students post to some prompt and then reply to each other's response or via major written assignments. Thus, I usually have two to three major American Psychological Association (APA)-formatted assignments in each course I teach with one being a capstone research paper totaling 12-14 pages. With all the technological innovations in education, there is not yet a reliable machine or software that responds to student writing as the professor does in the context of his or her instruction. So until a more sophisticated and highly personalized Scantron machine is developed, having a working strategy to manage the sheer number of papers I receive and be able to provide quick yet meaningful academic feedback to my students is essential to maintaining my sanity. Yes, welcome to my world, but although I often feel alone, isolated, and sometimes under the crunch, I know my colleagues share my plight, as do thousands of other faculty.

Like most professors, I routinely visit my course syllabi and tweak them—adding more specifics and emphasis (bolding, underlining, and clarifying certain passages) in the explanations and directions of particular assignments. I also have rubrics (which I know some colleagues resist) for each assignment, as I want my students to know exactly how they will be evaluated. I have refined these rubrics or writing guides, modifying the criteria and point values over the last couple of years. I have wrestled with the notion of providing sample papers from previous students (with their permission and names removed). I no longer provide samples for doctoral students (though I might consider doing so for undergraduates), because the sample paper can hinder students' creativity. Moreover, no professor wants to read 12-15 papers that are organized identically.

A recent innovation that I have incorporated into my online courses is a 5-minute video recorded in our studio with the information technology folks or sometimes with just a simple laptop camera using Camtasia software. I have recorded these for each major written assignment in the concentration courses that I teach and later added graphics and clip art, along with the syllabus. The videos are posted so students can view them anytime, even before they enroll in the course. I have found that by doing this they can watch the video any time and as many times as they want, and it really cuts down on the instructional time that I have to spend answering questions during my live or synchronous class sessions. If you regularly teach the same course and have developed a good assignment, I would recommend utilizing this easy strategy to avoid having to explain the same assignment over and over.

Another effective strategy to employ *before* the semester begins, regardless of the course level or even the instructional delivery format, is first to print out monthly calendars (you can easily find blank monthly calendars as Microsoft Word documents online for each month) for each course you teach. I am a visual learner and I need to physically see and plan when I will make Assignment #1 (and #2, etc.) in one class

due to avoid the same due date in one of my other classes. Trust me, once you have two major sets of papers due on the same date, you will never ever do that to yourself (or your loved ones) again. Students really appreciate receiving these finished calendars, as I type the dates right on them in different colors when the various assignments are due and when we are scheduled to meet synchronously online. Granted this is mostly common sense, but having 7 days to grade 14 students' papers due one Sunday night at midnight before another set of papers from another class comes in the following Sunday makes all the difference in the world.

Tangentially, if you have 7 days to grade 14 students' papers, it is very manageable and not so overwhelming if you just strive to do two to three papers a day. At my school within the larger university, we have established a "2-week turnaround time" for returning all students' work and I find by approaching it as a goal of completing two to three papers a day, I never need to take the full 2 weeks. What I do is grade them the first thing in the morning, after my coffee, before I even shower, dress, or leave the house. Once one gets to campus one never has total control of the day, as there are meetings to attend and interruptions, and if you are like me, you may need total quiet to concentrate. This reminds me—one also needs to know one's own daily biological clock regarding optimal work times. Although I am a night owl, my eyes are generally tired after dinner or class, and I know I do not want to have to read the same page repeatedly: so coming back with fresh, rested eyes can certainly help.

Do not procrastinate or break your routine. More importantly, do not fool yourself into thinking you work best under pressure and say, "I have all weekend to get to that set of papers." Trust me, trying to read and grade 15-18 twelve-page student papers all on Sunday night will make you miserable and very unproductive. There is a phenomenon called "rater reliability" (and "rater bias") and if you try to get through that stack in one session, you will wonder if on the last papers you are consistent as you were on the first few. There is a tendency to want to read the good papers first and put the more troubling ones on the bottom of the pile. This is also not recommended. I grade them in the order that they come in and thus I try to reward the earlier ones.

Another best practice that I would encourage is the use of a "rewrite opportunity." I clearly write in all of my course syllabi that "one paper per term may be redone and only at the discretion of the instructor. Rewrites will not be allowed for the purpose of boosting an already acceptable passing grade to still a better grade." Oftentimes, I stop reading, writing comments, and making corrections after the first or second page and write:

> I am stopping here. As per the course syllabus, you are afforded "one rewrite" and I suggest you exercise that option here and redo/fix your paper by adding more content (and also thoroughly editing/revising/proofreading) and then resubmit it (without penalty) within the week. Please let me know as soon as possible if you will indeed take me up on this offer, or if I should continue to grade your paper.

No one has ever not taken me up on this opportunity. Graduate students are busy folks and they often procrastinate. Some will take the path of least resistance and wait to see how the professor graded or responded to their assignment. However, who wants to spend excessive time on a paper riddled with careless errors? Typically, I return a paper for a rewrite or if someone did not follow the requirements or ignored minimum expectations (i.e., length, number of references, missing certain headers, etc.). Having been at a university for a while and having already established a reputation for high expectations helps as students do talk to one another. However, that initial assignment

should always be gone through diligently or as they say, with "a fine-tooth comb." Although it is a long semester, you only have one chance to make a good first impression and set the proverbial bar high.

Another piece of advice is to not be one of those inflexible professors who will not accept a "late" paper because it was submitted to the assignment drop box 5 minutes after the posted deadline. What I routinely do is say that all papers are due by Sunday night midnight your own local time; however, on the preceding Friday I usually send out a course message or an announcement (or even both) that if they "need an extra 24 hours to finish the paper or to edit it with a fresh set of eyes, no problem. Get me the papers the following night." What difference does that extra day make? I was not going to start grading the papers at 12:05 A.M. my time anyway. You come across as a good person, although my former students know this is one of my regular procedures. I would rather the students submit finished papers of which they are proud—even if it is technically a day late—than to have mediocre or incomplete papers that are submitted on time.

One more strategy I would pass on is to use a *certificate of authorship* form that students complete (sign and date) for each submitted assignment. This cover page also lets them know I will upload their papers to the Turnitin.com antiplagiarism site and I hope this serves as a deterrent for academic misconduct. I now address plagiarism pretty hard both in the course syllabus and at the course orientation session held the first week of the semester; so generally the number of incidents has declined. Sometimes the originality reports indicate a high percentage match, not because of plagiarism but rather because they are paranoid and quoting (and citing) excessively. If this is the case, I also return their papers. I do not want a series of quotes one after another. I want to see a synthesis of the literature and more paraphrasing and less relying on other people's verbatim words. I now also include in my assignment directions "no block quotes" or "lists of bulleted items," as I want graduate students to analyze and distinguish between different parts of the literature or take a stand and justify a position. They need to formulate and hone their own conceptual frameworks.

I post a number of useful writing and APA resources including various helpful websites, as I am sure most of you do. In the first week, I now also send all my students a link to a short YouTube video on how to change the grammar-checker settings in Microsoft Word so that they can work smarter, not harder. Most people are not aware that you can turn up the basic default settings to catch many often-overlooked grammatical errors (i.e., clichés, wordiness, etc.). Many graduate students do not have a close family member or colleague to proofread their drafts. Thus, this little tip alone will improve your students' papers while saving you time grading time.

Whether you use the track changes feature inside the actual Word document to grade and make marginal comments or print out the students' papers as I do, I am not going to be so prescriptive here to say one method is better than the other. If I had to pay for my own paper and ink cartridges or toner, then perhaps I would use the former method. Instead, since I first print and then later scan graded papers (to then upload) into PDF files on the department office's copiers, I figure why spend even more unnecessary time staring at a computer screen than I already do. Thus, I personally handle all the papers and handwrite my comments, et cetera. I can readily crosscheck the reference list with the in-text citations this way without having to toggle back and forth. I can also sit outside on the patio not worrying about my wireless connection or battery level and even enjoy an occasional cigar.

It is no longer enough to be a fastidious editor as our high school English teachers

once were. Personal comments do not replace the grade or point total score—they enhance it. If possible, I try to make two reads of the paper looking at just the overall content all the way through. Then I go back and comment on form and style, syntax, et cetera. Sometimes I do this vice-versa depending how I feel at the time. I also try to finish a student's paper in one sitting before I get up and take a break—which I suggest you do hourly. Most importantly, do not work when there are distractions or if you are in a bad mood. Take a walk. The papers will still be there when you return!

I am sure most of us try to find something positive to say about a student's work to balance all the negative. I recommend always personalizing your evaluation using a student's first name in your final comments on a paper and then dating it. I also routinely wish them good luck on the next assignment. Occasionally, it is worth noting the sheer effort that was demonstrated, although the final grade might not reflect that. I also have my students include the respective assignment rubric as the last page. That makes it easier to complete the rubric with the point total and to provide some specific academic feedback besides the noted corrections or comments on the previous pages. Endeavor to discuss the content of the paper and not just the student's format or mechanics. I have heard students tell me that certain professors only seem to care about APA format, which they perceive as minutia, as they yearn for feedback on their ideas.

At the doctoral level, I want to always be cognizant of the academic references utilized to ensure that they are not only current but also from good, scholarly journals and from primary sources if at all possible. It also goes without saying that if you want your students to use good, current reference sources that you also have to update your courses to incorporate current textbooks, et cetera. We need to "practice what we preach" and not exhibit a "don't do as I do, do as I say" attitude. While I require my students to use (cite) from the required course textbooks, I do not want them also to *only* use other required course textbooks from the program's other required courses. We want our students to become familiar with the various academic gurus and the seminal works in the field, which will only help them later on in the dissertation stage.

There are certainly many other specific grading techniques and instructional strategies into which I could delve if I had the space. There are also a plethora of guides and resources on teaching and grading to assist. Marilla Svinicki and Wilbert McKeachie's *Teaching Tips,* first published in 1950, and now in its 14th edition, is a classic reference that every professor should own. Suffice it to say that what works for me might not work for you. Read your students' end-of-the-semester faculty course evaluations and look for recurring comments. Update your syllabi, textbooks, and perhaps periodically change assignments or tweak rubrics to keep them and you fresh. Make sure that your major assignments are genuinely assessing mastery of the course content or more specifically, course learning outcomes. Finally, although grading papers can be laborious, do not dread it as it is part and parcel of the work that we, as college professors, regularly do and you do not want to make this a self-fulfilling prophecy. Good luck, everybody!

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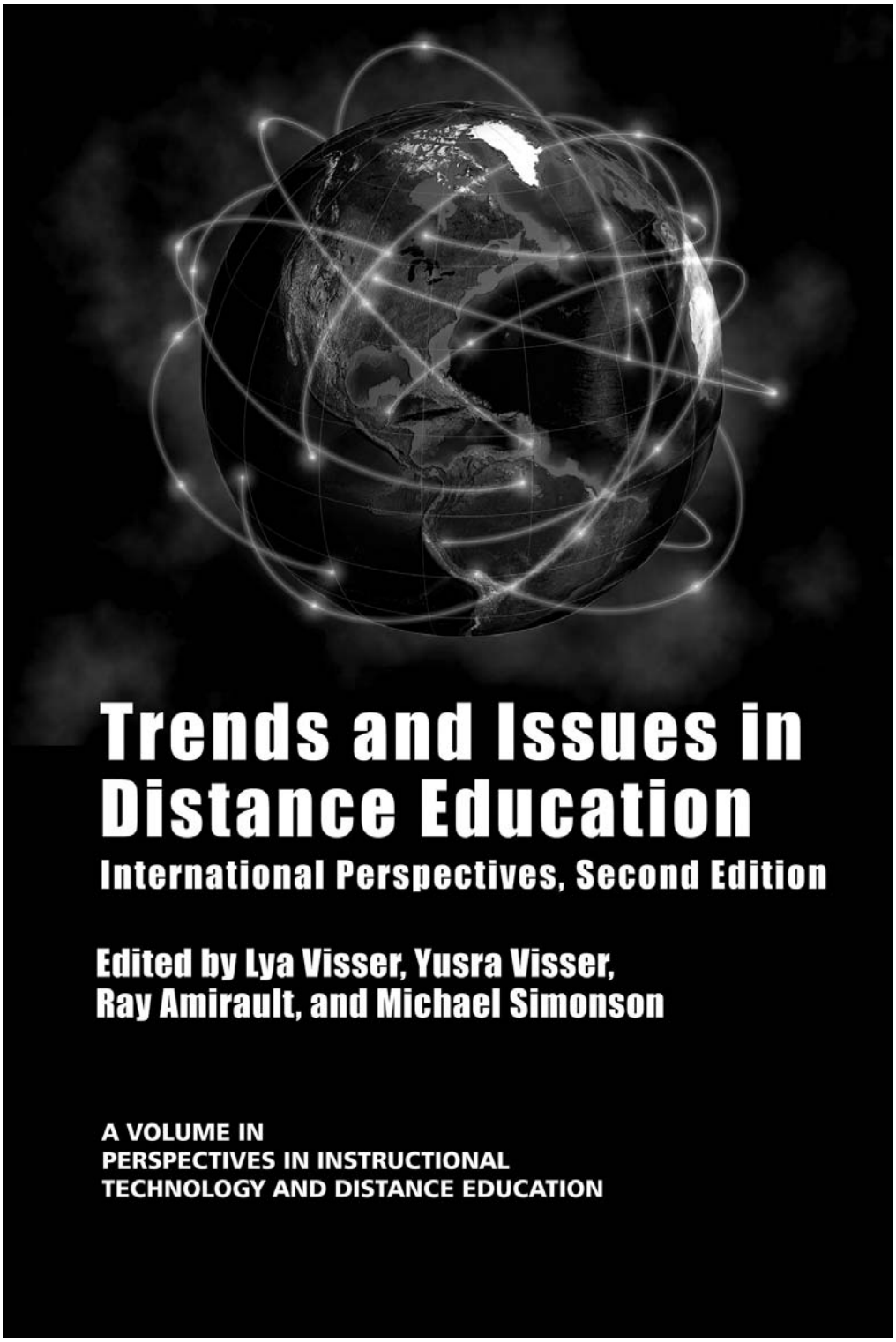

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Survival 101

Quick Tips for the Novice Online Math Instructor

Tracy Samuel

Introduction

The moment that I had asked for, but secretly feared, had finally arrived. There was no turning back so I had to face it head-on. It was time to teach my first online college algebra class. Many thoughts kept running through my mind. Which learning management system (LMS) would work best for demonstrating math problems? How would I encourage my students to engage in meaningful discussions? Without reading their faces, how would I know when they were struggling with a concept? Would I have the support and training needed to provide effective math learning online? Although I had a lot to learn, I was ready to experience teaching in a new light and to expand my course beyond the four walls of my classroom.

Since teaching my first online class, I have mentored other instructors at my college who wanted to join the community of online educators and learners. My purpose for writing this article is to further share some basic but solid advice regarding the following areas: selecting the best LMS for math teaching and learning; choosing and using technology that allows you to effectively answer student questions and assist with content issues; and finding and developing the support needed to be successful.

