

Does Online Education translate  
to '*Out of a Job*' for Educators ?

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## 1. Introduction

Online education, also known as distance education is continuing to grow and spread to many fields of study throughout the globe. It is becoming increasingly common at many higher education institutions, offering fully online and/or hybrid/blended courses combining online instruction with face-to-face teaching (Sun & Chen, 2016). E-learning as a pedagogical issue has brought many benefits to students. It has been found to be convenient and can enable students to access educational material with ease. It can facilitate enhanced communication between and among students and lecturers (Mapuva, 2014). Online study may take many different forms depending on the learning institution, type of degree or course, and even the needs and desires of the student themselves. An online course is a teacher-led education experience that takes place over the Internet, with the teacher and student separated geographically, using an online instructional delivery system to access course content and allow communication between the teacher and student and between students (KPK12.com, 2016).

The type of assignments utilized in online education may differ slightly from traditional classroom tasks, but their similarities can be noted. Common online assignments may include read/watch/respond (online lecture), discussion boards for longer more detailed debate, blogs for daily or short responses and

research papers to explore concepts or topics concerning the course. Software is available to conduct online conferencing or Skyping between students and students, or students and the instructor. Blind peer review is also a common form of student interaction that can offer added insights to various topics especially at the graduate level of study. A mini conference of student papers is a common method to encourage interaction and dialogue in online courses. Other requirements for learners may come in the form of blogging, online journals, Wikis, or case based assignments. The type of course, the number of students, and how often they will be required to check in can determine which type(s) of tasks may be best suited.

Recently Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have become extremely popular through their availability to reach large numbers of learners and accessed through top name universities. Early in 2012 Stanford University offered a free, chunked course on Artificial Intelligence online and 58,000 people signed up (Daniel, 2012). Also available at any level of learning to more advanced education are Supplemental Online Education (SOE) courses. These courses may be for learners who require additional assistance to garner knowledge for credit completion or for those students seeking advanced study beyond their core requirements. People choose to take these either for career or academic advantage and the courses are not necessarily applicable towards earning a degree (Dennis, 2016). The type of course and the goals of the learners are important items that should be taken under consideration. This is true though of both online and offline classes.

Another type of online education that has become increasingly popular within the United States especially, is online public or private K-12 schools. The major advantage to this type of online education is the opportunity to reach students who for some reason cannot participate in a physical learning atmosphere. All or only

certain courses may be accessed from Internet connected devices. Lastly, there are also educational apps and programs that offer endless opportunities for active learning via the Internet. The mobility of these learning systems allows for adaptability to a student's individual lifestyle and can be utilized anytime and anywhere (Dennis, 2016). A significant element in meeting the instructional needs of the twenty-first century learner is to discover effective ways to reach the individual in the context of diverse technology enhanced opportunities (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012). Online educators have an exciting opportunity to help shape this innovative educational arena for the benefit of both students and faculty (Espinoza, Whatley, & Cartwright, 1996).

Most commonly associated with the spread of the Internet the history of distance education is only a continuation of a faceless educational process that has been in actual existence since the 1800's. Today's older learners can associate this process with a more archaic form of learning under the title of "correspondence courses". Correspondence programs, pioneered in higher education by the University of London in the mid-19th century, reached mainstream America in the 1890s (Craig, 2015). Since that time and with the ease of access to the Internet online education has allowed for anytime, anywhere connections between learner and lecturer. Acceptance by employers of these types of alternative courses and bestowed university degrees has also fueled the increase in these types of programs offered online. Enrollment in online courses has outpaced overall university enrollment for the past several years. The growth of online courses does not appear to be slowing (Atchley, Wingenbach, & Akers, 2013). Online courses offer the promise of access regardless of where students live or what time they can participate, potentially redefining educational opportunities for those least well-served in traditional classrooms (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017). While students may have walked or were bused over great distances in the past, those days seem to have cease to

exist for many present-day learners. Students today are largely unaware of the lengths to which students in the past were forced to travel for an advanced degree (Sanfilippo, 2017).

