

## Refining the Question: How Can Online Instruction Maximize Opportunities for All Students?

By: Roy Schwartzman

Schwartzman, R. "Refining the Question: How Can Online Instruction Maximize Opportunities for All Students?" *Communication Education* 56 (2007): 113-117.

Made available courtesy of Taylor and Francis:

<http://www.informaworld.com/openurl?genre=journal&issn=0363-4523>

**\*\*\*Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Although research on computer-assisted and online instruction abounds, researchers have expressed concern about the lack of theoretical frameworks for these studies (Timmerman & Kruepke, 2006). While ample research documents learning outcomes in individual courses, few attempts have been made to link computer-assisted or fully computer-mediated instruction with philosophical concerns pertinent to media, education, or cognition. Ironically, the same issue of the journal that contained this lament (*Communication Education*) included a major step toward its remedy.

In the first of the series of essays published in this journal, called "Raising the Question," Allen (2006, p. 122) asked whether online instruction is "setting our students up for failure" by depriving them of the social and intellectual stimulation present at the physical college campus. I seek to expand the discussion by going beyond the dichotomy of online versus on-campus instruction to probe when and why online instruction might be desirable. This essay addresses Allen's (2006) concerns about online instruction and student retention, extending the dialogue to examine how online coursework may reach students who might be bypassed by the traditional classroom instruction. The central issue for Allen (2006) and for me is how to offer online instruction according to the principles of effective pedagogy.

Questions about online instruction often treat online courses en masse, insufficiently distinguishing poorly designed courses and instructional tools from more worthy efforts (Meyer, 2002). The characteristics associated with effective or ineffective online courses are not constants. Based on observations of the kinds of content that contribute to effective comprehension, instructors or content designers can engineer many technological limitations out of online coursework. Electronic course components can be redesigned to improve their capacity to engage students and deliver content. Studies of computer-assisted instruction reveal that variables of media richness such as providing feedback to students, encouraging user interactions, and sensory engagement (Timmerman & Kruepke, 2006) may be misunderstood as limitations of the electronic medium per se. Limitations mistakenly attributed to the cold, impersonal online educational medium (Noble, 2001) can be anticipated and counteracted with strategic plans for enriching the electronic environment (Timmerman & Kruepke, 2006). The important question may no longer be whether to engage in online instruction, but how to do it in concordance with principles for effective instruction (Schwartzman, 2006).

Allen (2006) offers a thoughtful analysis of why online instructional delivery is no panacea. Echoing concerns of early critics (Noble, 2001), she identifies the most rewarding, genuine college education with physically experiencing the campus environment. The social contacts and support networks built by personal interactions supposedly form the core of college education. These points are valid, but they also rely on an unstated assumption that college students are students in the most traditional sense: willing and able to be physically present on campus and to make the college environment a primary locale for social contacts. Contrary to the presumed free choice of online versus on-campus, many students face the choice of online courses or no degree. The demographics of the online basic oral communication course I taught exemplify the choices.

One student, a single mother, recently gave birth to another child. Unable to afford adequate childcare and without a network of family and friends to care for her newborn, she did not have the luxury of physically experiencing the campus environment to build social contacts. In fact, had she become a part-time student on campus, she almost certainly would have been another case of attrition, since she would have to interrupt her education to care for her child. This student faced a conundrum. The only way she could obtain a better job to support her family was to complete her education. She required an option that enabled her to study at home in her own time.

Another student suffered from a debilitating respiratory illness that kept her largely home-bound except for trips to seek medical care. Like many fully online students, she could not find one physically convenient campus that provided all the necessary coursework for her degree. She assembled a smorgasbord of courses from various universities that allowed her to complete her degree requirements without threatening her health.

Anecdotes such as these could multiply indefinitely. Empirical studies of online courses confirm their ability to reach students with special needs. Robinson's (2005) study of online course enrollment across 18 disciplines at 13 universities found that 43% of students took online courses because they were convenient for work schedules, while 22% chose online coursework due to family obligations. The flexible schedule of online courses adapts to the needs of full-time workers and single parents. DeVry University traces the rising interest in online courses directly to the fact that more than half of college students are non-traditional (*Business Wire*, 2004). The push to offer more online instruction has been driven by a desire to include populations who socially or geographically have not had access to higher education (Enoch & Soker, 2006).

Online courses do not offer a panacea for non-traditional students. Miller & Lu (2003) note a possible paradox for non-traditional e-learners. The older the students, the more likely they are to encounter challenges in using unfamiliar technology. Fortunately, these students seem willing and able to use advanced technology. One study found that more mature students (age 30+) are less likely to have reliable high-speed Internet access; yet, when the technology is available, a higher percentage of these students use it than do any other age group (Enoch & Soker, 2006). Gorski & Clark (2002, p. 28) warn about the "disability digital divide" arising from failure of some online courses to account for visual or motor impairments that could prevent effective usage. Online course delivery must take into account physical limitations of students by providing alternative ways to access content. Not only must a course comply with ADA accessibility requirements, but it should also incorporate features that maximize access for all learners. Multiple content formats such as captioned pictures, text alternatives for video content, or audio conferencing for text-based chats benefit students with different learning styles as well as different physical abilities (Burgstahler, 2002).