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Selecting a LMS: You Do Not Have To Recreate the Wheel

For novice online math instructors, I've learned that selecting a LMS designed for mathematics learning relieves some of the initial pressure of curricular development. When I began teaching online, I had the choice to use the college's LMS or the textbook publisher's online interactive system that was created specifically for math classes. I decided to use the publisher's math system because it offered the most efficient assistance for creating, customizing, and maintaining my math course. The system that I used then, as well as today, is MyMathLab (MML). However, there are other math systems, such as ALEKS and

WebAssign, that are just as effective in teaching online math courses. These systems are used for courses ranging from developmental math through calculus and statistics. In my opinion, selecting one of these systems is the best decision for a novice math instructor. Let me explain why.

First, the database. MML provided an extensive database that I used to create effective homework assignments, review activities, quizzes, and exams. Using this database, I did not have to initially invest the time and resources needed to create curricular materials. Instead, I could focus more closely on how to structure the course while using the database to create engaging, self-paced assignments and assessments.

Another advantage of using this math database is that all homework, review activities, quizzes, and exams are automatically graded. Also, when working homework and practice problems, the students can click a link and receive immediate help with their lessons. These two features help novice instructors manage the grading workload and ensure that the students receive immediate feedback regarding their grades and progress in the course. These features helped me create a learning environment that promoted student success without being too overwhelming for my first online experience.

My second tip is to make use of the many multimedia tools provided. MyMathLab, as well as the other math databases, provides mathematically sound lecture videos, PowerPoint slides, multimedia textbooks, and other media types to assist students with the learning process. Research shows that students have reported that the MML videos are useful features of the system (Spence, 2011). These features allow novice instructors to begin teaching without having to invest significant time, and sometimes money, needed to create, edit, and produce original teaching videos, animations, and other media types.

Choosing Technological Tools to Provide Additional Support: User-Friendly is Key

After I selected a LMS, customized my course, and enrolled my students, another challenge presented itself. How do I answer the students' math questions online? I needed something that worked well and I needed it quickly. If you find yourself in this same situation, I suggest that you use these tools: (1) a smartpen and notebook and (2) a document camera with the accompanying software.

The smartpen, which writes like a ballpoint pen, must be used with special paper that looks like a regular notebook. This pen has a small video camera and a voice recorder, which allows it to capture audio that is synced with the user's handwriting. It then creates a digital file that can be attached to e-mails, uploaded to a LMS, or stored in a public virtual setting.

It is a valuable tool because it is inexpensive, user-friendly, portable, and effective for explaining math problems and concepts to students (Mehlhorn et al., 2011). In my classes, I have used smartpens to help me successfully answer student questions and create a one-on-one experience for my online students. For instance, I recently received an e-mail from a student who was struggling with forming and evaluating composite functions. She was frustrated and wanted help immediately. I picked up the smartpen and within minutes was able to create, upload, and send a tutorial pencast tailored to her individual needs. The synced audio and handwriting features of the smartpen allowed me to provide the same one-on-one experience virtually as I would in a face-to-face tutorial session. I would strongly suggest investing in a smartpen before you begin your course. It will prove to be a valuable tool.

Another tool that I have recently been introduced to, and have found valuable for online teaching, is a classroom document camera. The document cameras are used to

capture live images as well as to record audio. With these document cameras, the accompanying computer software, and an SD card, a lecture or review session with your face-to-face students can be recorded and shared as supplemental videos for your online students. This technology brings the energy of your face-to-face class to your online students by allowing them to hear all interactions between you and your students.

Finding and Developing a Support System: Sources for Growth and Collaboration

A third tip for survival during that first semester of teaching online is to develop a system of learning and support. This system should provide opportunities for you to learn, collaborate with other teachers, and to grow professionally. I found support in the form of attending conferences and workshops, and collaborating with other online instructors in both math and other disciplines.

My professional development as a novice began by attending the International Conference on Technology in Collegiate Mathematics. This annual conference provided the interactive, hands-on training that I needed to learn the many features of MML. The sessions that I attended at this conference also introduced me to the smartpen, to using the tablet PC and Camtasia to produce videos, and to create discussions for my online classes. This conference also allowed me to collaborate with colleagues from all over the world regarding their experiences.

To find a conference that meets your needs, I suggest beginning with the designer of the interactive system that you select. If it is not possible for you to travel to conferences, there are less expensive options. As Wilson and Stacey (2004) have noted, "Delivering staff development online is another strategy to develop the skills and knowledge of online teachers" ("Staff Development Online," para. 1). For instance, Pearson Education provides live online workshops to help instructors apply best practices and engaging strategies in their online math classes.

You will often find support right within your department. Before you begin teaching your online course, talk to other instructors who teach online, and also those who use a mediated math system as a supplemental tool in their face-to-face classes.

If there is no one in your department teaching online, talk to instructors in other disciplines to learn what techniques have helped them achieve student success. Over the years, I have incorporated good tips from nonmath faculty regarding discussion topics and assessment strategies. If you do not find the support that you need within your college, seek help on the web. There are online forums for instructors who teach online that could lead to an exchange of innovative teaching strategies. You will find these support systems indispensable not only during your first semester but throughout your online teaching career.

Conclusion

My how-to tips are easy to summarize. First, by selecting a learning system that specializes in math, you can focus less on curriculum development and more on the course's structure and its ability to engage your students. Second, because mathematical concepts are often difficult to demonstrate by e-mail, you can use such tools as the smartpen or the classroom document camera to help you communicate with your students. Lastly, attending conferences and collaborating with other online teachers will provide you with the professional development you need.

At first, teaching math online produced feelings of anxiety within me. But now, as I continue to teach online, my three-step approach keeps me calm and comfortable.

In fact, online teaching has become my favorite mode of instructing.

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The University of the West Indies Open Campus

A Beacon for Distance Education in the Caribbean

Beverly S. Crooks-Johnson

Introduction

The University of the West Indies (UWI) evolved over the past 60 years in response to the demand for higher education in the Caribbean region. Over the years UWI has provided quality educational opportunities and has been producing thousands of intellectuals, and many of renown. Although the institution continued to experience recognition and growth, there were still numerous individuals, particularly from noncampus countries who faced challenges in accessing higher education. UWI Open Campus' development was a means of reengineering UWI's educational infrastructure to resolve the problem of tertiary education access in the Caribbean.

This article gives a brief overview of UWI's beginnings, looks at the institution's present status, and briefly traces of the genesis of distance education at UWI to the materialization of its fourth campus, the Open Campus (UWIOC). Discussion of UWIOC pursues with a look at the program offerings, telecommunications infrastructure, enrollment, and the necessity for quality assurance. Despite increasing competitiveness and other challenges UWI, and by extension UWIOC, has maintained the position of being the institution of first choice for higher education in the Caribbean.

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Historical Overview: UWI's Humble Beginnings

The University of the West Indies (formerly the University College of the West Indies) evolved from the positive response of the West Indian people to dispossession, resulting from years of colonial rule that marked their history. The first office of the University College of the West Indies (UCWI) was opened at 62 Lady Musgrave

Road, Kingston, Jamaica on February 1, 1947. The institution was relocated to Mona, Kingston on the Gibraltar Camp. The Mona campus was officially opened on October 3, 1948, with an enrollment of 33 students, comprising 10 females and 23 males. By 1950 there were 304 residential students enrolled. It was the UCWI that provided necessary skilled manpower, expertise, and knowledge about the West Indian cultures and economic systems, and stood as an emblem of regional unity. It was quite befitting, therefore, when R. M. Homer, the principal of Queen's Royal College in Trinidad, recommended UWI's Latin Motto, which appears on its armorial bearings: "Oriens Ex Occidente Lux," meaning "Light Rising From the West" (UWI: Time Capsule: Past, 2008).

In 1960, UCWI's second campus, in St. Augustine, Trinidad came into existence. By April 1962 the royal charter was passed conferring on the UCWI degree-granting status, and declaring the intuition as the University of the West Indies. The third UWI campus, Cave Hill, Barbados was established in 1967. The then vision of Sir Phillip Sherlock, UWI's founding father and first vice chancellor, well articulated that of the mandate institution, which was to: (1) multiply opportunities for vertical mobility; (2) provide the society with a corpus of knowledge based on research; and (3) broaden the intellectual base that universal suffrage and political independence demanded (UWI: Time Capsule: Past, 2008).

UWI at Present

The UWI has grown into a landmark regional institution, providing higher education in 16 Caribbean countries. Table 1 below shows UWI's three campus countries and all the other participating countries in the region. Figure 1 serves as an indicator of the size and locations of UWIOC's 16 participating countries.

Since its inception UWI has experienced considerable changes which "have helped reposition some of the University's original configurations and traditional directions" (UWI: Present, 2008, para. 1). Currently UWI offers over 800 accredited programs to over 45,877 students, through its nine faculties, three physical campuses, and 12 centers within the English speaking Caribbean.

Distance Education: No New Phenomenon at UWI

According to Thomas and Soares (2009), UWI has traditionally been governed by campus-based education, with the three campuses in Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago, giving campus countries the competitive edge in attracting scholars at the tertiary level. Furthermore, statistics reveal that tertiary education is not sufficiently developed within the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and that the number of persons accessing higher education within the region represents only 3-7% of the population. This highlights the need for the expansion of increased learning opportunities for OECS nationals, and to stem increasing practice where students have to migrate to further their studies. It is against this background that UWI developed distance education (DE) initiatives to help level the playing field and facilitate increased access to ter-

Table 1. UWI's Three Main Campuses and 12 Participating Countries

UWI Campus Countries	Participating Countries
Barbados	Angulla, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Belize, Bermuda
Jamaica	British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat
Trinidad and Tobago	St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Turks and Caicos

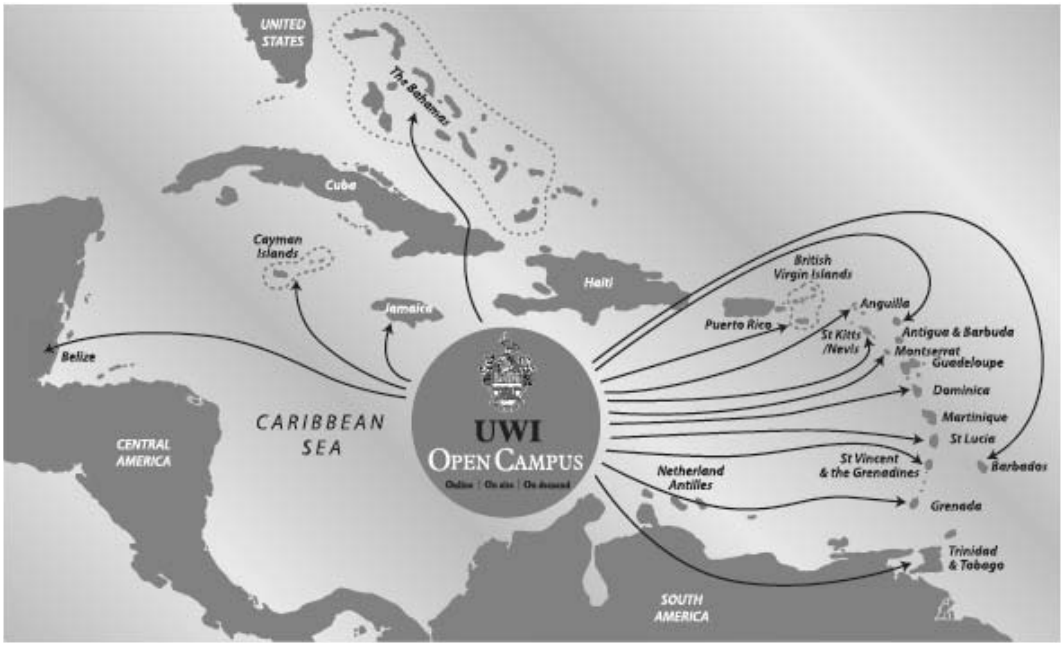

Figure 1. Open Campus participating countries in the Caribbean.

tiary education by noncampus countries of the OECS (OECS, 2013). This propelled UWI's bifocal approach to instructional delivery, as the "bifocal approach meant firstly, widening student access, and secondly, responding to the needs of those students in the noncampus countries who could not afford to move to a campus country" (OECS, 2001, p. 6).

UWI started offering distance learning programs from as early as 1958, through radio broadcasts on its Radio Education Unit on the Jamaica campus (Thomas & Soares, 2009). The Radio Education Unit produced radio programs, which were aired in schools and teacher training colleges in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean. Instructional recordings were also distributed to different radio stations in the region. In late 1970 UWI introduced a new DE project, the Challenge Examination Scheme, which in 1983 was incorporated into the University Distance Teaching Experiment. University Distance Teaching Experiment later transitioned into the University Distance Education Centre, in 1996 creating a dual mode operation for the institution. It was from this vantage point that UWI started to realize usefulness of a telecommunications network for educational outreach in the Anglophone Caribbean (Thomas & Soares, 2009).

The Emergence of the UWIOC

UWI's newest campus, the Open Campus (OC) was officially opened in Antigua and Barbuda in June 2008, after obtaining the approval of the Council of The University of the West Indies in April 2007. The OC is a merger of the former offices which held responsibility for DE and continuing studies: the Office of the Board for Non-Campus Countries and Distance Education, the School of Continuing Studies, the UWI Distance Education Centre, and the Tertiary Level Institutions Unit (About UWI Open Campus, 2004-2013).

In the first year of operation the OC developed its first set of programs, which

constituted certificate programs in three areas including an online certificate in Online Journalism and Community Media, which was developed in collaboration with the Caribbean Institute of Media and Communications (UWI Open Campus: Self Study Report, 2012). Today it offers over 800 accredited programs utilizing a variety of methodologies and formats for delivery. Delivery methods include blended learning modalities, face-to-face, online, and distance learning involving the distribution of print and software materials. Programs include courses for preuniversity education, certificate, diploma, and undergraduate programs, postgraduate degree programs, extension courses, technical and vocational, and other continuing studies courses. The institution uses this multimode teaching and learning approach for both physical and virtual instructional locations at its 42 sites in 16 English-speaking Caribbean countries.

The fourth campus therefore emerged as a solution to the issue of regional human resource development and aimed at: (1) creating a student–centered learning environment; (2) establishing a viable and sustainable financing mechanism; (3) designing and implement an administrative and organizational structure; (4) formulating policy for managing, developing, and implementing open and flexible learning; and (5) establishing policy for managing/building interinstitutional relationships/partnerships (Thomas & Soares, 2009). UWIOC is thereby guided by the following principles:

> The Open Campus of the University of the West Indies is based on the idea that the high-quality university education, research and services available at our institution should be open and available to all people who wish to reach their full potential inside and outside of the Caribbean region. (About UWI Open Campus, 2004-2013)

UWIOC's Distance Education Telecommunication Infrastructure

Schlosser and Simonson's (2006) definition of DE signifies that telecommunications systems are critical to a DE environment to connect distant learners with instructors and learning resources. UWIOC uses the Moodle Open Source learning management system (LMS) in dual mode instructions for faculty and students communication within and outside of class schedules. The learning management system provides interactive, collaborative features like discussion forums, real-time chat tools and blogs, and course assessment features like online quiz and exam, and drop box for assignments. In recent times campus classrooms have been upgraded with multimedia technological access and lectures for many programs, and are streamed over broadband. UWIOC uses Elluminate and BigblueButton applications for live online courses and to facilitate communication for both educational and administrative purposes. In addition, web conferences are used for asynchronous sessions (OAS, n.d.).

