

Ten Reasons for Teaching Online

Thanks to all of you who were able to attend last week's symposium on *The Future of E-Learning at NEIU*. Ninety students, faculty, and staff members participated in the sessions featuring information and examples of how online teaching benefits students and invigorates faculty. If you couldn't participate but want to learn more about a successful online program, visit our keynote speaker's blog at the University of Illinois, Springfield: <http://uisonlinesuccess.blogspot.com/>.

During the symposium we pointed to the large body of research that has found no significant difference between the outcomes of online and face-to-face teaching. Today we highlight the pedagogical value of e-learning that sometimes actually surpasses what can be accomplished in face-to-face classes. Here are ten good reasons for teaching online.

1. Flexibility

This is probably the most obvious advantage: Online teaching is time and space independent. Both students and faculty can participate in class without having to come to campus at a fixed time. This is a considerable benefit to many of our upper-level students who are working during the day and have a hard time commuting to campus for their evening classes. Online courses offer the opportunity to "attend" class when the students are most ready for it, e.g. later in the evening and/or during the weekend.

2. Intensive Writing Practice

Most of the communication in online classes takes place in writing. While this is often not the type of writing we expect in class papers, it nevertheless provides students with considerable writing opportunities they would not have in ordinary classes. Modeled properly, these low-stakes writing activities represent learning experiences for students who never had to express their ideas to an audience (other than the instructor) on a regular basis.

3. Everybody "Talks"

Active student participation in face-to-face classes is often limited to a handful of extroverted individuals. In online courses, students don't hide in the back of the class. Good online learning is structured such that every student can contribute to the same extent as everybody else. If so desired, both the quantity and the quality of student contributions can be assessed and factored into students' grades because the medium keeps a complete record of those contributions.

4. Reflective Student Contributions

Part of the problem with lower student participation in on-campus courses is the fact that some students are shy and take more time to formulate a response. This can be particularly true for second-language learners, almost half of NEIU's freshmen classes. The "asynchronous" nature of most online communication allows those students more time to compose their responses. It will take some purposeful modeling and structuring of electronic discussion forums, but the additional time allowed in those electronic discussions makes more reflective student responses possible and likely.

5. Periodic Synthesis

Since Blackboard documents every contribution made by students and faculty, online courses can build in periodic synthesis activities that have class members look back at key arguments or points that were made in previous sessions or over several weeks. Research on learning has taught us the importance of cycling through new material more than once, so that stronger connections can be made between new knowledge and already existing understanding. This process also allows students to recognize the progress they have made throughout the semester.

6. Practice Opportunities

Effective online classes are structured for maximum student involvement. That includes involvement with the faculty member, with other students, and with course material. Classroom lectures are replaced not just by passive readings but active, hands-on opportunities to practice new skills and apply new knowledge to authentic case scenarios. The Web is full of such opportunities, and textbook publishers increasingly supplement their books with online course cartridges and web tools.

7. Student Contributions to Class

As the above 'point 5' shows, student discussions are designed to become part of the course material itself that is reflected upon and periodically synthesized. In addition, groups of students may collaborate on projects whose results also become part of the course materials. Online class discussions can be structured so that they involve student moderators who get to practice valuable group and leadership skills.

8. Preparation for Lifelong Learning

The ability to function as lifelong learners is an important outcome of higher education, especially at a time where people are likely to change their careers multiple times during their lives. A critical aspect of lifelong learning is independence. Students need to learn to become less reliant on the direct guidance and physical presence of a teacher and increasingly work with a wide variety of resources that include e-learning and mediated interaction with other learners as well as teachers at a distance. Few people will be able to come to campus throughout their lifespan when they have to upgrade or change their professional qualifications. E-learning will be an important tool for the lifelong learning of our students.

9. More Student-Faculty Contact

This may seem counter-intuitive: How could learning at a distance offer better contact opportunities than face-to-face encounters in the classroom? And yet, the presenters from UIS emphasized repeatedly: Their interactions with online students tend to be more frequent and deeper. They make it a point to communicate with every student individually and, whether that communication is through e-mail, discussion forum, online chat, or audio/video conferencing, the interaction is less hurried and more substantive than the typical encounters with students shortly before or after a class session on campus.

10. Improved Planning for Face-to-Face Classes

Being able to improvise is both a strength and a potential shortcoming of on-campus classes. Having taught the same classes for years, it is easy for a faculty member to be convinced that teaching is at its best when it's spontaneous and follows the teacher's instincts so that classes may develop in directions not anticipated at the outset of the semester. Online teaching requires very detailed planning upfront and, almost invariably, faculty who have done it say that it has benefited the way they have subsequently prepared their face-to-face classes as well.