In truth, though online education has shown not to be equally suitable for all types of study and degree programs. Several researchers found that certain disciplines were not suited for an online setting (Carnevale, 2003 ; Nelson, 2006 ; Noble, 2004 ; Paden, 2006 ; Smith, Heindel, & Torres-Ayala, 2008). Some academic disciplines, notably Science and vocational subjects such as Social Work, are notable for the practical requirements involved in their study (Coughlan & Perryman, 2011).

Teaching face-to-face and teaching online are both teaching, but they are qualitatively different. In comparison, driving a car and riding a motorcycle are both forms of transportation, but they have enough differences to warrant additional training and preparation when switching from one to the other. The same is true when faculty move from the traditional classroom to the online classroom. There are some things that the two have in common, but there are also plenty of differences (Bull, 2013).

A noticeable shift in varieties of learning environments has been taking place now for a number of years while criticisms abound. But, owing to its flexibility, accessibility and affordability, online education is gaining in popularity, especially for people who are otherwise unable to obtain education because of physical distance, schedule conflicts, and unaffordable costs (Sun & Chen, 2016).

The exact role of the instructor, commonly referred to in online instruction as that of ‘facilitator’ is also unclear. Since it’s extension into the more mainstream education format lecturers and learners in this type of virtual learning environment

have had to assume roles differently from what they may have been accustomed to. While instructors are asked to articulate more clearly their goals and methods to others in the development team, students are also asked to take more responsibility for their learning (Berge, 1995). Instead of telling students the answer, the teacher asks questions to help them discover the answer themselves (O'Neil, 2006). This altering role of the instructor has some lecturers and learning institutions considering how they can best connect to Internet age learners while satisfying educational objectives and students desires in a tech savvy world. The exact position of the lecturer and learner in a virtual schooling environment is still being examined.

## 2. Instructors-Sense of Presence

The expansion of online learning has initiated a sense of urgency in some instructors as to how they will fit in to the new order of educational learning. Since its early inception in the 1960s, online education has been constantly criticized for its apparent lack of quality control, particularly the scarcity of high-quality teachers (Yu & Hu, 2016). Regardless of mode of instruction the teacher in physical form will always have a place even in an online environment. When learning is engaged, questions arise, when questions arise, a teacher is tasked with coming up with a sufficient answer. This interaction between lecturer and learner and questions and responses cannot be replicated with even the most advanced computers. Although technology is evolving rapidly, much of what we are seeing today under the e-learning label is not new (Clark & Mayer, 2011). Online instructors need to be intentional about creating a sense of presence in their courses so that students know that somebody is leading their educational experience (Kelly, 2014). The sense of presence in an online course has been identified as a critical component in the interactions between the instructor and the students (Munro, 1998). It is difficult

to understate the important role community has when it comes to learning, with community here meaning a group of people with shared values, a common purpose and similar goals (Stanley, 2013). Research has shown that a successful online experience is dependent on the interaction between faculty and students (Cavanaugh, 2009). Student satisfaction in online courses is highly correlated with interaction with the instructor (Shea, Swan, Fredericksen, Pickett, 2001 ; Trippe, 2001). Much like today's musical artists who often sample other music to re-mix, re-envision, and re-create new songs and sounds, practitioners today are taking different elements of digital learning, with varied backgrounds and sources, for use in their own schools, programs, and classrooms (KPK12.com, 2016). We can well anticipate that online education will continue to increase its presence and influence higher education through a vigorous process of reshaping, refining, and restructuring (Sun & Chen, 2016).

### 3. Instructor Attendance

The phrase 'out of sight, out of mind' is not conducive to online courses. Just as learners need to be motivated to complete work in a timely manner, lecturers need to be available to assist when necessary.

The interaction among learners and between the instructor and learner determines to a large extent the quality and outcomes of online learning, and ultimately the learner's ability to master course content and improve critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, the hallmarks of higher education (Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), 2013, 2015).

Learners need to know and understand that their teachers will be there when needed. Instructors often update grades through virtual grade books and don't have as much opportunity for regular informal feedback before and after classes (Kokeuller, 2017). Online education by very nature of its formation allows for quick and concise questions and answers to be supplied in a more efficient and timely manner than meeting once or twice a week in a physical classroom. Instructors for on-line courses need to extend their availability and improve their communication with students (Said, Kirgis, Verkamp, & Johnson, 2015).

