

Virtual Learning for the management of blended Instructional Programmes for a flexible, self-paced, less interactive online education

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ABSTRACT

Virtual schooling allows students to take structured courses at geographically separated locations from their teachers and classmates. This definition overlaps with other terms such as e-learning and distance education. In the United States, virtual schooling is commonly associated with online middle or high school courses but is not limited to only web-based instructions but it also includes other forms of technologies, such as two-way audio-video interactive systems. Online learning has unveiled its great potential to enhance learning opportunities for all to learn more and enhance your impact with learning.

The terms virtual learning environment (VLE) and learning platform are generically used to describe a range of integrated web based applications that provide teachers, learners, parents and others involved in education with information, tools and resources to support and enhance educational delivery and management. These terms are broadly synonymous with 'managed learning environments' (MLEs) and 'managed virtual learning environments' (MVLEs). The applications that form part of these online services can include web pages, email, message boards and discussion forums, text and video conferencing, shared diaries, online social areas, as well as assessment, management and tracking tools. This virtual curriculum complement the curriculum taught in the traditional education setting by providing equality for all students, despite disability, and geographical location and socioeconomic status.

INTRODUCTION

A virtual school or cyber-school describes an institution that teaches courses entirely or primarily through online methods. It has been suggested that a virtual school is an online learning platform offered by an educational organization whereby individuals can earn credits in the particular area of interest which can be counted toward graduation or advancement to the next grade.

There are many different virtual school instructional and enrollment models. Instructional models range from fully independent self paced (asynchronous) courses to semester based virtual (synchronous) teacher facilitated courses. Class sizes range widely with anywhere from 25 students to as many as 200 students in each class section.

Students keep in contact with teachers and collaborate with other students through web communication tools provided in the course delivery platforms. Students can also communicate by phone, email, and other technology communication practices with instructors. Studies have shown that the use of the telephone in communication between educator and student seems to afford some aspect of more meaningful communication, as it provides more information at a personal level (sound of each other's voice, intonation of what is said, etc.). However, communication between parties by email has been understood to be the most critical component for online learning as it allows for the most convenient and speedy response on behalf of the parties involved. In addition, to help with communication many virtual schools have implemented their own system programs to help build courses and maintain student profiles. There are also a variety of books and training manuals to aid in the development of such schools and courses.

HISTORY

The first Virtual High School (1998-2005a) in the United States was created in 1996 by the Concord Consortium (2005) and has since turned into a nonprofit organization. State initiatives have also started their own virtual schools, e.g. Kentucky Virtual High School (2005), Illinois Virtual High School (2005), Florida Virtual School (2004) and many others. Susan Patrick, director of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology estimates between

“40,000 to 50,000 students in 37 states are participating in online courses through approximately 2,400 publicly funded, Internet-based charter schools and state and district virtual schools” (Pape 2005).

Virtual schools now exist all around the world. Over the past decade, K-12 online instruction has dramatically increased in both Canada and the United States. Some of these virtual schools have been integrated into public schools (particularly in the United States), where students sit in computer labs and do their work online. In other situations, students can be completely home-schooled, or they can take any combination of public/private/home-schooling and online classes.

Virtual schooling has also become a favorable option for home-schooled and private school students as well as advanced placement and at risk students (Joiner 2002). For instance, the Virtual Schools offer dual-credit courses which provide enriching and challenging experiences for advanced students while rewarding them with both high school and college-level credits simultaneously. Many institutions of higher education have also collaborated with virtual schools to offer such opportunities. Also, other online educational providers are beginning to look at levels of engagement, levels of knowledge gained, and course completion rate as measurable indicators of success (Pape 2005).

GETTING ADMISSION IN A VIRTUAL SCHOOL

From the moment one becomes interested in an online course— Institutions help you sign up, get started successfully and begin working with your teacher. And, yes, the courses are all online so you can work according to your own schedule, anytime and anyplace or take as many as you want as a homeschool student. Once you're ready, the next step is to decide what course is right for you. You may already know which course you'd like to take or you may browse the course catalog. When you begin the sign-up process, registration system is customized for you, based on where you live and your grade level. Each course has a real teacher who guides you through the coursework, which is broken down into modules. Teachers are also available via phone, text, email and from 8 a.m. — 8 p.m., seven days a week — and they love to hear from you. As a

part time student you can plan around your extracurricular activities ,You can plan ahead to slow down and take more time on topics that you find difficult to make learning more effective.

GRIEVANCES OF PARENTS AND STUDENTS

A child who is suffering from panic attacks is educated solely at home In a virtual classroom. The teacher addresses, "Good morning everyone," "Right, settle down. Now, has everyone got their poems out?"The child was home-educated from the age of seven after suffering panic attacks and bullying at school and he used to recall the teachers as 'horrible teachers'. Now he logs on to his computer from Monday to Thursday, chats in the "main hall" with classmates before entering his virtual classroom, protected by a password, half an hour later for his first lesson.