The Computer and Technical Services division of the Open Campus has responsibility to manage all the technical and technological requirements of UWIOC throughout the Caribbean. UWIOC recently upgraded student portals to an integrated portal (my.uwi.edu), which allows for single sign-on access to several applications like the Moodle LMS, e-mail, and library resources, among others. Recent upgrades now enable mobile access to the portals. At present web-based polling allowing students to respond to interactive polling questions is being pilot tested (OAS, n.d.; UWI Open Campus: Computer & Technical Services, 2004-2013).

UWIOC's Programs and Student Enrollment

The Marketing and Communications units in the territories have been instrumental in UWIOC's policies and initiatives development, which help to control the University's image and identity. Program development emerges from researches conducted by Marketing and Communications to determine the relevance and viability of courses offered. UWIOC offers several graduate, undergraduate, continuing, and professional education programs in response to students' needs and contribution to workforce and regional development. Student enrollment has gradual increased over time. Undergraduate intake, for example, grew by 6% during the first 4 years, and new postgraduate programs attracted over 600 students in the first semester of the OC operation. Table 2 gives a summary of the total enrollment for online/blended program for the 2011-2012 school year. The bachelor of science, bachelor of education, and associate degree programs had enrollments of 3,817, 1,154 and 733 respectively, with the master of education registering over 200 students. The statistics in Table 3 gives the breakdown of student enrollment UWIOC's over the first 4-year period. The data reveals that campus countries' enrollments are comparatively much larger than that of the noncampus (UWI-12) countries combined.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's report (2011) highlights the changing criteria by which

Table 2. Total Enrollment for Online/Blended Programs 2011-2012

Program	Total Enrollment
Associate degree	733
Bachelor of education	1,154
Bachelor of science	3,817
Certificate	183
Diploma	68
Postgraduate diploma	45
Master of education	226
Specially admitted	111
Transient programs	162
Grand total	6,499

Table 3. Enrollment in Open Campus Continuing Education Programs 2008–2012

Countries	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
Total UWI-12 countries	984	1,283	1,864	2,004	3,873
Barbados	850	789	660	809	919
Jamaica	3,636	3,900	5,331	4,974	4,877
Trinidad and Tobago	12,349	14,972	11,800	11,369	8,179
Total campus countries	16,835	19,661	17,791	17,152	13,975
Grand total	17,819	20,944	19,655	19,156	17,848

educational success is judged. The report stipulates that the aim of educational delivery is no longer to provide fundamental education for all, but to "increase the demand for people who are capable of doing knowledge work," persons who are able to function effectively in today's global community and "compete for jobs not just locally but internationally" (p. 15). The OC responded to increased demanded for workforce development programs by taking on the commitment to develop training programs at the local level in partnerships with local, regional, and international entities (UWI Strategic Plan, 2012 -2017).

UWIOC and Quality Assurance

The UWIOC management teams with delegated responsibility periodically assess the institutions' performance against the aims and objectives of its Strategic Plan. Consistent with the institution's goal to sustain quality, institutionwide surveys were conducted, particularly toward the period of accreditation. Representative student samples, all members of staff and stakeholders were surveyed and the analyzed results returned favorable findings. UWIOC's response as documented in the Self Study is instructive: "We were humbled by the magnitude of best practices we unearthed within our Campus and motivated to correct the ills that still plague us" (UWI Open Campus, Self Study Report, 2012, p. 221). Over the first 4-year period there were improvements made to the curriculum, including pedagogical reform and as the introduction of various new and cutting-edge programs. External review of the campus Quality Assurance Unit resulted in recommendations for the continued development of the quality assurance function at the UWI (UWI Strategic Plan, 2012-2017).

Morabito (1997), in addressing the increasing demand for distance learning opportunities through online institutions, speaks to the importance of accreditation for online programs, a process which strengthens the institution's reputation and also "serves as a sign of quality and legitimacy" (p. 22). UWIOC stood the test for quality assurance and was accredited for a 6-year period by the Barbados Accreditation Council in July 2013. The declaration of the Barbados Accreditation Council report speaks volumes for the institution's operations:

> The commitment to quality was clear from all of those the team met, from the design and delivery teams in APAD to the online and face-to-face tutors. There are effective systems of monitoring and review of programs and appropriate international benchmarking of standards. The Quality Assurance Unit provides an appropriate and high quality service to the Open Campus. (UWI Open Campus: Institutional Accreditation, 2004-2013)

Achieving and maintaining quality is not just an institutional exercise. Parents, students, teachers, and educational stakeholders seek to determine the extent to which educational institutions prepare students for life.

While many countries monitor and make comparative assessments of student learning outcomes, the yardstick for determining academic results "is no longer [seen as] improvement against national educational standards, but also improvement against the most successful education systems worldwide" (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011, p. 19). Internationally UWI was ranked by Webometric, in January 2011, as one of the world's five top ranking organizations at 705 out of 12,000 universities worldwide. The Webometric ranking places UWI in the top 6% worldwide, at number two in Caribbean, behind the University of Puerto Rico and first place in the English speaking Caribbean (UWI Office of Planning and Development, 2011).

Today, UWI is still seen as the undeniably "the only truly regional higher educational institution in the Caribbean in concept, scope and reach" (Tewarie, 2009, p. 6). However, the author cautions that with the emergence of other local and competing universities, like University of Technology and Northern Caribbean University in Jamaica, the University of Guyana, and the University of Trinidad and Tobago, UWI cannot be complacent but will have to consistently aim at attaining world ranking criteria to maintain its competitive edge in the region while competing with other international universities.

Consistent with the university's mission of promoting economic, social, political, and cultural development of the West Indian society, the guiding principles of UWIOC is the long arm which is extending the institution's reach to "provide high-quality university education, research and services available … [and to] be open and available to all people who wish to reach their full potential inside and outside of the Caribbean region" (UWI Open Campus, Self Study Report, 2012, p. iii). Consistent with UWI's motto, UWIOC's reputation and modes of operation provide a sound platform from which the intuition can shine its educational torch to brightly illuminate within and well beyond the boundaries of the Caribbean region.

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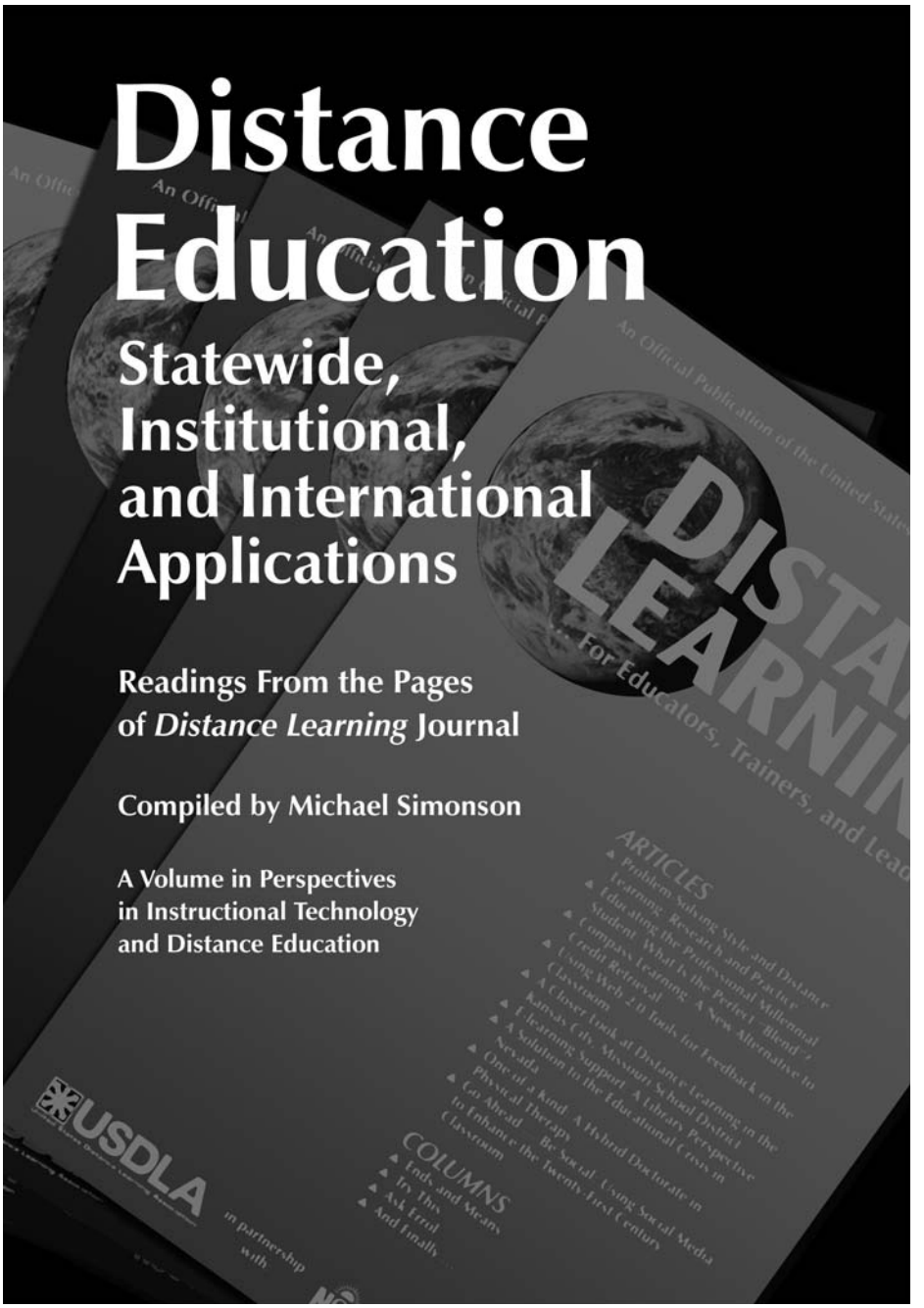

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Online GED

Equalizing Opportunities for Adult Dropouts in Hillsborough County

Elber Alvis

Introduction

Not having a high school diploma or its equivalent produces negative outcomes in individuals and society that are mostly related to economy. A person who does not complete high school loses approximately $260,000 in lifetime income compared to one with a high school diploma or general educational diploma (Rouse, 2007). This economic consequence may worsen if we consider that dropouts contribute about half as much in taxes as do high school graduates and draw larger government subsidies in the form of food stamps, housing assistance, and welfare (Dynarski et al., 2008). Comparing dropouts with those who complete high school, the average high school dropout costs the economy approximately $209,200 over an individual's lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, higher reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, higher rates of criminal activity, and higher reliance on welfare (Levin & Belfield, 2007). The National Center for Educational Statistics has projected 20,392,000 of ninth to 12th graders in the United States during 2013 and with an 8% dropout average (see Figure 1) (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & Kewal-Ramani, 2011); more than one and a half million of students will leave school without a high school diploma. So if we consider that a cohort of 700,000 high school dropouts has a fiscal consequence of $148 billion in lost taxes revenues and additional public expenditures over the cohort's lifetime (Levin & Belfield, 2007), the total lost in the Unites States will be more than $300 billion. Thus, something needs to be done to ensure high school graduation and avoid a fiscal crisis in the future.

A study developed by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011), indicates that raising educational outcomes not only boosts incomes for individuals who earn degrees, but these individual gains also compound to improve local, state, and national economies. Indeed, improving high school graduation rates represents a great economic stimulus for any state.

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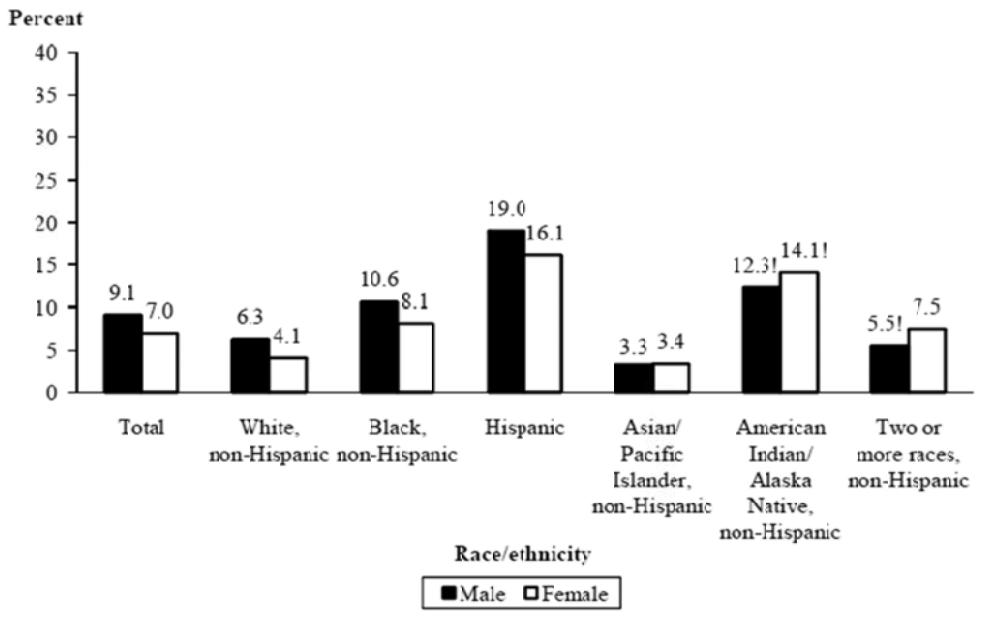

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October 2009.

Figure 1. Status dropout rates of 16- through 24-year-olds, by race/ethnicity and sex: October 2009.

Consequently, the challenge for school districts and states is to implement interventions to raise high school graduation rates, which in effect is happening around the nation now. Five of those interventions whose effectiveness is supported by research studies are summarized by Levin and Belfield (2007) and shown in Table 1. Another important intervention is currently in progress in the Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS), the eighth-largest school system in the country. HCPS is in the midst of a 7-year initiative focused in raising the rate of high school graduation from an initial 82.2% to 90% or more (Hillsborough County Public Schools, 2011). Although these interventions have increased the rate of their high school graduates, no one has reduced the percentage of dropouts to zero. It represents that there are still students who leave school before attaining high school graduation. Therefore, additional effort must be done to reach those individuals without high school diploma that after all become in adults with fewer opportunities for success. Adult education provides educational opportunities and at the same time reduces the amount of dropouts.