Online instructors often go absent from their classes for spans of time simply not tolerated in the traditional classroom. The irony is that the current model of e-learning sets student needs and instructor workload in opposition-online students need interaction with their instructors far more than their face-to-face counterparts (Smith & Taveras, 2005).

Connection of student and sage may be even more important when physical class attendance is not part of the course. One role of online teachers is to select and filter information for student consideration, to provide thought-provoking questions, and facilitate well-considered discussions (MacKillop, 2009). Inadequately trained lecturers using e-learning in educational environments can become an obstacle in a finely balanced learning process and can lead to problems in application use and in the perception of students (Volery, 2000). Successful completion of courses in online education is greatly enhanced when lecturer and learning are both not only online but also in-tune to the requirements and desires of each other.



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#### 4. Course Load/Class Size

The number of courses for online versus offline instructors has found to differ substantially for a number of reasons. While the emphasis for both online and online learning centers on 'quality education', how to attain this objective in a timely and sufficient manner can prove challenging. Many distance education programs implement tools to evaluate course design, learner experiences, learner completion and success, and interaction patterns among students and instructors (Andrade, 2015). Learning management systems have the capability to provide analytics which indicate assignment statistics, amount of time students spends on course activities, page views, and other learner actions (Mattingly, Rice, & Berge, 2012; Slade & Prinsloo, 2013). Thusly, precise accountability for student attendance and active interaction can give course designers information to implement course loads. Unfortunately, online course are many times not viewed in the same light by instructors and executives in the teaching field.

It is not uncommon for higher education administrators in particular to view online, distance learning-based courses as the "mother lode" for sizeable tuition revenue increases. After all, to the uninitiated, the argument can be made that if a traditional classroom teacher can accommodate a class of

25 students with the demands of face-to-face instruction, scheduled office hours, and individualized assessment, why shouldn't an online instructor be capable of handling 50 students? Why not a 100? After all, goes the contention, online learning is assisted by computer, office hours are diffused  $24 \times 7$  thanks to electronic mail, and instruction is available on-demand thanks to its digital format (Tomei, 2006).

The same number of students in a physical class does not transfer over to courses conducted online. Class sizes can vary widely in online education, where enrollment is not limited by the constraints of a physical classroom (Haynie, 2014). Courses registered as MOOCs may typically have hundreds if not thousands of students. Accurate assessment and accountability of student tasks and assignments may become blurry though online submissions.

## 5. Grading

Assessment or grading for online education may take differing forms depending on the type of course and number of students enrolled. For MOOCs, there is an obvious disadvantage with student figures in the hundreds. This is especially true if an assignment is complex or long as in an essay for example.

Essay grading in Moocs has been a tricky issue for institutions to solve. Moocs can enroll tens of thousands of learners, which means that assigning even a single essay will lead to more content than an instructor and a small army of teaching assistants can read, let alone give meaningful feedback on. EdX, the Mooc platform that MIT helped to found, has piloted automated essay grading, but the technology is not there yet (Straumsheim, 2016).

This type of computer generated grading tends to make physical instructors skeptical. Continuing along those lines then the next obvious conclusion would be for students to just submit computer generated writing, finally ending without any learner involvement at all and just one computer compiling the writing assignment while another computer corrects it. Fortunately, so far this has not been the case with total elimination of physical instructors. MOOCs are gaining in popularity throughout the globe and there are many issues with their existence that not only involve grading and assessment. Typically, though most online course have a much smaller number of enrolled students making grading sufficiently easier than having hundreds of registrants. The type of assignment submitted also can play an important role in how assessment is conducted. Because reading and replying one-to-one with text is much more labor intensive than the oral exchanges in a face-to-face class, e-learning courses usually require more work than face-to-face classes (Connors-Syrcos and Syrcos, 2000). Smith and Taveras (2005) conclude that ;

In e-learning courses, there is typically a ratio of one instructor to 25 students. Students expect one-to-one interaction with the instructor. Labor intensiveness of the text format and the instructor's competing work demands make this awkward. Perhaps we need to fundamentally change the topology of e-learning interfaces.