MOST OF THE CHILDRENS' OPINION ABOUT VIRTUAL SCHOOL ARE

- "It's different from normal school. We are quite enjoying it,"
- We don't think we would ever go back to real school again
- "Like many other kids, we don't like the homework. But the teachers on-line are nice and we just make sure to have a good internet connection."
- No school uniform
- Children love their new school - the teachers, new friends and using their computer.
- "At my previous school, teachers were bullies and kids were bullies in the playground,"
- "We didn't learn much at real school. We used to be afraid of math's because the teacher was really horrible.
- "Now we feel more confident because it is texting instead of speaking out loud and standing up.

- "My old friends thought it was really cool but their parents thought 'internet school? - I don't know about that'."
- There are other obvious appeals - no uniform, no school journey, shorter days, Fridays off, no rushing, no heavy bags and not being hustled about by large, intimidating crowds. Even the parents' opinion about children is that "It puts them in control," e-learning creates a courteous community and building confidence as regular schools.

According to a recent survey parents having children specially the working professional are very much concerned about their child's performance within the school always, but sometimes they are so busy in work that they know nothing of what their child is up to. And it is because of progress in online education or virtual learning environment that parents now remain in contact with their children, their academic performance and their faculty members as well with ease. But at the same time parents say that it is neither a school for problem children nor a tutoring service. "It's a substitute. And ordinary schools should go away, but there are certainly other things required of these schools.". Virtual schools are beneficial for:

- bullied children who need their confidence rebuilding
- children with physical or personal health barriers
- children who have been home-educated
- In addition, they study philosophy and society, art and web design and Spanish is about to be introduced.
- There are four teachers who teach up to eight hours a week and can work from home or anywhere with access to a computer.
- No eye contact
- Methods for rewarding, disciplining and resolving conflict are among the peculiarities that come with teaching online.

- For good work, teachers might ping across a picture of a cute kitten or a robot.
- Resolving conflict takes on a whole new dimension as every interaction between students and teachers is on record.
- But while students seem happy at virtual school and parents say they are pleased with their progress, sitting at a computer for five hours a day does have some side-effects.
- There is no physical exercise or eye contact, little verbal and physical communication and no chance to learn how to handle the bustle and bullying in the playground.
- "They have got a lot of friends who live locally and they get exercise at weekends.

VIRTUAL LEARNING CENTRE

Virtual schools are committed to set very high standards for distance learning and know that the student-teacher interaction is key to student success. For this reason, they encourage all of their students to attend web meetings, and to adhere to the course schedule on all due dates. This level of rigor builds a strong work ethic and forges a classroom and school community thereby preparing students for post-secondary studies. All the courses are taught by highly qualified teachers who understand how to blend the power of synchronous, streamed communication with the flexibility of static, anywhere-anytime course content.

Sometimes referred to as "distance learning," correspondence schools offered students an alternative to the traditional brick and mortar meetings within a schoolhouse. These schools utilized the postal service for student-teacher interaction, or used two-way radio transmissions, sometimes with pre-recorded television broadcasts. Students were expected to study their learning

material independently and, in some cases, meet with a proctor to be tested. Modern virtual schools provide similar alternatives to students with a more ubiquitous and, often, interactive approach.

WHO TEACHES THE ON-LINE COURSES

Certified teachers who are employed within the Trillium Lakelands District School Board deliver online course material for the Virtual Learning Centre. Each teacher receives training and support so that they are comfortable with the online approach to both teaching and learning.

SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

Synchronous learning involves the exchange of ideas and information with one or more participants during the same period of time. A face-to-face discussion is an example of synchronous communications. In e-learning environments, examples of synchronous communications include online real-time live teacher instruction and feedback, Skype conversations, or chat rooms or virtual classrooms where everyone is online and working collaboratively at the same time.

Asynchronous learning may use technologies such as email, blogs, wikis, and discussion boards, as well as web-supported textbooks, hypertext documents, audio video courses, and social networking using web 2.0. At the professional educational level, training may include virtual operating rooms.[33] Asynchronous learning is particularly beneficial for students who have health problems or have child care responsibilities and regularly leaving the home to attend lectures is difficult.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Advocates of virtual learning believe that virtual schools hold advantages including: not being required to attend and travel to face-to-face classes and the integration of digital media into the curricula. Virtual schools also give a student the opportunity to stay in school when traditional brick and mortar schools will no longer accept them. Some reasons for this could be extensive absences due to

medical reasons, teen pregnancy, or for other reasons that the school system may deem distracting to the school body. Virtual schools can be considered a great equalizer, as these schools can make education accessible to non-traditional students. Additionally, students with physical disabilities or transportation issues may find that they are able to succeed in virtual school without the burden of getting to a physical location for schooling.

Scheduled flexibility is another perceived advantage of online education. Students who have job and family obligations, which can limit the time spent in the classroom, are able to attend virtual schools at any time of day. For parents returning to school, this is an option which allows them to fit schooling into their busy schedule. So, for individuals who are self driven this type of learning environment allows them to excel at their own pace. Essentially, virtual schooling allows individuals an opportunity to engage in critical thinking activities in the environment of their choice.

