

Myths and realities of online education: Leading and ensuring quality academic programs

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Abstract

Online education is continuing to grow and is central to many institutions' long-term strategic goals (Allen & Seaman, 2010). The demand for distance education is continuing to increase and expand as institutions seek to diversify access points to their academic programs beyond the confines of their campus. In fact, even the most traditional universities are offering more distance courses than ever before. However, questions and concerns surrounding online education not only remain, but if anything, have intensified. This paper slays five common myths of online education.

Key Words:

Online education, myths and realities

FIVE COMMON MYTHS

Myths often permeate discussions about the merits and virtues of online education. It's time to mercilessly do away with, hopefully once and for all, five of the most common myths.

Myth 1: Teaching an online course is easier than traditional teaching; and professors who choose to teach online are doing so because it's easier.

Teaching online is a different experience than teaching face-to-face. It requires new skills and techniques; all of which take time to learn. Many authors argue that the online environment promotes a more learner-centered instructional approach, requiring instructors to share control of the learning process with students (e.g., Jolliffe, Ritter, & Stevens, 2001; Palloff & Praff, 1999, 2001). Instructors may find that they need to play a more facilitative role, which can be a significant departure from their normal teaching style and require a shift in thinking related to control of the learning process. Teaching in the online environment “challeng[es] previous practice with regard to assessment, group interaction, and student/teacher dialogue” (Ellis & Phelps, 2000, p. 2), and “necessitates a new model of instructor” (Cohen, 2001, p. 31).

Myth 2: Anyone who teaches a traditional, face-to-face course can effectively teach an online course.

Is teaching a traditional course the same as teaching an online course? Those who have recklessly tried likely jeopardized student learning, learner satisfaction, academic integrity, and overall perceptions of the university and distance learning. Research suggests that faculty may struggle with learning the necessary technology skills (e.g., Giannoni & Tesone, 2003) adapting their pedagogic strategies for the online environment (e.g., Ooman-Early & Murphy, 2009), conceptualizing their course for the new environment (e.g., Kang, 2001), and finding the increased time required to develop quality online courses (e.g., Bonk, 2001).

Common sense must prevail. For example, since virtually all of us can drive an automobile, we can all safely drive an 18 wheel truck, right? Of course not; it takes a different set of skills. The same concept applies to online teaching. Sophisticated and effective traditional faculty can transfer some skills to online teaching, but not all. Therefore, professional development is essential before a “traditional” instructor is unleashed on unsuspecting (not for long) students. Learn by doing or trial by error with captivated learners enrolled in a course is unacceptable behavior.

“Certifying” a professor with the skills necessary to teach an online course as a prerequisite, as is common practice at Purdue University Calumet, is necessary. The structure of the Distance Education Mentoring Program at Purdue University Calumet has been reported by Barczyk, Buckenmeyer, and Feldman (2010).

Myth 3: Taking an online is easier than taking a traditional course; students who choose to take online courses are doing so because they don't want to work.

Students enrolling in online courses do so for a variety of reasons. Those who expect, and in some cases demand, a less rigorous academic experience are usually sorely disappointed. Generally, quality online courses require learners to meet the same standards as traditional, face-

to-face courses (accreditation standards mandate this equivalency). Many professionals accurately assert that the learner skills necessary to successfully complete an online course are different than traditional courses. Are quality online courses easier? Generally, no! To further slay this myth, according to Namahoe (2011), students actually believe that technology is critical to success in learning. However, students do not simply want more technology, they want the proper technology used appropriately, including online options.

Myth 4: Online courses are an easy way to put a lot of students into an online course; thereby, increasing the amount of revenue generated for university administrators.

Yes, enrolling a lot of students in an online course is a way to increase the amount of revenue generated for university administrators. And yes, chief academic officers at higher education institutions are increasingly likely to indicate that online education is a critical component in their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2010). However, reputable leaders will avoid the scheme of over-populating online courses.

University administrators must acknowledge the additional amount of work and time professors must invest in preparing, launching, and teaching a quality online course. Therefore, these instructors should be duly compensated and the number of online learners should rarely exceed those assigned to traditional courses, except in extraordinary circumstances.

Myth 5: Online courses are qualitatively inferior compared to traditional courses.

There are high quality online courses and high quality traditional courses. And there are qualitatively inferior online course and qualitatively inferior traditional courses. The instructional delivery medium (online or traditional) is clearly not the primary determining factor. (Would anyone foolishly argue that all face-to-face conversations are superior to those executed via a cell phone?) A number of other critical factors, such as the quality of the instructor, instructional approaches, and learner engagement, unquestionably trump the delivery medium myth.

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