Adult Education at HCPS

For more than 60 years, the Adult Education Program has been the major contributor to the educational opportunities to adults in the Hillsborough County. HCPS administers its Adult Education Program under the Division of Curriculum and Instruction and has for its mission to serve the academic, career, leisure, and special needs of students for the life roles they will assume and to enhance the economic development of the community. Each year, this program provides educational opportunities to more than 30,000 individual adult students 16 years or older in the

Table 1. Interventions that Demonstrably Raise the High School Graduation Rate

Intervention	Details	Extra Graduates if Intervention Given to 100 Students
Perry Preschool Program (PPP)	1.8 years of a center-based program for 2.5 hours per weekday, child-teacher ratio of 5:1; home visits; group meeting of parents.	19
First Things First (FTF)	Comprehensive school reform based on small learning communities with dedicated teachers, family advocates, and instructional improvement efforts.	16
Chicago Child-Parent Center Program (CPC)	Center-based preschool program: parental involvement, outreach and health/nutrition services. Based in public schools.	11
Project STAR: class Size reduction (CSR)	4 years of schooling (Grades K-3) with class size reduced from 25 to 15.	11
Teacher salary increase (TSI)	10% increase in teacher salaries for all years, K-12.	5

Source: Adapted from Levin and Belfield (2007).

areas of adult basic education, general educational development (GED), adult high school credit, English for speakers of other languages, citizenship, vocational preparation instruction, workplace readiness skills, and technical career educational opportunities (http://ace.mysdhc.org).

In order to earn a Florida high school diploma through the general educational development program at HCPS, students, ages 16 to 17, may attend an approved underage GED program and adult students 18 years or older can enroll in a GED class. For placement, all students need to take the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). This test is used to evaluate reading, mathematics, and language skills. If students score 9.0 or more, they are placed in the GED program. If not, they are placed in the adult basic education program. After 60 hours of instruction, students are TABE posttested to measure educational gains. When adult basic education students reach the score of 9.0, they are promoted into the GED program. GED classes at HCPS are available in comfortable classroom settings or online. Whichever option students choose, they will receive professional help from certified teachers who assist them in attaining their goals. Once students reach scores 12.0 or more in all three TABE level D (Difficult) subtests, they are referred to one of the six GED testing sites to take the official GED test (http://ace.mysdhc.org).

About the GED Test

The GED, or general educational development, test had its beginnings in the military during World War II. In 1942, Ralph Tyler headed an advisory committee to the Army Institute that selected five tests from the Iowa Test of Educational Development to form the first GED test. In essence, the test was created to certify veterans who had left school to serve the country during WWII. The first GED tests were administered to returning veterans in 1943. In 1947, the state of New York allowed school dropouts who were not veterans to seek their GED credential. Soon after, other states allowed their nonveteran dropouts to take the GED test and, by 1949, 570 GED testing centers across the nation administered the test to 39,000 individuals (Tyler, 2005). In 2009, more than 470,000 individuals were awarded their high school creden-

tial (Turner, 2011). According to the American Council on Education nearly 800,000 adults sit for the GED test every year and, during its lifetime, more than 18 million adults have earned their high school credential through the GED. Since the original GED test was released in 1942, the five academic content areas in which candidates are assessed have not changed. They are math, science, social studies, reading, and writing. As secondary education has evolved, the GED test has too. Four generations of the GED test have circulated, with the current series released in 2002 and a new one coming up in 2014. Today the GED test is accepted by virtually all U.S. colleges and employers and is offered with the same content by the American Council on Education in every one of the 50 states of the United States and 11 provinces of Canada in several different formats and languages including: English, Canadian English, Spanish, Canadian French, Braille, Audio, and Large Print (GED Testing Service, 2012).

Online GED Preparation

Passing the GED tests may require some preparation. Some individuals study GED preparation books and other materials. Others are comfortable with simply brushing up on a few of the subject areas where they need practice. Some candidates prepare intensely by taking face-to-face or online classes at local adult education programs sponsored by school districts, colleges, and community organizations in their area.

Hillsborough County Public Schools offers online GED instruction to students who prefer distance education instead of face-to-face classes. In order to be accepted in one of the online GED classes, students must score 6.0 on the TABE Level D Reading Subtest and 9.0 in a minimum one of the three subtests (Math, reading, or language). Exceptions must be approved by the site administrator with the director's permission. After registration, students attend an orientation to meet the online instructor and receive a password for login. Once students have logged in, they can work at their own pace in language arts writing, language arts reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. As they move along with the program, assessment is provided to monitor improvement. Two optional lab hours per week is provided to online students for testing and individualized tutoring and/or instruction. Online students must spend approximately 6 hours per week working on the course and submit at least three—preferably five—completed assignments per week. When students are ready to take the official GED test, they are allowed to take two GED practice tests. One is online and the other one is paper based. Students take the Online GED practice test as their schedules allow. For the paper-based test, students schedule a meeting with the instructor in a convenient date during the two lab hours provided by the program.

Characteristics of HCPS Online Learners

According to the Department of Adult Education Teacher Handbook 2012-2013, there are some characteristics of online learners that need to be considered at the time of the enrollment process:

- Students should be self-disciplined and self-motivated. The online process takes a real commitment and discipline to keep up with the flow of the process. Students need to understand that with the freedom and flexibility of the online environment comes responsibility.
- Students should be open-minded about sharing life, work, and educational experiences as part of the learning process. Students, extroverts and introverts, find that the online process requires them to utilize their experiences. This forum for communication eliminates

the visual barriers that hinder some individuals in expressing themselves.

- Students should be able to communicate through writing with their teachers. In this virtual classroom, nearly all communication is written through e-mails, so it is critical that learners feel comfortable in using e-mails and expressing themselves through writing.
- Students should be willing to "speak up" if problems arise. If students experience difficulty on any level, either with technology or with the course content, they must communicate this immediately. Otherwise the instructor will never know what is wrong.
- Students should accept critical thinking and decision making as a part of the learning process. This process requires learners to make decisions based on facts as well as experiences. Assimilating information and executing the right decision requires critical thought.
- Students should be able to think ideas through before responding. Meaningful and quality input into the virtual classroom is an essential part of the learning process. Time is given in the process to allow for the careful consideration of responses. Learners will not always be right, but they need to be prepared to accept a challenge.
- Students should be will and able to commit to 5 to 7 hours per week per course and do the minimum requirements for the course. Students need to understand that the online course is a convenient way to receive an education, not an easier way. In fact, many students say that it requires much more time and commitment.
- Students should feel that high quality learning can take place without going to a traditional classroom and should plan to complete the course work successfully.

In addition, counselors use an online student survey with 14 questions is used during the registration process as a means to determine whether students are comfortable with using technology for learning.

About the GED Website

In order to get access to the GED online program, HCPS students must type in the address bar of their web browser the URL: http://fatdec.ucompass.com. The word FATDEC found in the URL stands for Florida Adult and Technical Distance Education Consortium. FATDEC is a group of public schools, community colleges, and school districts that are working together to deliver curriculum in an environment for adult education and career and technical programs in Florida's postsecondary public institutions. FATDEC was formed in March 2001 when six members got together to develop best practices for online instruction, create policies and procedures for distance education system, and design courses and development. The members chose the GED as the first course to place on line. Now FATDEC has 37 members and offers both credit and GED courses. FATDEC courses are delivered via the Internet through a learning management system product called "Educator" by Ucompass.com. Courses are hosted in a secure environment, and each school or district remains autonomous in its admission and registration process (http://www.fatdec.com). Hillsborough County Adult Education uses it only for GED preparation. After new students are registered, the Division of Curriculum and Instruction office enters students into the required course along with assigning them a user name and password. The Online Student Registration List with the user name and password is e-mailed to the instructor, who contacts students with their sign-on information.

Conclusion

Future generations in the United States are in danger with the number of students

who drop out of school every year, but great improvement of high school graduation rates is possible. Early educational interventions and adult education have been successful, but there are barriers that need to be defeated in order to fulfill expectations. Online GED gives dropouts the chance they need to improve their lives. Hillsborough County Public Schools has the commitment of equalizing opportunities for underage and adult dropouts by providing meaningful educational programs they can succeed. Online GED enhances the opportunities for those students that are not able to attend face-to-face classes. It provides the flexibility of learning from anywhere at their own pace and 24/7.

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Parental Involvement and Its Impact on Student Achievement in Florida Virtual School

France M. Alcena

Introduction

One day, as I was getting off work, my mobile phone indicated that I had a new message. It was Ms. Perez, my daughter's virtual school teacher, who was seeking my help in order to ensure that my 11th grader completed her assignments for her online course. Until then, she could have a failing grade. I called Ms. Perez back, left her a voicemail promising to take care of the issue. As soon as I walked in the house, I addressed the situation with my daughter and gave her 2 days to be current with her work. I also offered her my support in case she did not quite understand what she needed to do. Two days later, Ms. Perez called me back to thank me for my support and told me that my daughter earned an "A" for the semester because she fulfilled all the requirements. In turn, I expressed my heartfelt gratitude toward her for contacting me and reminded her that she could get in touch with me by any means when it comes to my child's academic performance.

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This personal experience is directly related to the topic addressed in this article: the impact of parental involvement on student achievement in Florida Virtual School. Research indicates that children tend to perform better in school when there is parental involvement. Makgopa and Mokhele (2013) concur that every adult, including parents and teachers, are accountable for student learning. Mulligan (2013) attributes student academic success to the level of parental involvement in schools. Such assumption has been proven to be true for face-to-face classroom instruction and evidenced by students' achievement, test scores, and research; is it also true for online classes?

The global evolution of technology has a significant influence on every aspect of our society, especially the educational system. Nowadays, learning through online courses is a worldwide practice. The number of students attending classes asynchronously is increasing considerably, especially in the United States where a great number of states offer distance learning opportunities to students from kindergarten through Grade 12 as part of the public school system.

When parents are deciding or helping their children decide on a school, they are faced with the choice between a traditional program where the child is physically in school, a virtual program where the classes are given completely online, or a combination of both (Rauh, 2011). Either one of these choices requires their complete attention. Their involvement does not stop after they make their decision regarding the type of schooling they want to enroll their child in. Actually, it has only begun because subsequent choices will have a significant impact on academic achievement. This article aims to investigate how parental involvement influences the educational performance of students and offers some suggestions on ways to get parents involved in virtual settings, mainly in Florida.

Parental Involvement: Overview

Researchers, scholars, educators, school administrators, and parents have assigned a variety of definitions to the term "parental involvement." Hashmi and Akhner (2013) attribute parental involvement to everything that parents do to enhance the academic performance of their children, which includes the way they provide their support at home and communicate with the schools. For the U.S. Department of Education (2001), it is the ongoing partaking of parents and families in students' learning. Lareau (2000) asserts that it comprises all activities that parents do such as reading to children, talking to them, teaching them the alphabet, attending conferences, and events and meetings that are taking place in the schools. In other words, parental involvement can be defined as the relationship that is developed between parents, families, and schools where all stakeholders have a common goal: to bolster students' learning. It encompasses what parents do at school and at home to strengthen academic performance. It is so important that every year, every parent, teacher, and student in Florida's Broward County School District sign an agreement that is called the "compact form," which lays out everyone's roles and responsibilities in student learning. All schools receiving Title-I funding—schools that have 51% or more students who qualify for free/reduced-price lunch—are required to have a parental involvement plan that is developed by both schools and parents and revised yearly by all parties.

In order for parental involvement to occur and be effective, schools must provide parents with diverse opportunities to play their part in their children's education. Educators must realize that it is a crucial element in resolving many educational issues (Fan & Chen, 2001), whether these issues happen at home or in the classroom. As a result, educators must be open to this framework by maintaining constant communication with families. This way they will be more likely to overcome most of the challenges that hinder parental involvement.

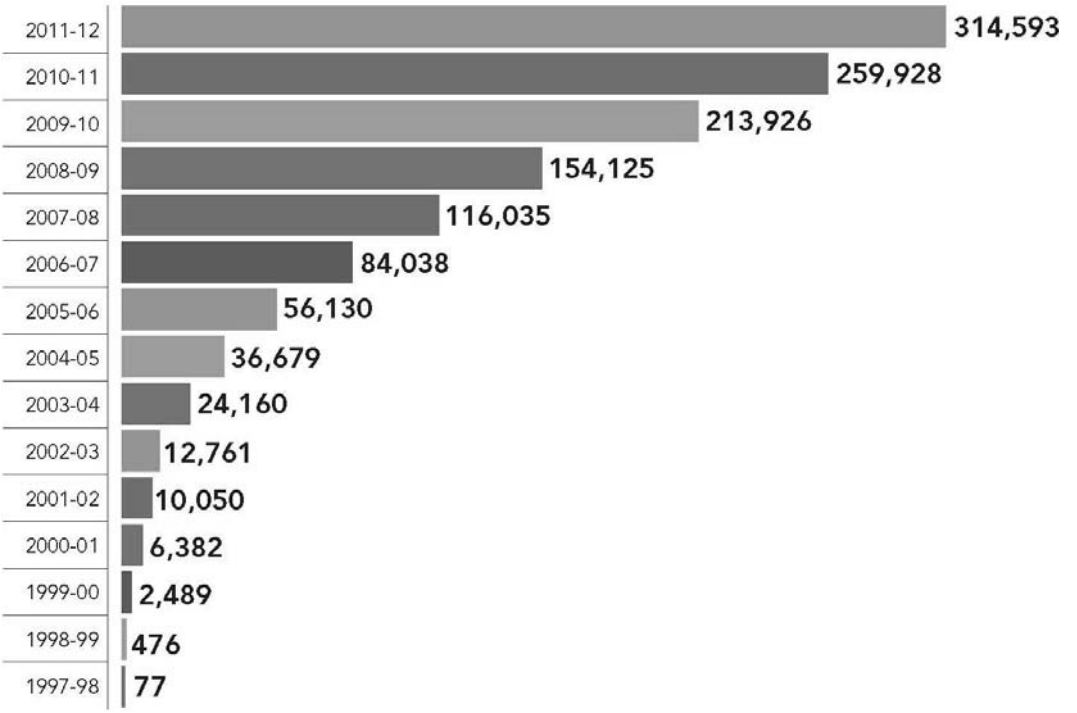
Florida Virtual School: Background Information

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) began to provide online courses to children in kindergarten to Grade 12 in 1997 as part of the state public school system with its own governing board. It was accredited in 2001 by the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation and the Southern Association of Colleges and

Schools. During the initial year, FLVS served only 77 students (Johnson, 2012). As years passed, enrollment increased considerably—from 55,000 in 2005-2006 to 80,000 in 2006-2007 (Johnson, 2012). During the academic year 2011-2012, FLVS offered about 120 courses, including AP courses, to more than 148,000 pupils with the support of over 1,800 staff members. The Digital Learning Act of 2011 had a significant impact on the expansion of FLVS. It mandated that all Florida students entering the ninth grade in 2011-2012 take at least one online class as part of the requirements to graduate from high school. The school population is not only in the 67 districts in the State of Florida, but also throughout the nation and abroad.