What could be considered one of the most advantageous highlights of taking part in virtual schooling is with the large advancement of information available online, individuals who participate in virtual schooling have the opportunity to integrate other means of technology into their knowledge production. Individuals who participate in virtual schooling have the advantage of building upon their twenty-first century skills which include global awareness, computer literacy, self-directed learning, online communications, and collaboration and so on. Some believe that as a result of being able to develop and build upon twenty-first century skills, this helps to make the individual more employable.

In regards to the school itself, they also see advantages to offering virtual schooling. When a small or rural school does not have the teaching staff available or capability to instruct a course that they would otherwise be unable to teach, virtual schooling opens up this opportunity.

KEY ADVANTAGES OF E-LEARNING INCLUDE

- Improved open access to education, including access to full degree programs
- Better integration for non-full-time students, particularly in continuing education,
- Improved interactions between students and instructors,
- Provision of tools to enable students to independently solve problems,
- Acquisition of technological skills through practice with tools and computers.
- No age-based restrictions on difficulty level, i.e. students can go at their own pace

DISADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL SCHOOL

It includes the cost of start up, differences in access due to the digital divide, as well as issues regarding accreditation. Not everyone has access to digital technologies which would permit them to attend virtual schools, though in some cases, local libraries or community programs may offer access to computers and research materials. Also, in terms of disadvantages, due to the fact that virtual schools are still relatively new, there are seldom methods of evaluating their effectiveness.

Key disadvantages of e-learning that have been found to make learning less effective than traditional class room settings, include:

- Ease of cheating,
- Bias towards tech-savvy students over non-technical students,
- Teachers' lack of knowledge and experience to manage virtual teacher-student interaction,
- Lack of social interaction between teacher and students,
- Lack of direct and immediate feedback from teachers,

- Asynchronous communication hinders fast exchange of question,
- Danger of procrastination

KEY DEVICES WHICH ASSIST VIRTUAL LEARNING INCLUDE

COMPUTER, TABLETS AND MOBILE DEVICES

Computers and tablets allow students and teachers' access to websites and other programs, such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, PDF files, and images. Many mobile devices support m-learning. Turkey's Fatih project is putting tablet computers in the hands of every student from grade 5 to 12, and interactive whiteboards in every classroom.

WEBCAMS

The development of webcams and webcasting has facilitated the creation of virtual classrooms and Virtual learning environment. Virtual classrooms supported by such technology are becoming more and more popular, especially since they are contributing as a main solution to solving problems with travel expenses. Virtual classrooms with such technology also provide the benefits of being easy to set up.

WHITEBOARDS

Interactive whiteboards, similar in use to "smartboards", allow teachers and students to write on the touch screen, so learning becomes interactive and engaging.

SCREENCASTING

Screen casting is a recent trend in e-learning. There are many screencasting tools available that allow users to share their screens directly from their browser and make the video available online so that the viewers can stream the video directly. The advantage of such tools is that it gives the presenter the ability to show his ideas and flow of thoughts rather than simply explain them, which may be more confusing when delivered via simple text instructions. With the combination of

video and audio, the expert can mimic the one-on-one experience of the classroom and deliver clear, complete instructions. From the learner's point of view this provides the ability to pause and rewind and gives the learners the advantage of moving at their own pace, something a classroom cannot always offer.

COMBINING TECHNOLOGY

Along with the terms learning technology, instructional technology, the term educational technology refers to the use of technology in learning in a much broader sense than the computer-based training or Computer Aided Instruction of the 1980s. It is also broader than the terms Online Learning or Online Education which generally refer to purely web-based learning. In cases where mobile technologies are used, the term M-learning has become more common. E-learning, however, also has implications beyond just the technology and refers to the actual learning that takes place using these systems.

INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD INCLUDE VIRTUAL SCHOOLS TO

- Economize on the time of teaching staff, and the cost of instruction.
- Facilitate the presentation of online learning by instructors without web authoring experience.
- Provide instruction to students in a flexible manner to students with varying time and location constraints.
- Provide instruction in a manner familiar to the current web-oriented generation of students.
- Facilitate the networking of instruction between different campuses or even colleges.
- Provide for the reuse of common material among different courses.

- Provide automatic integration of the results of student learning into campus information systems.

CONCLUSOIN

Enrollments for fully online learning increased by an average of 12–14 percent annually between 2004–2009, compared with an average of approximately 2 per cent increase per year in enrollments overall. In 2006, 3.5 million students participated in on-line learning at higher education institutions in the United States. Almost a quarter of all students in post-secondary education were taking fully online courses in 2008. In 2009, 44 percent of post-secondary students in the USA were taking some or all of their courses online; this figure is projected to rise to 81 percent by 2014. During the fall 2011 term, 6.7 million students enrolled in at least one online course. Over two-thirds of chief academic officers believe that online learning is critical for their institution. The Sloan report, based on a poll of academic leaders, indicated that students are as satisfied with on-line classes as with traditional ones.

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