Time management for instructors is extremely important regardless of mode of instruction. While all learners may operate in a "need the answer now" world, the total number of courses and realities of the teachers sphere of obligations may prove otherwise. Student requests should not be ignored but learners must also understand that their query at 2 am on some detail of the course may not be answered for a few hours depending on the time zone and class schedule of the instructor.

There are challenges though even with less numbers, many online courses take the form of discussion while establishing a community of learners. An alternative format in courses with large numbers is to implement a peer grading system. This then also involves the use of critical thinking on the part of the learners. Critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it (Paul & Elder, 2006). In this way each student is not only completing a task or assignment but also delving in and analyzing work completed by their peers. Williams (2005) concerns the lack of critical thinking in education may certainly have a negative effect on the development of the skill of problem solving. While initially presented as part of online discussion groups the use of critical thinking projects and grading can be carried over into a multitude of disciplines for online as well as offline assessment.

## **6. Instructor Remuneration**

Salary and remuneration can differ between the two modes of instruction. Perceived notions and the actualities of teaching by distance can conflict causing pay discrepancies and stress for lecturers. The issues of time and incentives are universal to the conversations and research related to online course development and teaching (Chiasson, Terras, & Smart, 2015). In a qualitative, metasynthesis study conducted by De Gagne and Walters (2009), "work intensity" was identified as one of the major themes. According to Boettcher (2006), faculty reported working 60-80-hour weeks while moving a face-to-face class to an online course. These hours worked though can vary for online instructors as online instructors are busiest during the beginning and conclusion of a course. The time in between may be assisting students in projects and guiding them toward their completion dates. Getting learners up to speed on pertinent software for the course can also add unexpected

delays and confusion not to mention stress and anxiety for learner and lecturer alike.

Salaries may be adjusted for many reasons, these include type of course, number of students enrolled, and degree level. Many instructors may be teaching a mix of online and offline courses adding to stress and opportunities to perform other duties such as writing research papers or conference attendance. Since online education's introduction and more recent rise in popularity the debate has raged on about appropriate faculty compensation.

Faculty should be compensated at a level that they feel is fair based on the perceived (and often real) increased workload associated with developing and teaching an online distance education course. This is especially important for adjunct faculty who are able to easily move to another institution because there is no on-going relationship (Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009)

Work that cannot be physically seen by university administrators may not be calculated correctly as far as scholastic achievements may be concerned. There is concern that the extra work required to produce and teach a quality online course will actually work against a faculty member's obtaining promotion and tenure, in that it takes time away from more highly valued scholarship and service (Bower, 2001 ; Blair & Monske, 2003 ; Schifter, 2004 ; Seaman, 2009 ; Gutman, 2012 ; Hopewell, 2012 ; Raffo, Brinthaup, Gardner & Fisher, 2015). Andersen (2004) found tenure-track faculty more likely to teach distance education courses if they know their efforts will be counted towards tenure. Whether an instructor is part-time, full-time, or tenured, faculty members are most often interested in teaching hours and time for research or other activities. Green, Alejandro, & Brown (2009) suggest that "Because most faculty members are motivated by flexible working conditions, they should be allowed to have some say about their course load and

schedule". Salary increases are therefore not the only motivational factor with regards to instructing online.

## 7. Instructor Training

Involvement with online education invariably involves technology and it's ever expanding formats. The increasing number of online programs and course offerings in higher education has resulted in great demand for online instructors (Ching, Hsu, & Baldwin, 2017). If an instructor is currently a little fuzzy about utilizing PowerPoint or other accepted computer programs, then they will most likely be unsure about the latest software that enhances learner's experiences even further. For faculty members who have not accomplished a level of comfort and/or proficiency with technology tools, it may have more to do with a lack of time and less to do with opposition (Thormann & Zimmerman, 2012). In an online learning environment the learners will be expecting the instructor to be the 'computer expert' when it comes to solving technological issues with course submissions and communication. In addition to content expertise, instructor expertise in pedagogy and technology is a key element contributing to the quality of online courses (Varvel, 2007).