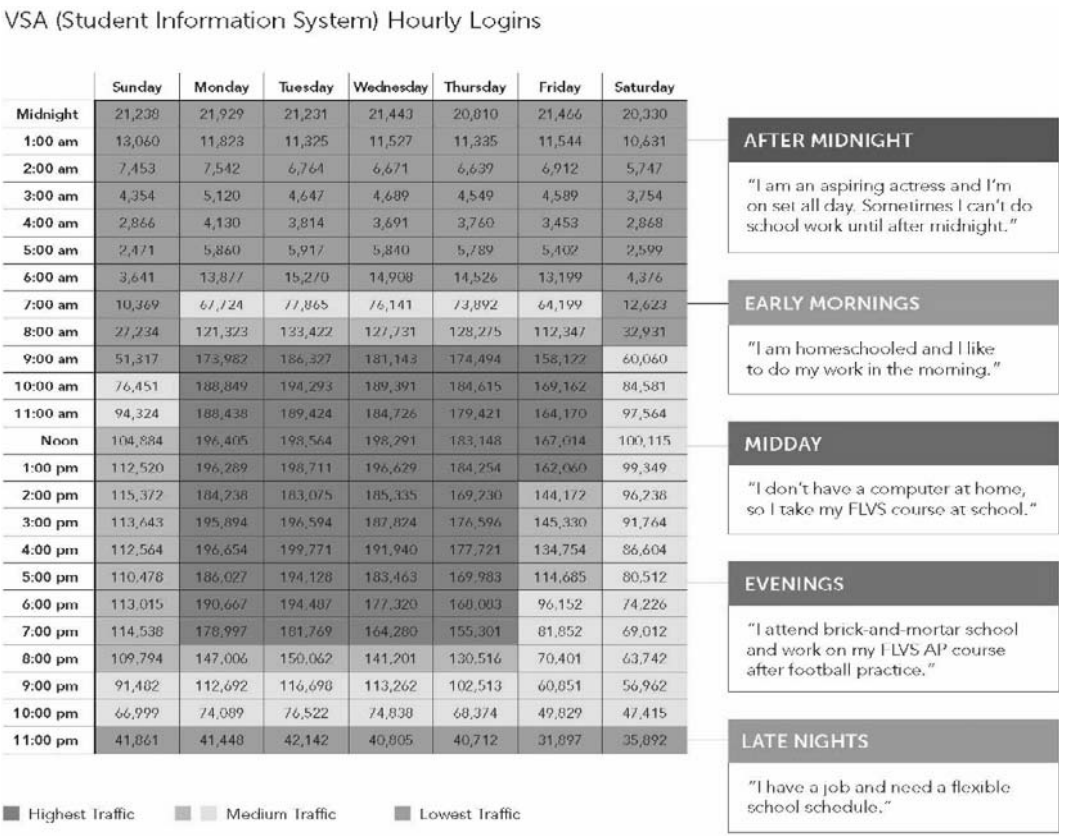
Florida Virtual School aims to provide "quality, technology-based education" that will make every learner successful. Students learn at their own pace and have more control over their learning than they do in face-to-face classrooms. Instruction is individualized to meet the unique educational needs of every student. Teaching is no longer about fitting all students in one room and having them reading the same page (Young, Birtolo, & McElman, 2009). The schedule is flexible. There is no set place and time to complete classwork (see Figures 1 and 2). Parents receive guidance and support from educators and counselors so that they can better assist their children.

FLVS utilizes a wide variety of devices and tools for instruction, including mobile phones, e-mail, the Web, and text messaging. Because these tools are already familiar to most learners, they make the teaching and learning process easier and more interesting. As long as they are used



Source: Florida Virtual School (2012).

Figure 1. Total number of successful semester completions: 1,291,849.



Source: Florida Virtual School (2012).

Figure 2. When do FLVS students learn?

effectively by both the instructor and the learner to deliver quality instruction, successful learning will take place.

The Future of Florida Virtual School

As technology-based instruction has taken a different turn, online learning, or distance education, has experienced a remarkable evolution. Virtual school has expanded so quickly, it makes it a difficult task to predict what it will look like in the future. Julie Young, president and chief executive officer of FLVS, notes that,

> In a field as rapidly changing as online learning, it is sometimes hard for even us to know what will come next. Planning for the future, however, is a necessary and exciting undertaking, and we know that some of what we're planning will need to be adapted to meet technology changes and other developments in the coming years. (Florida Virtual School, 2012)

Nonetheless, FLVS's administrators and the governing body must plan strategically to avoid surprises. In an article published in the *Sun Sentinel* on December 10, 2013, Karen Yi described the Broward School District's plans that will affect more than six schools in the County due to "declining enrollment and drops in student performance." These strategies will include the

opening of the district's first online technical high school. This online technical school is scheduled to open next year. It will offer a blended model—both online instruction and face-to-face classes. About 33 programs will be offered and only 150 freshmen will be able to attend during the first year.

Parental Involvement in Florida Virtual School

Planning for the future of education should of course include parents and families. They are vital stakeholders and their involvement has a positive impact on students' achievement. FLVS must provide parents with opportunities to play their role in the academic performance of learners. Epstein et al. (1997) proposed a framework of six ways to get parents involved in schools: (1) providing parents and families with parenting skills and help schools in understanding families, (2) communicating effectively with parents and families about student progress and school happenings, (3) providing volunteer opportunities for parents and families, (4) creating prospects for parents and children to learn together at home, which includes homework and curriculum related activities and projects, (5) allowing parents and families to be part of the school decision making process by encouraging them to be part of advocacy groups and committees such as Parent Teacher Association, Parent Teacher Organization, school councils, forums, other organizations, and (6) matching parents, families and the community with resources and services that are available to meet their needs. When Epstein et al. suggested these six types of parental involvement, technology-based schooling was not as popular as it is today. They were probably looking at the traditional schooling where students and teachers meet in a classroom to teach and learn. Even though education is changing, these propositions to get parents involved still apply to technology-based programs. Florida Virtual School should utilize these strategies in order to ensure that students receive adequate level of support from parents in order to be successful.

Parenting

FLVS can provide parenting classes to families, not only with child-rearing skills, but also to help them understand the appropriate ways to utilize technology so that they are able to monitor their children's online activities. Technology affects our society positively and negatively as well. Parents must be informed about what their children are exposed to when surfing the Internet. As part of the parenting program, some parents could attend workshops and seminars to learn skills such as creating and accessing e-mail, navigating through websites, and even learning computer programs. Just as Title-I funded schools have done it, FLVS could find funds that would allow online parents to voluntarily attend conferences that aim to offer them with the skills and the knowledge they need to be more technology savvy, better assist their children and mentor other students.

Communicating

Educators must have access to parents by a variety of means. One of the quickest and surest ways is via e-mail. This is why it is necessary that parents learn that skill in the parenting program. This way, the line of communication between FLVS and the home would be more accessible and parents would be informed of their child's progress in online classes and stay current on graduation information.

Volunteering

There may not be enough opportunities for parents to volunteer in virtual schools as they do in traditional face-to-face classrooms. A needs assessment could be done

to determine parents' availability and possibilities to support students' learning. For instance, there might be a regular meeting online where educators and parents can meet and discuss just about anything regarding the online learning experiences. Those who are computer savvy and educated enough can tutor other students online; however, proper background checks and close monitoring must be conducted to protect our children and parents as well. As a result, students will receive more individual attention and those whose parents are unable to support them at home would have a mentor or a tutor to assist them.

Learning at Home

Florida Virtual School can provide information to parents regarding the curriculum and the required skills to pass a class. Parents can also be informed about the different calendars and deadlines to ensure that students are on point with assignments. They can also offer additional assistance to their children. Just like the regular school system, FLVS can assign projects and research activities for families to complete together. This way, children will build their self-confidence and develop a more optimistic approach toward learning.

Decision Making

Almost anything that can happen in a traditional classroom can also take place at a distance. Therefore, FLVS could find ways to implement a web-based parent teacher association and even conduct school advisory council and forum meetings at a distance. Parent would receive a calendar with meeting dates and reminders. As a matter of fact, it would be more effective than the face-to-face meetings because those who are unable to attend could always listen to the recordings at a later time. This would allow parents to give their input on decisions regarding budgets and policies that impact education and they would have firsthand information about any upcoming changes. Parents would also be able to network with other families and be more confident about cyber learning.

Connecting With the Community

Florida Virtual School could have a presence on the parent page, linked to various websites that offer services that could be helpful to parents and families. These services may include but are not limited to health, literacy, counseling, employment, focus groups, recreation, immigration, and any other agencies that are in their surroundings that can assist them with any issues they may have. This way, parents would know where the community resources are and be able to utilize them to meet the needs of their families.

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Challenges are a part of everything we do and most of the time they bring excitement to our daily lives. Of course getting parents involved is a challenge. It is already a very difficult task to get them to come to the traditional schools even for a simple conference. In low socioeconomic areas, especially, it is hard to reach them even on the telephone. Some barriers to parental involvement in synchronous schools are numerous. Some parents do not speak English and are unable to communicate with faculty and staff or read and understand the letters or the flyers; some are not literate enough to provide homework assistance; others have to work more than one job because at least one of the parents is not present in the home; a number of parents/guardians are either too young and immature or too old with health issues. There are a number of families who are just not interested or may have conflicting schedules.

Computer illiteracy, lack of Internet access, and insufficient funding can be added to the above-mentioned challenges to cyber schooling. Schools should never assume that parents have easy access to technology either at home or elsewhere (Ramirez, 2001). Mulligan (2003) added that school administrators and educators have some control over the level of parental involvement, for they are the ones planning the meetings, open houses, conferences, and so forth. Consequently, FLVS must find ways to overcome these barriers by implementing efficient parental involvement programs that would benefit not only students but parents as well. The six types of involvement proposed by Epstein et al. (1997) could be a starting point, with appropriate funding allotted specifically to these programs.

Benefits of Parental Involvement

Wright and Bogotch (2006) assert that the effectiveness of parental involvement depends on the schools' attitudes toward parents, and they must have the willingness to accept and work with them. Many students are not as autonomous (Moore, 2007). They may not be capable of self-directed learning due to lack of discipline, self-motivation, and determination. If distance learners are not autonomous or self-sufficient, it will be very challenging for them to succeed. Subsequently, they rely on their parents' support in order to complete their virtual school requirements.

As an educator and a doctoral student, I should not have waited for my daughter's online teacher to inform me that she failed to fulfill her online course requirements. I should have known better and been more involved and proactive. Asking your child "did you do your assignments?" or just assuming they did is not parental involvement. As a parent, I should have been there for my high school child the same way I was there when she was in elementary and middle school. Shumow, Lyutykh, and Schmidt (2011) affirm that parental involvement decreases when their children are in high school. They also suggest many possible explanations as to why parents do not provide as much assistance in high school as they did in elementary school. One explanation has to do with demography. Shumow et al. determined that parents with higher level of education are more apt to be involved at the high school level because they are better prepared to provide their assistance. It is unlikely to find less-educated families involved in high school due to the strenuous curriculum. This group of parents would greatly benefit from the involvement program that would offer online parenting classes and literacy classes in order to get involved in their children's education from kindergarten all the way to high school and even beyond.

Parental involvement means better test scores and higher achievement. It also forces teachers to raise the bar and provide students with meaningful teaching and learning experiences. When parents are around, educators do better than their best and children perform to the highest level. Such action will result in better grades and a higher graduation rate. By creating a substantial parental involvement program, FLVS would invest in parents who would become more self-sufficient and students who would be willing to learn and achieve successfully.

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Digital Feedback

An Integral Part of the Online Classroom

Lisa Goldsmith

Feedback

Nitko and Brookhart (2011) defined feedback as information that is provided to a student from a teacher based on a formative assessment performed by observing and diagnosing student activity. In the broader definition, feedback can include any information about performance that can be used to better student performance. This feedback should be helpful to students in improving their work. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2012) went on to suggest that feedback shows students the guidelines as to performance improvement. Feedback is very important in online environments, in field experiences, and in the classroom. There are several types of feedback; they can be classified by the type of interaction through which they are administered. Feedback can occur from the teacher to the student, from the student to the student, or from the media (material) to the student. Feedback can also occur from the media (material) to the teacher. The purpose of all this feedback is to adjust learning. Feedback delivered electronically includes synchronous feedback, such as prompts in electronically delivered quizzes. It also includes asynchronous feedback, such as comments on assignments and tests, discussion responses, and the notes given on drafts of papers submitted. Simonson et al. point out that prompt feedback is important for learning process improvement. This finding is echoed in a study of formative assessment in the college classroom performed by Mangino (2012), in which one major finding was that the proximity of feedback to the time in which the task was performed was directly related to learning gains. The technology available in both learner assessment and delivery of feedback has expanded greatly in recent years, and continues to grow. Distance learning environments are often the sites of the development of methods for the use of these tools.

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Data as Feedback

Nonhuman Feedback: Data as Feedback?

Are data feedback? Not usually. In most cases, data need to be analyzed by a

human, such as an instructor, and then delivered as feedback. Assessment of learning can be made by a human or by software. Often, assessment made by software needs to be interpreted and the feedback delivered by a human. Software programs can generate many types of reports, some to be delivered to the instructor for further analysis and action, and some to the student. Sometimes, simple feedback can be immediately delivered to the student. Usually this feedback comes in the form of "correct" or "incorrect" as to their answer. This article will discuss how data can be used in the formation of feedback and used as feedback itself.

Course Management Systems Tracking Data

Course management systems usually incorporate some sort of tracking mechanism to deliver data to instructors and course developers. These data could include navigation data, course management data, and demographic data. The data instructors could mine for formative assessment purposes would include student participation data and student surveys. Researchers have found that many instructors are unable to use the data available for formative assessment interventions (Grant, 2012). Course management systems can produce large amounts of data; unfortunately these data are often not reported in a way that is useful to the instructor. Instructors often do not have the correct data management tools, so the data that are available in the course management systems are inadequate to understand, diagnose, and provide feedback direct the learning experience of the students. Recent research has looked at an example in the Blackboard system. This research provoked the question: how can data provide the evidence to cause instructors to change content or intervene in the learning process? Objective data are readily available through the Blackboard system. Data are easily collected on the number of postings a student has done, as well as on when and how they post. These data are slightly helpful, but even more helpful data are available. For example, data can be examined semantically to check if the discussions are on topic. This may tell the instructor if intervention is needed. However, the only way these data are useful is if they are accessible, complete, and usable by the instructor. This not only involves the instructor getting the data in usable form, but also the instructor knowing how to combine the objective data that are mined, with both subjective and objective data that the instructor has gathered through other means. It is only then that an instructor can make a determination of what formative steps are needed for individual students and the course as a whole (Dringus, 2012). A recommendation rising out of the research on this topic was that a layered approach be used to help end-users become more comfortable with the use of these data. Another suggestion was that a system should be developed in which instructors could share their strategies for using this type of data. And as always, evidence-based best uses reports would be helpful in creating faculty acceptance and use of the data available to improve teaching and learning (Grant, 2012).

Clickers

Student response systems can provide immediate feedback in large university class settings. Powell, Straub, Rodriguez, and Van Horn (2011), studied the use of student response systems, also known as clickers, with 183 students divided into two groups. The grades of the two groups were analyzed to determine the effect of clicker use on achievement. A five-question survey was completed by the students to determine their perception of the use of the clickers on their learning. The questions addressed academic achieve-

ment, formative assessment effect on learning, student self-identification of gaps in knowledge acquisition, the fun aspect of clickers, and student perception of cost versus value. The results of the survey of perceptions showed that all of the students that used the student response system thought the clickers were fun, but only half of them thought they were worth the cost. Students felt that the feedback received from the student response system increase their understanding of the concepts and helped them catch gaps in their content knowledge. The results of the final grade analysis showed that students who used the clickers performed significantly better than those not using the clickers. Though clickers are still widely in use with student response system programs, they may soon be replaced by handheld devices such as tablets or mobile phones.