Students need more educational options than the traditional experience of focusing four consecutive years of their life at the physical location of a campus. To frame the issue as online versus on-campus presents a misleading dichotomy. Many non-traditional and special needs students not only appreciate but require the flexibility of online instruction. Interestingly, much of the research on retention does not differentiate non-traditional students or other special needs students from traditional populations. Revealingly and accurately, Allen comments that "novice students" require on-campus academic and social experiences (2006, p. 125). Novices defined by credit hours may encompass diverse populations. The social integration experiences most valued by traditional students may not be feasible or available to part-time enrollees even when they are on campus. For example, the additional time commitment to service-learning, while valuable for traditional students, may compete with mandatory work or childcare duties for non-traditionals. The same experience that seems enriching for one type of student, such as those with no childcare responsibilities and minimal professional obligations, becomes onerous for another. It is time educators recognized that education sometimes must come to the students instead of always beckoning students to the classroom.

Several claims about online instruction sound factual, but actually these claims require further empirical support. Relatively little work on learning outcomes for online communication courses has been conducted, and

virtually none on the social effects. The relationship between instructional technology and the affective side of learning remains largely unexplored (Turman & Schrodt, 2005).

“Distancing students from the on-campus experience creates a greater sense of 'distance' from relationship building and learning” (Allen, 2006, p. 123). The question is: greater than what and for whom? Clearly, the online experience for my disabled student and single mother enabled them to feel close r to a genuine educational experience than staying isolated at home without any course options. The support for the psychological distance claim is plausible but indirect. The complete rationale is:

1. Physical immersion in campus life enables intellectual and social development.
2. Online instruction removes students from the physical campus.
3. Therefore, online learning reduces intellectual and social development.

Although the syllogism appears logically sound, its empirical validity remains untested. Studies should address correlations between online coursework and social integration. This line of research would be quite challenging given the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of isolating online coursework as an independent variable. Significantly, Allen's (2006) helpful overview of research on retention and social integration does not include any studies specifically dealing with online coursework. In fact, all of the references deal with retention and none address online instruction directly. An empirical study correlating retention (i.e., degree completion) rates with online coursework does seem feasible, and it could offer some insight on whether online coursework has any correlation with actual student retention figures.

Another claim raises similar issues: “On-line courses early during a student's university experience deter or undermine appropriate social integration at a time when social integration is most critical to student success” (Allen, 2006, p. 124). This claim presents a vital topic for empirical analysis, but its phraseology resembles a statement of proven fact. Does the degree of social integration correlate with the amount of online instruction? If so, do the online courses cause the failure to integrate socially, or do poorly integrated students self-select online coursework to avoid personal interaction? If the latter, then online courses, instead of causing social disintegration, may be one of its many symptoms.

Far from reflecting a weakness in Allen's analysis, these hitherto ungrounded claims represent legitimate concerns about online instruction that call for empirical testing. Continued reflection about online instruction should stimulate additional research that will enhance understanding of which instructional methods work best under particular circumstances. Raising these questions and seeking their answers could render an important service to the discipline and to our students.

## References

- 1. Allen, T. H. (2006) Raising the question #1: Is the rush to provide online instruction setting our students up for failure?. *Communication Education* **55** , pp. 122-126.
- 2. Burgstahler, S. (2002) Distance learning: Universal design, universal access. *Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education Journal* **10** , pp. 32-61.
- 3. (2004) <http://libproxy.uncg.edu:2124/itx/informark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T004&prodId=ITOF&docId=A114289442&source=gale&userGroupname=gree35277&version=1.0> — March 16
- 4. Enoch, Y. and Soker, Z. (2006) Age, gender, ethnicity and the digital divide: University students' use of web-based instruction. *Open Learning* **21** , pp. 99-110. [informaworld]
- 5. Gorski, P. and Clark, C. (2002) Multicultural education and the digital divide: Focus on disability. *Multicultural Perspectives* **4** , pp. 28-36.
- 6. Meyer, K. A. (2002) *Quality in distance education: Focus on on-line learning* **29** , Jossey-Bass

- 7. Miller, M. T. and Lu, M. -Y. (2003) Serving non-traditional students in e-learning environments: Building successful communities in the virtual campus. *Educational Media International* **40** , pp. 163-169. [informaworld]
- 8. Noble, D. F. (2001) *Digital diploma mills: The automation of higher education* Monthly Review Press , New York
- 9. Robinson, L. A. (2005) Consumers of online instruction. *Issues in Information Systems* **6** , pp. 170-175.
- 10. Schwartzman, R. (2006) Virtual group problem solving in the basic communication course: Lessons for online learning. *Journal of Instructional Psychology* **33** , pp. 3-14. [Vocational Education and Training Abstracts]
- 11. Timmerman, C. E. and Kruepke, K. A. (2006) Computer-assisted instruction, media richness, and college student performance. *Communication Education* **55** , pp. 73-104. [informaworld]
- 12. Turman, P. D. and Schrod, P. (2005) The influence of instructional technology use on students' affect: Do course designs and biological sex make a difference?. *Communication Studies* **56** , pp. 109-129.