Doubt in an online instructor's computer prowess may ultimately lead to apprehension in the teachers overall educational abilities and knowledge of actual course material. Effective online teaching utilizes pedagogies that entice, engage, and educate students, such as student-centered and active learning approaches (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011 ; Duffy & Kirkley, 2004 ; Stavredes, 2011). It is imperative then that the instructor rise above any initial skepticism by rectifying any complications early in the course. Smooth commencement for all learners will only add to their motivation and intellectual progression. Contrarily, a course that

begins with delays, interruptions, or extreme alterations will only instill feelings of uncertainty and demotivation within online scholars. Introducing and modeling the best pedagogical practices enhanced through technology usage helps develop and support future online instructors for effective online teaching (Ko & Rossen, 2011). Faculty acceptance of online education is consistently cited as a significant barrier, with many being hesitant due to lack of support, assistance, and training (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Therefore, it is extremely imperative that appropriate guidance be utilized for instructors prior to the first lesson.

## 8. Online/Offline Similarities

While some instructors and administrators tend to attempt to draw a line between online and offline instructional formats and procedures there are many items that remain the same. The format may have been altered but the fundamental plan has not been replaced.

When speaking of web-based instruction, it is easy to equate a new delivery medium (the Web) with “a new pedagogy” and, consequently, define face-to-face, in-person, classroom instruction as being a traditional, old, bad approach to instruction. This is misleading. It is not the delivery medium that defines the instruction. Granted the delivery medium is very instrumental in the learning approach and its capabilities should be integrated in the instructional design. When an instructional event such as a lecture, for instance, is replaced by a talking head on streamed video, the delivery mode is more “high tech”, but the strategy has not changed (Verneil & Berge, 2000).

Regardless of mode of instruction, student efficiency is the key objective in any

course. Whether tech or tech-less, learner erudition stays constant. For instructors who may be hurled into an online instructional environment there can be a sense of relief in this truism.

Many of the characteristics necessary to be a good online learner are attributable to being a good online teacher. Self-discipline and self-motivation are integral, as active participation is an absolute necessity to successful online learning or teaching. Enthusiasm for the learning potential offered by online education is also necessary, as enthusiasm by the instructor is often infectious and picked up by the students (MacKillop, 2009).

Most recently, with sufficient data obtained there have been comparisons between those of offline and online students. Attendance whether in the physical or virtual world is always of concern to educators. Waschull (2001) and Collins and Pascarella (2003) both noted no difference in attrition from on-campus to distance courses, regardless of whether students self-selected or were assigned to the section. While the differences in offline/online education have been hyped out of proportion it is the similarities that could and should be further scrutinized.

## 9. Conclusion

The physical remoteness of e-learning makes interaction with the instructor the most important factor in student satisfaction. Since online education is a new paradigm, many faculty are unprepared for the fundamental differences in the roles required for teaching online (Shelton & Saltsman, 2006), Adjustments in pedagogy and a willingness to try new approaches are needed in order to help these learners be successful (Andrade, 2015). Online instructors are widely viewed as facilitators



(e.g. Brindley et al., 2009; Crawford-Ferre & Weist, 2012; Gabriel & Kaufeld, 2008; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Rao & Tanners, 2011) who should foster a merger between diverse theories and live experiences (Sun & Chen, 2016). Research has not discovered anything regarding the online forms of distance education that would change the general principles about teaching previously identified by research into teaching by print or audio and video technologies (O'Neil, 2006). This means bringing learners frequently into action by asking questions, encouraging student presentations, getting students to talk to each other, and in other ways involving them fully in the teaching-learning process (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Online teaching should not be expected to generate larger revenues by means of larger class sizes at the expense of effective instructional or faculty over-subscription (Tomei, 2006). The growth rate of student enrollments in online courses is outpacing the growth rate of the total higher education student population (Allen & Seaman, 2008). The scholar, Reid (2017) states that

“An online degree takes time, dedication, self-control and self-motivation, and you will earn a degree that is on par with a program on a physical campus in terms of quality. With that, you will get what you put into it, just as you would in person.”

The ability to study online has escalated with the introduction of portable phones with sufficient computing power and resources.