Handheld Devices

Handheld devices can be used to deliver feedback to instructors for grading, or directly to students in field activities. In a study published in 2009, handheld devices were used with elementary school teachers in training as they participated in a field experience tutoring students. Assessment data were collected through the use of an assessment tool that was designed for use on the specific handheld device being used (Bennett & Cunningham, 2009). It should be noted that the device used in this study would be considered quite out of date by 2014 standards. The handheld devices used had limited memory, so assessment tools had to be short. Data could only be entered through the use of the stylus, with no keyboard entry available. Even with these drawbacks, the teachers found the devices useful for entering assessment data that could then be accumulated and analyzed so that feedback could be generated, upon which action could be taken to improve learning activities (Bennett & Cunningham, 2009). With current technology, smartphones and tablets are able to take the place of previous devices, such as personal digital assistants, to perform both student response activities and data reporting via course management systems applications available to both smartphones and tablets. With the existence of the "cloud," data are available anywhere.

Mobile devices can be valuable tools in current methods of learning and teaching. One method in which feedback utilizing mobile devices can be used is scaffolding. Combining today's independent, self-directed learning methods with the vast amount of information students are confronted with can result in working memory overload. Scaffolding expands on the constructivist theory of education by stating that students build knowledge based on what they already know. Constructivist theory states that individuals tend to build knowledge from a series of experiences (Revere & Kovach, 2011). Scaffolding is the method used to structure the series of experiences noted in constructivism (Nitko & Brookhart, 2011). A study of this learning/teaching method, undertaken by Hung, Hwang, Lin, Wu, and Su (2013), in which students received information and answered questions during a field experience, found that the use of mobile devices during a field experience, to provide immediate feedback during an inquiry learning activity, produced positive results. The group using the mobile devices scored much higher on post activity assessments than groups performing the activity with no real time feedback. It should be noted that the control group did not have the scaffolding methodology built into their lesson.

Computer Assisted Learning

Simulation-based computer assisted learning programs also provide real-time feedback to assist in the learning process. A study of the use of computer assisted

learning to assist in statistics coursework (T.-C. Liu, 2010), examined how synchronous feedback, provided through simulations, could direct students into appropriate activities to correct misconceptions that occurred during their learning process. Liu utilized the cognitive conflict learning model as a lens through which to exam this phenomena. The cognitive conflict model, much like the scaffolding model, addresses cognitive overload in learning. In this model, learning follows a flow from externalization to reflection to construction to application. In the simulation-based computer assisted learning program studied, feedback during the construction phase would be used to prompt students into activities that would create concepts about the content. Feedback at the conclusion of the application phase would either direct the student to remediate the construction phase or go on to the next activity. The results of interviews in this study were that students felt that they were able learn statistical interpretation with fewer misconceptions through the use of feedback in a simulation-based computer assisted learning system.

Human Feedback

Synchronous Instructor-to-Student Feedback

Communication in an online environment occurs between instructor and student, peer-to-peer, and even between the content and the student. Communication between instructor and student can take place both synchronously and asynchronously. Some instructors prefer to use the online chat sessions in the course management system for synchronous communication. Others prefer to hold traditional office hours in which they can have phone conversations or even Skype sessions with their students. Instructor feedback also occurs during online class sessions in which discussions take place. Research results have shown that synchronous discussions with instructors can be very beneficial. Students have reported that synchronous, computer-based discussions, with instructors can be a positive form of formative assessment with feedback. Students reported that they felt the discussions shifted from passive learning to active learning, and that real-time instructor feedback caused a connection between misconception and correction. Both students and instructors reported a more positive experience with computer-based discussions versus face-to-face discussions. The instructor reported more participation in computer-based discussions as compared to face-to-face office hours (Chung, Shel, & Kaiser, 2006). Other studies have reported a feeling of disconnection in computer-based discussions because of the inability to observe nonverbal cues (Huang & Hsiao, 2012).

Asynchronous Instructor Feedback

A large factor in a student success in an online course is instructor feedback. Research results have shown that students who receive more teacher comments on assignments, rather than just a letter or numerical grade, earn higher course grades. Conversely, fewer teacher comments were associated with lower student grades. These results illustrate the idea that teacher feedback is an essential part of an online course (Liu & Cavanagh, 2011). In order to be effective, feedback must be prompt and on point (Simonson et al., 2012).

Synchronous Peer Feedback

Chat sessions, often embedded in course management systems live course sessions, can be a positive, student initiated, synchronous, feedback vehicle. However, often the feedback is pedagogically questionable and will be dominated by the

students who type faster, rather than generating a diversity of ideas. Chat sessions also generate overlapping discussions and out-of-sync conversations. One solution to the negative aspects of chat sessions is to have an instructor facilitate the chat (Revere & Kovach, 2011).

Asynchronous Peer Feedback

Student-to-student communication occurs most often on either discussion boards or blogs. This asynchronous form of communication allows students to be creative as to content, but can also allow for some students to miss out in participation (Revere & Kovach, 2011). Once again, some students find that misunderstandings are more likely in online communication because of the absence of nonverbal cues (Huang & Hsiao, 2012).

Discussion boards could be seen as the asynchronous form of chat sessions, and closely related to classroom discussions. Discussion boards usually involve student-driven content based on instructor-assigned questions. Discussion boards allow for thought-out discussions, rather than spontaneous discussions, as in chat sessions or classroom discussions. Discussion boards allow all students to participate more equally, leading to higher quality discussions (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). In order for discussion boards to be effective in providing the type of feedback that leads to critical reflection, instructors should facilitate the discussion board activity. The pace of the discussion board assignments should be set to assist students in focusing on the course content. The facilitator plays the role of keeping the discussion focused, and ensuring participation (Henning, 2012).

Utilizing Asynchronous and Synchronous Peer Feedback Methods

Some research suggests that blending synchronous and asynchronous discussions creates a learning experience that includes the best of both worlds—the traditional classroom and the online learning environment. Proponents of this method assert that the traditional classroom discussion keeps students more engaged than an online, asynchronous discussion. At the same time, online, text-based discussions allow time for deep reflection and critical thinking. Some students found that online, synchronous discussions were frustrating because of overlapping conversations in the text-based chat. But overall, the students who participated in the synchronous sessions in this study found that both their involvement and their motivation in the course were increased. Additional benefits to providing synchronous discussion sessions along the same topic lines as the asynchronous discussion boards include having a second chance to check for understanding of the content discussed on the discussion boards, as well as stronger student preparedness for the synchronous discussion (Armstrong & Thornton, 2012).

Blogs

Just as discussion boards can provide opportunities for critical reflection through peer feedback, blogs can provide for even more in-depth student expression and feedback. Many blog sites are free. Many course management systems provide a blog tool (Simonson et al., 2012). As a student driven process, blogs can be a positive outlet for student expression, and peer feedback enabling critical reflection. The asynchronous nature of blogs, as well as the longer contributions, can discourage the feedback process. Factors that can ameliorate this problem are good instructor facilitation, notification of postings and responses, and applications available for tablets and mobile phone devices (Revere & Kovach, 2011).

Peer Feedback on Writing: Wikis and Peer Assessment on Writing Assignments

Wikis are writing assignments that are completed collaboratively over the Internet. Wikis provide an opportunity for peer-to-peer feedback that enables the critical reflection process. Research has indicated that the feedback received through the wiki process is perceived as valuable by the student writer. Among the drawbacks to the wiki experience are difficulties in the social aspects of group process. Research indicates that this problem often diminishes as students proceed in the project, becoming more comfortable with each other and clearer on the objective of the writing. Instructor facilitation as well as strong assignment development can lessen the negative impact of the social difficulties. The wiki is, essentially, a group assignment that has an added purpose of being published to the Internet to provide information to others. Group assignments as a whole tend to encourage self-assessment and reflection through feedback from peers. Knowing that one will have to assess the work of another student encourages all students to understand the assessment criteria of the assignment. Thus collaboration and peer feedback assignments help not only the student receiving the feedback, but the student giving it (Lin & Kelsey, 2009; T.-C. Liu, 2010; Revere & Kovach, 2011).

Peer Feedback Essentials

Research results have shown that peer feedback assignments can lead to one of the greatest goals of education; lifelong learning (Phelan, 2012). Peer assessment is best done with a clear instructor rubric. Student involvement with the construction of the rubric, as well as clear assessment criteria, and appropriate instructor facilitation, can maximize gains in the learning objectives of the peer feedback assignment for all parties. These guidelines can also minimize the occurrence of inaccurate peer feedback, which is one of the drawbacks of a peer assessment assignment. Peer feedback can be constructed within a course management system, or using social networking and other Internet resources such as Twitter, various Google applications, and audio/video applications such as Skype (Revere & Kovach, 2011). Feedback can be delivered in a timely man-

Table 1. Feedback Types by Temporal and Source Characteristics Feedback

Synchronous		Asynchronous	
Data as Feedback	**Human Feedback Delivered Electronically**	**Data as Feedback**	**Human Feedback Delivered Electronically**
To student: • Quiz results • Tutorials • Mobile devices • Clickers	Instructor to student: • Live chat office hours • Chat facilitation in online class session Peer-to-peer • Chat discussion in online class session • Online meetings for group assignments	CMS-to-instructor: • Reports from the CMS to be analyzed and feedback delivered to student	Instructor-to-student: • Grades and comments • Discussion facilitation • Corrective comments on drafts of papers Peer-to-peer: • Wikis • Blogs • Discussion boards • Peer review of written work

Sources: Grant (2012); Hung et al. (2013); Liu and Cavanagh (2011); Mangino (2012); Powell et al. (2011); Revere & Kovach (2011).

ner that is satisfactory to both recipient and provider through course management systems or through e-mail. In distance learning, the feedback process can create a sense of community in the online classroom. Providing feedback, and receiving and utilizing feedback, often results in a reflection process that becomes a lifelong learning skill (Phelan, 2012).

Conclusion

Feedback is an essential part of online learning. Its primary purpose is to adjust learning processes in order to maximize student achievement of learning goals (Simonson et al., 2012). Feedback can be delivered from the instructor to the student, student-to-student, or even from software embedded in the software that is delivering content to the student. Feedback can be in the form of data, as in the case of the reports that instructors can obtain from course management systems. This information must be analyzed and then delivered to the student as useable feedback (Grant, 2012). Simple feedback can be delivered from applications on mobile phones, in student response systems in large classes, or through computer assisted learning systems. Feedback in the form of human communication is delivered electronically in distance learning courses. Distance learning can include both synchronous and asynchronous feedback activities. Students have responded with both positive and negative perceptions of synchronous communication over the Internet (Chung et al., 2006; Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Asynchronous feedback from an instructor comes in the form of grades, comments, and corrections on papers. For the best learning improvements, this feedback should be given as close to the time the task being assessed was performed as possible (Mangino, 2012). Peer-to peer feedback occurs in distance learning courses through discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and other collaborative assignments. The peer-to-peer feedback process fosters, in the learner, a capacity for critical reflection, which is a lifelong learning skill. In addition, all of the feedback processes assist in the creation of the online learning community (Phelan, 2012).

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Online Education in the Bahamas

What Is its Position?

Kendra Spencer

We live in a world where technology seems to be taking over. However, in spite of the growing trend of technology in our daily lives, there are many countries that have not reached this point as yet. I live in one of those countries. A country where one is unable to perform a self-cash out at the grocery store, a country where our local network has just migrated to high-definition television, a country where the majority of our schools are not computerized. Yes, there are many adult learners who are involved in online education through schools such as Nova Southeastern University, the University of Phoenix, and Walden University. However, when it comes to the K-12 sector as well as our local colleges, online classes are practically at a level of nonexistence. Hence, the focus on online education in the Bahamas: what is its position?

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In approaching the topic, I imagined having such a program being implemented in the educational system in my country. Hence my aim to gather the views of others as it relates to this subject. Therefore through voluntary acceptance to participate in this project, I interviewed instructors from local colleges. I found that their responses were common and their concerns the same.

The first instructor, Ron Clarke, serves as acting head of a math department at a technical college. He stated that technology in the classroom in the Bahamas is in dire need of advancement. While teachers use technology such as smart boards, and various computer forms, the students do not have immediate access to computer technology in the classroom. As it relates to the question comparing the prevalence of computer technology in the Bahamian education system to other countries, Clarke added that we actually have to get to that stage of technology prevalence in the classroom, and make it available to our students. He also mentioned that in spite of the fear of older teachers to embrace the technology phenomenon, younger teach-

ers are ready to take on this route of teaching, but more training is needed.

Clarke stated that he uses the ENO Board as a form of technology into his lessons, along with the Skills Tutor Educational Software, which allows students to log in online and complete assignments and quizzes as well as tutorials that are made available for practice and skill building. Nonetheless, he summed up the interview by saying that we need more persons who will do research and produce documents to say that this mode of teaching and learning is the way forward.

The second educator I interviewed is an adjunct instructor at one of the local colleges. This well-versed young man, Alonzo Smith, shared his views about distance education and online learning in the Bahamas by stating that this mode of instruction and learning has global advantages and that it is certainly the wave of the future, especially with the advances in technology and the busy lives of many. He said that it is something that really needs to be tapped into since there are also many individuals who are not able to attend a traditional campus for many reasons. Smith added that he does not see online learning being integrated into K-12 classrooms in the Bahamas in the very near future, but rather as a long-term goal. The reason being, he added, is that the government, who is responsible for this implementation is not prepared for this move financially, and probably do not see it as an area of importance, since they are presently focusing on other areas of education, such as national exams and improving the national average. Conversely, he added that it would be advantageous to all students in the K-12 age groups because most of these students spend a lot of time online in their spare time, and since it is something that they enjoy doing, they are more likely to respond to this method of learning in a positive way.

In response to his school's move toward online learning, Smith stated that attempts were made and; introductory courses were offered, though not on a large scale. Sadly, there was a disconnect and tension arose since a lot of the instructors were not prepared to put in the overtime with teaching online, as they were still required to teach the regular load of traditional sessions. In addition, he added that many were trying to feel their way through the online instructional process. Moreover, Smith noted that more training is needed because most teachers do not know how to attack such a task. However, he said that his school is looking into revisiting this area, and that they are simply trying to find out what needs to be done to make it a reality. Nonetheless, he continued to say that, like the government system and the K-12 classrooms, his school is also "just not there as yet."

The responses from both Bahamian educators focused on some barriers to distance education. These barriers included increased time commitment, lack of money to implement the programs, organizational resistance to change, and definitely a lack of shared vision. Berge and Muilenberg (2000) asserted that the shortage of technology-enhanced classrooms, labs, or infrastructures can be grouped among the greatest setbacks in education. Therefore, there needs to be more discussions about how educational institutions can keep current with changing trends in technology.

The Nassau Guardian published an article that described the views of the leader of the Free National Movement, the opposition party of the Bahamas government, as it relates to technological proficiency in a new Bahamas. The leader, Hubert Minnis, stated that competency in science and technology is crucial to effectively manage a nation. He also mentioned the importance of recognizing that becoming technologically ready means more than paying bills online or accessing Bahamian law on one's computer or smartphone. In addition, he noted that the country needs to replace its archaic relics and become more

tech savvy. Minnis described tech savvy in the new Bahamas as having the appropriate government services and assistance online; having accessible computerized education for all; access to the proper medical and healthcare innovations on virtual platforms, and expanded opportunities in financial services (Minnis, 2013).

The words that really grasped my attention were "having accessible computerized education for all." I was happy to know that someone in the governmental hierarchy, in spite of being the opposition, recognized the importance of moving beyond where we are today. Minnis shared his view that the Ministry of Education, which is where our greatest expenditure exists, has not risen to the occasion to embrace science and technology. He stated that in a "New Bahamas," he recognizes that marrying the two will mean more than a few whiteboards and computers, but additional teacher training will be required to better equip teachers with the skills to use the new and emerging technology as teaching tools. This, he added, means equipping every classroom, from prekindergarten to college with the necessary technology to produce students equipped for the 21st century. Moreover, he announced that this also means making distance education accessible through the use of technology and media services (Minnis, 2013).

As I began to bring it all together, I reflected on Clarke's statement that the need for more research about distance education and online learning as it relates to the Bahamas is a necessity. While this is essential, we can look at the research of many of the pioneers of distance education and online learning and use these frameworks to build our own system. Of course cultural adjustments will have to be made, but lots of work has already been done; the information is out there, so we just need to collect the data and scrutinize the reported success. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2012), stated that the distance education research agenda has also evolved, and that researchers are no longer focusing only on achievement, but are now examining learner attributes and perceptions as well as interaction patterns and how these contribute to the overall learning environment.

There is a lot of ground work that has to be set before distance education and online learning can be implemented or become a norm in the Bahamas. The high school graduation rate in the Bahamas has decreased, in part due to students not attaining the required minimum grade point average of 2.0. In addition, the Ministry of Education also face challenges with recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers in specialized subject areas to ensure that "no child is left behind." Concomitantly, the national grade point average as it relates to the national exam, BGCSEs, is a D (Massey, 2009), but many schools do not have the funding needed for technology upgrades and, in most cases, the actual implementation.

As I researched the implementation of successful distance education programs, I was drawn to the steps taken by the state of Alabama. Stancil (2011) mentioned that, based on the deficiencies listed, members assigned to a task force on distance education that was led by the governor formulated a list of objectives to guide their vision. They also created a strategic plan about how and when to implement this initiative.

Stancil (2011) noted Meredith and Newton's three strands of intervention that must unite to ensure the success of an e-learning intervention. These include learner capability, technology and teacher pedagogy. Of course, one must consider the cost factors to effectively integrate these strands, as up to date technology needs to be positioned into the classrooms, as well as the appropriate training for teachers. If the teachers are not properly trained for such a task, then it will all be in vain.

While there are baby steps being taken toward integration of online education within our schools, I must concur with Minister Minnis that we have not integrated the basic computer technology as yet. Of course there are many Bahamians who are technology savvy, many have computers in their homes, many use smart phones, et cetera. However, there are still numerous Bahamians who cannot afford a computer or Internet service.

What is the position of the Bahamas regarding online education? I can say that I see my country as a sprinter, at the starting line, getting in position to start the race. Sadly the staring pistol has already been fired. Perhaps one day we will begin the race in spite of others lapping us.

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Snow Days

Is Distance Education a Solution in K-12 Schools?

Natalie B. Milman

As of the writing of this article, my children have missed 10 days of school and have had several (I have lost count) 2-hour delayed starts because of school cancelations due to snow and/or cold. Although these were not consecutive days lost, clearly the disruption, costs, and missed learning opportunities for not attending school add up. How can teachers manage so much disruption to learning? How can they make the most of this lost time, even when make-up days are scheduled? What are possible solutions?

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Many schools across the United States have started allowing "e-learning days," some of which can be used to make up missed school days legally, to address the lost time resulting from school cancelations (cf. Baker, 2014; Gumbrecht, 2014; Morones, 2014; Richman, 2014). Leading this trend are legislators in the state of Ohio who passed a 2011 law that allows for "A school district, community, STEM, or chartered nonpublic school … to use online lessons and paper-lesson 'blizzard bags' to make up a total of three calamity days" (Wann, 2014) as long as it has submitted a plan to the Ohio Department of Education by August 1 of that year.

As an online educator, I can see why school leaders might view online education as a key to the school cancelation challenge—and it makes perfect sense this would be part of any school's emergency plan, after all, school can be canceled for reasons other than weather-related ones. However, for those of us who teach online, we know firsthand how much time and

effort it takes to design, develop, and implement quality and meaningful online educational experiences. Moreover, I am very concerned about online education being thrust upon learners, particularly those for whom it is not developmentally, motivationally, and/or technologically appropriate, and with no input or preparation for how to be successful online learners or what to expect from online assignments.

Important factors to consider when determining how to incorporate e-learning are whether or not students have access to technology and/or the Internet at home. Even in households that have a computer and Internet connectivity, every student in the home cannot access the same computer at the same time to complete schoolwork. How do families negotiate who gets to complete her/his work and when? What if the home environment is loud and/or very crowded? What if the children hear other children playing outside in the snow? How conducive to learning is the home environment when everyone is home at the same time and stuck inside? What if there is no power? What if parents/guardians also need to work from home? All of these are questions that should be considered!

What Can Schools do to Prepare?

There are numerous steps school leaders can take to help not only teachers, but also students and their parents/guardians prepare for e-learning days, particularly when such decisions are made at 5 A.M. the day in which a snow day will take place.

1. Be prepared. Develop a plan before there is a need! It is important for school leaders also to keep a close eye on conditions that may result in school closure. Five in the morning the day in which school is canceled is not the time to be asking teachers to develop e-learning lessons!
2. Develop a plan. What are the expectations for students? How much work should they complete? How should teachers communicate with students? What is a reasonable deadline for assignments? What if students do not have access or the ability to work? What is the "tipping point" for requiring e-learning—is it 1, 2, 3+ missed days? How much work should be assigned (e.g., a full day's worth, half day)?
3. Be flexible. It is important for all stakeholders to understand that flexibility is key. Assignments may not be "perfect," Internet connectivity and electricity may be sporadic, among many other variables that might affect a student's ability to complete assignments.
4. Be available. If possible, educators should be available to answer questions about the assignments. This is particularly important if there will be a test—students *will* have questions (as will parents/guardians!) and they will need to contact their teachers for answers. It is critical for students to know how to contact teachers and for them to receive answers in a timely manner.
5. Educate all stakeholders about timing of communications, expectations, etc. Students, parents/guardians, and teachers should be prepared for any e-learning assignments. They should know, with as much advance notice as possible, when students will receive assignments, when they will be due, and how to submit them.
6. Acknowledge the digital divide. Not all students will have access at home to a computer or the Internet, and even when they do, this will not mean that they can work on assignments since another sibling, relative, and even a parent/guardian might need to work on the home computer.

7. Weigh the impact on parents/guardians. Many parents/guardians also have to juggle their own work whether they have the flexibility to telework or must find a way to get to work, as well as find someone to care for their children. Swarns (2014) touched upon some of the challenges parents/guardians experience when juggling working from home while also caring for children.
8. Assign developmentally appropriate schoolwork. Assignments should be assigned based on the students' abilities and also so that they can work independently. This may require differentiation of lessons for students. Not all parents/guardians will be home and/or able to assist their children.
9. Practice assigning work online both in school and at home. If there is an expectation to make-up a school day (or portions thereof), then students should have some practice with how to receive, complete, and submit assignments. Their first experience with e-learning should not be a snow day. They should be comfortable with this approach—practice will help achieve this.
10. Assess/reflect on how e-learning worked. As with any experience, it is important to assess how it worked for all students. There should also be assessments of both the practice run(s) and the actual e-learning day. Clearly there will be challenges and digital inequity, yet these cannot be addressed or accommodated without assessment and reflection on how it worked both during the practice run(s) and after a school cancelation.
11. Develop alternatives for students with limited or no access at home. Not all students will be able to complete the work. Therefore, teachers will need to develop alternate paths and time lines for students to complete the work.
12. Get stakeholder buy-in. All stakeholders should have an opportunity to learn about the possibility of e-learning, as well as to practice it. Educate the community, including the students who will be affected most!
13. Consider that kids will be kids. When my 10-year-old son was assigned several hours of work (on the ninth snow day), it was difficult for him to concentrate because he heard our neighborhood children sledding down the hill in our backyard—which also is the best sledding hill on our block! Factor in that kids will want to enjoy the snow, too.
14. Provide teachers professional development. There are many effective strategies for employing e-learning in teaching. However, even strategies such as the popular "flipped classroom approach" (Milman, 2012) have their limitations. Teachers today need to be knowledgeable, innovative, and selective about the choices they make that impact student learning.

E-learning should not be a day full of "busywork" that is disconnected from students' face-to-face learning experiences. It should be a planned, meaningful, engaging learning experience that takes into account the wide variety of learning environments (students' homes) in which learning will take place.

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Teaching Today's Online Students

They Are Diverse, But a Challenge to Teach!

Errol Craig Sull

As distance education has become more complex in its platforms, technology, marketing, and offerings so, too, has the makeup of its students. They are of a wide variety now: ages, ethnicities, nationalities, capabilities, and interests. This can make for a challenge in teaching such a mixture, and if the distance learning educator is not fully immersed in understanding each student's specifics the class can be less than fulfilling for one or more students—something we never want. Thus this guide: it offers a better understanding of some bits and pieces for several categories of students an online educator would find enrolled in a 21st century online course.

Two notes:

1. Many of the items mentioned, although listed under this or that group, can easily be applied to other categories. Yet they are placed in the group where they reside as they are most important in that category.
2. It is not only possible but also quite probable that all categories of students listed in this column can be found in one class. Look over all the items listed, then select those that work best with the class. In the end, the distance educator must meld his or her teaching strategies with the specifics of each category's points: only this will result in a class that is perfectly fulfilling to the students.

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The Multicultural Student

Students who live in another country or are new to the United States can bring

some challenges the online educator does not anticipate. Without being on the lookout for signs these students are in the class—and for indications of the students struggling—it can result in a poor learning experience for the multicultural student.

- In the class intros ask students to indicate where they live—and, if necessary, how to pronounce names. It is crucial these students feel as comfortable as possible in the class, thus understanding the culture of the students and making an effort to pronounce their names—even if audio is not part of the course—shows the instructor's interest in making all feel welcome. And do not hesitate to ask students—in a general e-mail to the class—for info on how they have previously learned.
- Immediately reach out to students who display a language barrier. There may be students whose difficulty with the English language presents as hurdle with assignments and/or understanding the course material. Take time to work with these students—and the use of audio or audio/visual in explaining can prove very helpful in these situations.
- Make it a point to show enthusiasm for the multicultural makeup of the class. The online instructor sets the tone for the class, and when he or she displays excitement for a cultural buffet in the class makeup it becomes infectious. Not only will students more readily become involved in the course but this will also strengthen that important instructor-student bond.

The Adult Learner

The so-called "baby boomer" generation has reached record numbers in this country, the country's economy has resulted in more out-of-work folks returning to school, and online education simply makes it easier for older individuals to seek a return to college. Yet there might be certain difficulties they encounter in the distance learning course, and it's important to meet these head on.

- There can be other major responsibilities in a person's life, thus limiting time for studies. Deadlines are certainly important, but the distance educator must also be mindful of students with families, employment, and other responsibilities they deem equal in importance to school. Sometimes, deadlines should be bent to accommodate such situations—it shows one's interest in the student as a person, always important.
- It may take a bit longer for this student to master all technological aspects of the course. If a student has been out of school for some time he or she may be somewhat new to use of the computer for learning. Be sure to ask the class if anyone fits in this category; when hearing from such person be sure to learn in what areas the student feels weak, as help can then be given.
- Information presented in the course may be more difficult to learn due to being out of school a long time. Course material for students not too far removed from a learning environment may find a sense of familiarity with the material currently taught, while the student away from school for some time may find he or she is starting from scratch. The use of extra resources to help in explaining the material using detailed feedback on assignments, and including audio or audio/visual input on assignment and the course can prove very helpful in these circumstances.

The College-While-Still-in-High-School Learner

Although less than 8% of the current U.S. high school population takes college courses this number is rapidly growing. Teaching this young student in a college-level distance learning course requires an

awareness and understanding of the high school student mindset—and how best to integrate this student into a college-level course.

- Keep in mind that these students are in high school for the majority of their learning hours. The rules and procedures of high school is what governs these students most of the time, and the learning approach offered them can be different from the online educator's approach. This student is straddling two academic worlds, and the online college educator must always be cognizant of these possible differences.
- Stress the importance of learning what is to be expected at the college level. Using any online college course to teach high school students the expectations of college—beyond the course subject—is a strong bonus for the students. This offers not only jump-start learning at the college level and college credits but also a smoother transmission into the long-term college of choice for these young men and women.
- The students' basic knowledge of the subject being taught may be at a lower base. In teaching high school students it is possible that certain givens the online college instructor expects new students to have will not be there, simply because the student has yet to be taught the information or has not been taught the information at a college level. More basic teaching approaches might need to be employed, as well as additional drams of patience and understanding.

The Growing-Up-With-Technology Student

Many students—especially those coming directly from high school into college and a bit older (read: Generation X and Millennials) are extremely tech savvy, thus the use of technology to highlight and demonstrate course material is often expected and appreciated. A solid integration of technology with the course materials can help keep these students engaged.

- Make use of audio and audio/visual for a better and clearer understanding of the course and course material. Using varied software that incorporates audio and audio/visual is an approach to learning with which these students are familiar, thus their engagement and interest in the course is strong when these are introduced.
- Ask the students to contribute suggestions for websites and software for the course. These students are ripe for becoming student aides of a fashion, as they might have knowledge of websites and software or approaches to the Internet with which the online instructor is not. Use a discussion thread to corral these submissions—they can make the course stronger for all, and add resources to future courses.
- Offer assignment feedback in audio and written formats. Growing up with computers, smartphones, tablets, etc. places one in the immediacy of technology, and thus these students take well to feedback given in audio or audio/visual formats. When necessary to offer a more complete understanding of an assignment, balance this technological feedback with written feedback.

The Special Needs Student

More students with physical and mental challenges are attending college. While these students in online courses are usually designated and are given special accommodations, it is imperative the distance learning instructor become familiar with limitations and problems these students may face in learning through the online environment, while also understanding the online learning platform can offer this population certain advantages as well.

- When learning of students with specific mental or physical disabilities/challenges, learn as much as you can about the specific disability or challenge. Taking the time to learn about a disability can give added insight into such a student can better be taught in the online learning environment, while also informing the instructor on what usually standards components of the course may be more difficult for these students.
- If a student openly discusses it with you, respond to the student as you would any other student: with respect and as a college student taking a course. No differently abled student wishes to be addressed as such—and there is no reason for this. Interacting with this student as an online instructor would with any other student speaks well for the professionalism and humanism of the instructor, and results in more engagement from the special needs student. Important: always check over e-mails to these students to be sure no condescending or "pity" language has been accidentally included.
- If the opportunity arises, offer extra resources in the class or to the student that can be helpful in his or her learning. Creating a resources link in class where resources for all students can also include resources that can be helpful to a special needs student who might benefit from X or Y resource. If the student does mention his or her disability it is fine to suggest these resources—but do not be the one to initiate such a conversation.