Access to school via smartphones is already a reality and access via wearable devices is certainly likely within the near future. Wearable computers already exist as do devices that allow visualization of the internet while remaining mobile. Demand will continue to push new technologies, which will

eventually become practical and reasonably priced (Davidson, 2015).

A major complication with regards to online education procedures is that many learning institutions are primarily concerned with the here and now. This encompasses student enrollment, faculty, and other requirements. Unfortunately, technology is advancing so rapidly that it is not only outpacing current educational policies but doing so at such a breakneck speed that it is even questionable if brick and mortar type learning environments will even be needed in 10 or 20 years. The online environment is growing exponentially faster than traditional institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2013). This in turn is causing shifts in the very basics of what is education ? "Online teaching experience enables (and sometimes even forces) faculty to reconsider their deep-rooted beliefs about teaching and learning" (Abdous, 2011, p. 63).

Unfortunately, student involvement in online education is not best matched for every type of degree. Lab science, health care (Carnevale, 2003), and mathematics (Smith et al., 2008) courses have all been identified as course disciplines that are not well-suited for online course delivery.

Many e-learning research paradigms focus on constructs that cut across disciplines, perhaps implicitly downplaying disciplinary differences (Smith, et al, 2008). The design of an online degree program is just as or even more important than that of the instructional methods utilized. This is an area that extends future research opportunities. As for the loss of traditional classroom features, online education has been making up for this through its flexibility and low cost.

Financial considerations cannot be ignored. Colleges and universities realize significant income from online classes, and students borrow and spend a lot of money to participate online. Students continue to be more selective in

choosing online courses that offer the greatest value, and value is seen in those courses where faculty address the needs as discussed above. These are critical factors of which administrators and designers of online learning platforms and practices need to be aware (Davidson, 2015).

Students have access to their “classroom” recordings whenever they want, allowing them to go over ideas and review lessons at their convenience. Some have also pointed out that far from being an inferior learning experience, the one-on-one lessons that are often part of online education have taken teacher-student interaction to a new level, where one student is getting all the attention and the interaction, and training can be so unique and valuable (Yu & Hu, 2016). Additionally, Yu & Hu (2016) state that ;

Instead of worrying whether or not online education can ever be as good as more traditional formats, perhaps we should instead focus on how we can use it to deliver quality education for people all over the world, particularly the poor and underserved.

Indeed, e-learning has enabled universities to expand on their current geographical reach, to capitalize on new prospective students and to establish themselves as global educational providers (Mapuva, 2009).

In contrast to traditional teaching skills (such as the talk-and-chalk and rote teaching methods), e-learning requires lecturers themselves to be committed to a constant and changing learning curve, which may involve a mixture of formal training courses in conjunction with conferences and other less formal techniques, if they are to acquire and develop the skills needed to be an

effective e-learning tutor (Shank, 2000).

Our societal transformation with face to face communication via texting and twitter is also altering our educational landscape. Children who play strategic growth and development games in virtual worlds of today and tomorrow will not accept the school strategies of bygone yesterday. It can already be witnessed in our learning environments by students who may be constantly checking their SMART devices before and after their lessons while studying with paper and pencils during their classes. A move from a paper dependency is here and now, the shift to the next level of educating is still uncertain but it will surely involve more technology than we are presented with today. A 'scholastic shock' is beginning to take place within our educational framework. The terms and language of learning may change, the tools may be updated or even become obsolete but there will always be a need for a teacher, sage, facilitator, or guide. Someone to lead and instruct those with less knowledge, to become acquired with more knowledge so they may instruct those that come after them. For the human race it has always been so and will always be until the time that we fail to exist.

Online education does not mean an end to learning activities as we now know it but expanded opportunities for both learner and lecturer in the sense that greater knowledge is now available to a larger portion of the world than ever before. Findings from several research studies indicated that technology tools make teaching and learning more accessible and efficient, but rarely are there improvements in learning by simply adding technology (Twigg, 2003). Teachers should understand that online platforms would never replace classrooms, but work in conjunction to provide the best possible educational opportunities for students (MacKillop, 2009). After the education there is always the time to put the understanding that has been gained into practice. For some individuals this becomes a task within itself,

regardless of when or how they were educated.

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