The Totally-New-to-This-Online-Education-Thing Student

Many students come to an online course with only the experience of learning in a face-to-face environment; this can present some confusion and frustration. It is not only important to address this probability on Day One of class but to also offer as much assistance as possible for a smooth integration of this student into the online learning platform.

- Offer a discussion thread or other area where students can drop questions and concerns they may have in switching from one learning environment to another. Many students find it somewhat of a shock to go from a physical classroom to the online classroom, and they often have questions and concerns not anticipated. Knowing these can be submitted to the online instructed and quickly—and clearly—answered is a big help in making these students feel more at ease in the asynchronous learning environment.
- Have a list of key contact info for departments and persons in the school that can offer additional assistance to these students. While this is beneficial for all students it will get constant use from the face-to-face to the online environment student: advising, information technology, financial aid, and other such areas not directly related to teaching can be needed, and it gives an extra touch to the online instructors' concern for his or her students to have this info available.
- Offer basic computer assistance, such as information on making attachments, how to post assignments in class, and where grades can be found. This basic computer knowledge is so often taken for granted by the online educator in his or her students, yet there will be students who do not know one of more of these items. Either have info on these standard computer tasks posted or make it a point to post an e-mail early in class indicating an email asking for such assistance will quickly bring it.

Remember: Violins, cellos, drums, piccolos, and oboes: it takes a skilled conductor to create beautiful music from this mixture.

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

Distance learning continues to grow, and thus come more questions—and I am m happy to help out when I can! Each of the four concerns raised in this issue have been asked of me often, in different forms. There will never be the day when all of distance learning will exist without hiccups, curiosities, and challenges, but the more information that can be shared among the folks who teach these courses the continued growth in the quality of that teaching.

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This column's offerings …

I appreciate your columns, and have been especially interested in your emphasis on personalizing and "exciting" the course through various resources, cartons, puzzles, et cetera. This is an approach I have taken in my online classes, but I'm wondering: when does a teacher reach a point when there is too much creativity, too much "other stuff" in the online class?

Ah, this is a question and concern I often hear, and it would be great if I could give you a simple ratio, such as, 60% course shell and standard materials, 40% other. But such cannot be, as each course, each course subject, and each course instructor demand different materials to make the class "work" for the students. However, in introducing extras into a course—and by "extras" I mean anything that you add to the course beyond as it is delivered to you on Day One of teaching it—it is crucial that one never let audio, video, cartoons, and so forth take over the class. The standard for any online course is the instructor must make the material come alive for the students, must be the one who explains and highlights the information offered to the students.

Incorporating these extras is important: they can help make a course more engaging and exciting to the students; they offer illustration and highlights of various components of the subject being taught; and

they give the (correct) impression the online educator truly cares about his or her students having a positive learning experience. An overdose of these additional items, however, and two negative results can occur: so much added to a course that students do not have time to explore all or will simply overlook much … and giving the impression these "bells and whistles" are more important than one's teaching efforts. Ultimately, it is a feel, a sense of the right balance each online instructor must have—and a look back on each course taught will eventually offer the perfect formula for the courses yet to be taught.

I have a student in one of my distance learning courses who will not accept that it is her fault for not doing well in the course. Her excuses range from it being my fault ("You expect us to be a professional like you!") to her having a bad cold to not getting the textbook on time to believing she did follow certain assignments' directions (she did not)—the list goes on. Although I have been patient with this student, and I have taken the time to point out, in detail, where she went wrong in assignments, this has been to no avail. Have you encountered a student like this? What did you do? Any help would be appreciated. Thanks!

I do not know of any distance educator who has not had at least one of these students—for anyone who really cares about his or her teaching this problem can lead to some sleepless nights! Yet there are approaches one can take to reach this "hey-it's-not-my-fault" student, if only for his or her partial acceptance of taking more ownership in not doing such a great job in the course. First, you point out taking the time to indicate where the student went wrong in an assignment—have you tried incorporating audio or audio/visual feedback? This not only can lend a clearer explanation of the material but also add a more personal touch to the feedback, thus creating a stronger student-professor bond … important because it often results in the student being more willing to accept your comments.

Additionally, a phone call can go a long way in helping right the student on a track to improvement—tone of voice and the immediacy of a call often results in a positive student response, while problems in a student's life not related to the course might be discovered—important in wanting to work with the student. Also, begin each class by mentioning to students you are not expecting them to produce assignments at a professional level—this only comes with years of experience; rather, they will be graded on their ability to follow directions, to present the content needed in the assignment, and on their improvement. Finally, stay in constant contact with the student—initiating e-mails (with small learning suggestions in each) can help bring the student into a better flow of the class.

I teach two online courses at a small liberal arts college, also teach two traditional courses at the same school. Through online webinars and ground meetings I have had the opportunity to meet many of my teaching colleagues, and most of them are also adjuncts. The problem I have—and it may sound picky, I realize—is the lead faculty for our department continually refers to us as "adjuncts," never as "professors" or "teachers" or the like, often giving us the impression (through his e-mails, webinars, and facility meetings) that we are somehow less important than one who is not an adjunct. Am I being petty? It really does irk me!

Depending on which study one reads, adjuncts now teach 60% to 80% of all college courses in the United States—and their numbers are growing. Overall, faculty who supervise adjuncts recognize their worth, and they treat them with the respect deserved (so, no, you are not being picky!). Yet there will be that one or two—as you mentioned—who seem to look down on adjuncts, giving the impression

one with the title of "adjunct" (read: part-time and nontenured track faculty member) is somehow less than a teacher. The short response to your concern is you are probably not going to change this person's attitude toward adjuncts.

What you can do equates to a simple answer: be the best adjunct possible so one can see no difference in the quality of teaching one offers as an adjunct from anyone else teaching in your school. "Quality will out" is an old expression, and if one offers excellence in teaching—including going beyond what is required—that online educator who proves him or herself to be valuable not only to the students but also to the reputation of the school … and the lead faculty (or whomever) overseeing the adjuncts. Remember: "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me"!

There is certainly a rich array of software technology to use in the online classroom, but I'm specifically interested in using programs that allow for student collaboration on projects. This is a major focus of my courses, and in addition to simply assigning students to groups and setting up separate discussion threads for each group for members to interact on their projects I'd like to add some technology that would not only aid group members' collaboration but also add a bit of pizazz to my online courses. Any suggestions?

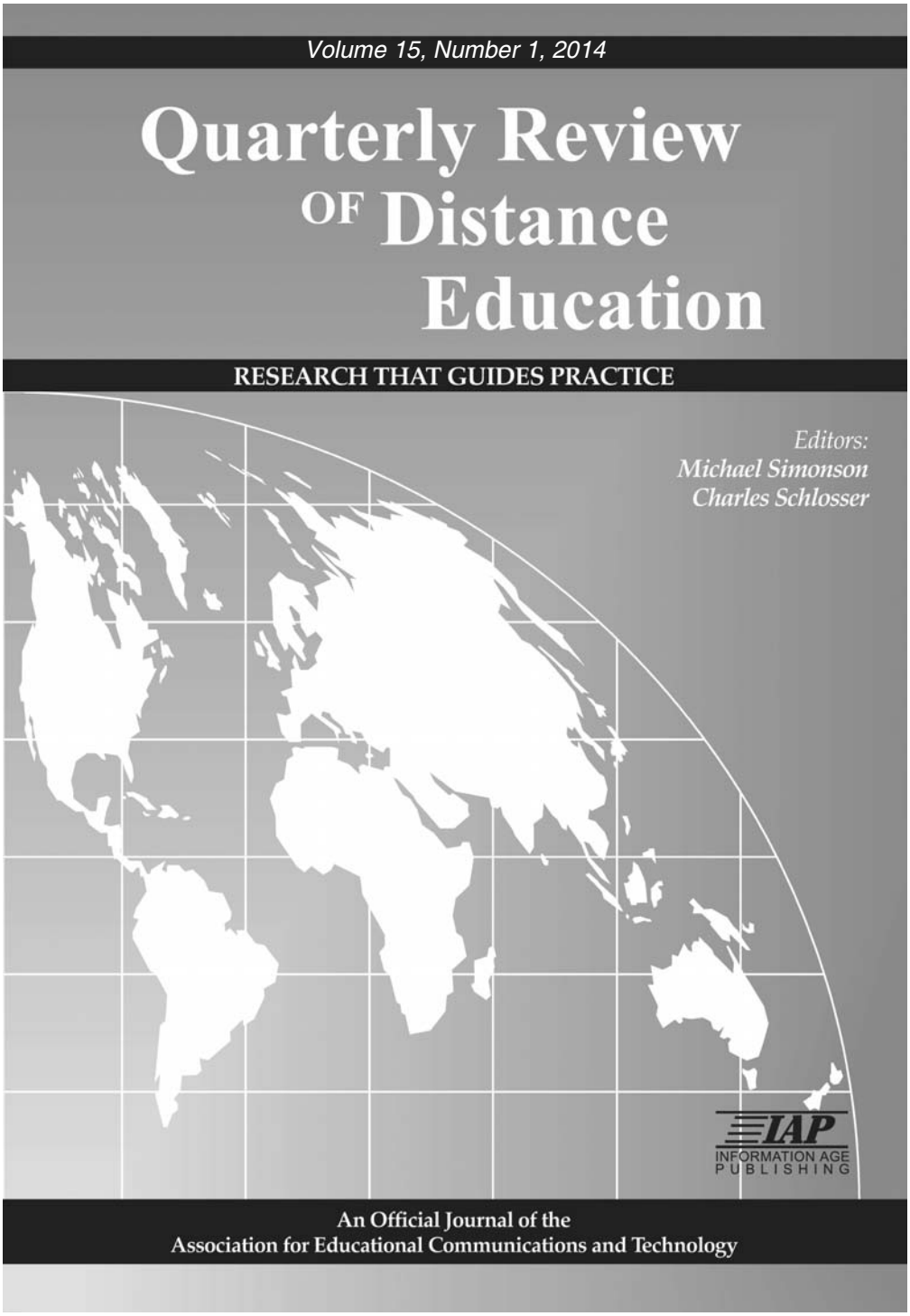
You have asked a fun question! I say this because there are software products today that not only can be a major asset to assisting group members in their online classroom collaborative projects but also add an engaging quality—the "pizazz" you mention—that helps bring a class alive with a bit of fun. This software falls into the categories of text alone, audio, and audio/visual.

On the easy side there are wikis—a web application that allows users to modify and change its contents (much like Wikipedia). Groups often use wikis for collaborative projects because they can modify and change the contents in the wiki without anyone limiting the changes. For more info visit http://www.wikihow.com/Start-a-Wiki.

Next comes VoiceThread, a free tool that allows students to post and create their collaborative projects as video or PowerPoint presentations, text, or other media; members of the group—as well as the online instructor —can comment and append the post for sharing with others. https://voicethread.com/ contains all the information needed.

The next biggie in this group is the use of YouTube, Jing, and Screencast-O-Matic for presenting videos (YouTube can be a video of anything, while Jing and Camtasia can only record what is presented on the computer screen). Groups have used these successfully to share ideas, projects, interviews, and so forth. (Of course, one can also use audio, posting these files either in a wiki or exchanging them with each other, via e-mail or in a discussion thread). Additional info on the use of these can found at http://www.youtube.com/yt/about/getting-started.html (for YouTube) … http://www.techsmith.com/jing.html (Jing), and http://www.screencast-o-matic.com/ (Screencast-O-Matic; YouTube, Jing, and Screencast-O-Matic are free).

Remember: The chain letter only works when it is forwarded on to others; sitting by itself no one else can make a decision as to whether its content is worthwhile.



The reader of *The Book Thief* is left with many conflicting images as the story unfolds, but one stands out; somehow the books that Liesel steals and the books she reads save her and give her life meaning. That may not be the message the Markus Zusak, the author, wants the reader to remember, but books and their impact are certainly central to the story of the book thief. Liesel would just be a lost and lonely girl if she did not have books.

What about today? All the rage today is the electronic book, one that exists on a server as a recorded file. Electronic books are a great addition to the options available to the reader, but should electronic books replace real ones?

The electronic book file cannot be read without a software package and without a device such as a tablet reader. And, according to some publishers, the electronic book is not owned by you; rather, it belongs to the publisher—who lets you read it for a price.

Why should distance educators be concerned with the status of the book? What difference does it make if we do not have real books, but only have electronic ones? After all, distance educators are in the business of virtual things. Yet, somehow the real book seems important, even critical. Distance learners should read books. Most definitely. But does it matter if the book to be read is only online?

Well, the decision to have real or electronic books is being made for us. One large publisher is no longer offering bound copies (books) of its education titles, only electronic ones stored on a company server that must be accessed using a propriety software reader, and readers only get to rent the electronic book for 6 months (or longer for a bit more money). Is this a good idea? Publishers have our best interest in mind, don't they?

A solution: do not adopt a book for your course that does not have the option of a physical book. Certainly, electronic versions of textbooks should be options, but physical books must be available.

And finally, let's stop bookicide, the 21st century equivalent of book burning.

Reference

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Books, Real and Otherwise

Michael Simonson

Crated, carted, cast aside,
printed works have liquefied
in shocking bouts of bookicide.

The printing press is done, perhaps,
and publishers have (boom!) collapsed
to clicky gadgets, gizmos, apps.

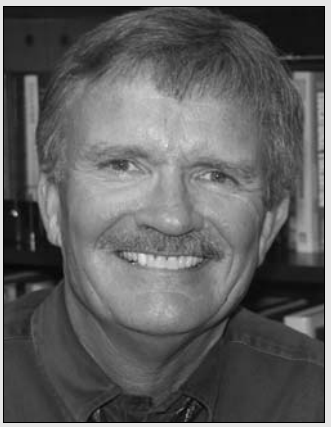
Digital books are all the rage,
touchless paper, turnless page.

Stores are only cyber spaces,
cold, electric, faceless places.

Bookshops closed, bookshelves cleared,
paperbacks have disappeared.

The age of print has culminated,
finished, finis, terminated.

—Susan M. Ebbers



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Most agree that a book is a series of printed pages, bound together on one side, and with a cover—something real and physical. Almost everyone knows what a book is, and what books are not. But, maybe it is not that simple. What about virtual books, electronic books, online books? Are they real? Are they books? Or, are they something else—written content? Some textbook publishers would have us think that the electronic book, the virtual book, the online book, are superior to physical books. They are cheaper, more readily accessible, and more modern. But, are they books?

One interesting discussion about books deals with the role the book plays in society. The bestselling book, *The Book Thief*, subtly supports the importance of books. Liesel Meminger is a foster child living in World War II-era Germany. She steals books, including one salvaged from a book burning. Leisel saved and cherished the book. Her book did not burn, and it was a real book.

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