

A Manifesto for Online Learning: Caution and Hope

Introduction

Online learning is not a monolith, though it is often treated as one. Hailed by some as a way to revolutionize individualized instruction, dismantle systemic barriers embedded in education, and provide opportunity for cutting-edge pedagogy and activities, online learning is capable of these lofty goals, but needs work to achieve them. Though some traditional school districts have implemented online learning in a way that has benefited students, many schools do not utilize, or do not have the infrastructure to support the purported dynamic opportunities of online learning. Similarly, though some virtual schools have reported student success, the United States Department of Education currently lacks meaningful data for online learning in both traditional brick-and-mortar schools and online learning institutions (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2024). It is my hope to clarify what online learning can do and problematize the United States' current implementation of online learning.

Personal Definition of Learning

Before we can discuss what online learning could be, we must clarify what learning is. I believe learning is a process that occurs in context, individually or collectively, where previous knowledge is drawn upon, and new knowledge is acquired through a variety of formal and informal settings, means, and processes. Learning varies from culture to culture; it depends in part on the individual's identity, the places and spaces where learning occurs, and the value put on knowledge by the individual and society. This definition is both vague and specific by necessity. While learning can occur in a variety of spaces - virtual, online - and places - in homes, at schools, through communities - I maintain there is a requirement for context and knowledge to be used and needed in these various places and modalities for learning to occur.

Online learning, by definition, requires some sort of virtual space: be it an affinity space like a [reddit thread for coding tips](#), or a learning management system run through a school such as [Canvas](#) or [Schoolology](#). However, not all online learning has to occur in exclusively virtual spaces. A hybrid model that includes opportunities for learning in virtual and physical spaces can be quite beneficial. This can be seen in the case of field trips where students go into the community and report their findings online, or a hybrid class model where students work predominantly online, but also have opportunities to go to campus and meet in-person. It is also worth noting that online learning in public schools is different from virtual public schools.

As the Digital Learning Collective (2024) reported: "State Virtual Schools (SVS) do not issue diplomas nor engage in school functions like state assessments or federal

reporting” (p.8). This means SVS are supplementary in nature, and do not take the place of a traditional school. On the other hand, full-time online schools “often operate as charter schools or district-authorized entities. . . and are reported by states. . . to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)” (p.11). This distinction is important as online learning can either complement what is being done in traditional in-person schools, or act as an independent alternative to traditional public schools. Therefore, when assessing online learning, or offering suggestions for improving or implementing it, we must be aware of what type of program is being discussed.

My Experience with Online Learning

Online learning, as it exists in many schools across the United States, is the antithesis of my hopes for online learning. Virtual learning, as I have seen it, falls into one of two categories. The first, is an inflexible curriculum preset by the company that produced it. It does not take into consideration the background of the students enrolled in the course: what funds of knowledge they have, what their reading or mathematical level is, what kind of hardware do they have to complete the course, and so on. The second kind follows a structure reminiscent of an in-person class, but cuts out collaborative elements or offers inauthentic substitutions for collaboration. For example, I took an online course on social emotional learning that required I read articles, listen to pre-recorded lectures, and then collaborate with my peers via a discussion board. However, by the time I took this course, the discussion board was inactive, and I had no opportunity to work with my peers or ask the instructor clarifying questions. This model which would have worked well in-person, felt inauthentic in an online context.

I have worked in public education as a high school teacher for five years now. During this time, I have witnessed another troubling trend with online education in public schools. Students will often switch from an in-person core class to online because it is easier to cheat. Programs like [Photomath](#) and [ChatGPT](#) become tools for easy-A’s and not tools for learning in the hands of unmotivated and disillusioned students. Furthermore, there is the assumption that online classes are easier, which has caused so many students to switch to online courses, that in the span of two years, my school has gone from fourteen sections of in-person English 11 to barely eleven. Currently, this is a major issue schools across my district are facing, and our superintendent is searching for ways to solve this.

What I Want Online Learning to Be

Despite my students’ perceptions of online courses being “easier” than in-person, online courses should be made to be no more easy or difficult than their in-person

counterparts. Rather, online learning courses should simply be a version of that class designed for the online space. Online learning should not be a copy-and-paste of a physical classroom. Techniques that work in-person, such as think-pair-share, need to be adapted or changed for the virtual environment. Courses, from the inception then, should be constructed in a way that takes advantage of the digital space, and utilizes tools that can bring about the type of organic discussion that happens in in-person spaces. This concept is discussed by Morris and Stommel (2018) in their essay "The Discussion Forum is Dead; Long Live the Discussion Forum." Rather than having a static discussion board with excessive guidelines for posting, a social media thread or a live whiteboard could be a better solution for discussion, and the type of regulations that require citations can be saved for a more formal writing assignment. This idea is further backed by *The Manifesto for Teaching Online* (2020) that states "text has been troubled: many modes matter in representing academic knowledge" (Bayne, et al. 2020). When considering online discussion, we must consider what is an authentic mode of communicating online. Sometimes a forum might be appropriate, but equally, so might be a social media thread.

In my physical classroom, I differentiate assignments for general education and special education students daily. While I use universal design to make my assignments accessible from inception, I end up making lots of decisions on the fly as students sometimes need further differentiation. However, the online space has the potential to bring individualized instruction on a greater scale through not only more course offerings, but the capability to do truly individualized instruction without the worry that students will feel singled out, or be burdensome on the facilitator I believe this because online learning typically can allow students to learn at their own pace, take courses they are interested in, and leads naturally to opportunities to extend learning, as the amount of resources - ie, the entire internet - is readily available.

Online learning has the potential to confront and dismantle systemic barriers to education. For example, online learning can make education more accessible for learners with disabilities. Screen readers, [Dyslexic-friendly fonts](#), and screen magnifiers are three common examples. Furthermore, virtual tours and online calls have the capability to bring places and people previously inaccessible or out of reach to the learner's door. This can make "online can be a privileged mode. Distance is a positive principle, not a deficit" (Bayne, et al. 2020). Distance, and online, in the case of virtual field trips, talks, and lectures, helps socioeconomically disadvantaged learners, rural learners, and learners with disabilities connect with the world in ways previously inaccessible to them and even students in in-person contexts.

Caution and Hope

While online learning can provide benefits such as individualized instruction and accessibility, it is important to remember these aspects are not always available, and must be intentionally included in course design. Furthermore, while online learning can provide access to rural students, economically disadvantaged, and students with disabilities, this only occurs if said students have access to technology. Rural America still needs infrastructure for high speed internet and the money to provide students with technology: so to, for urban students. Disabled students also need access to technology that works for them.

It is my hope that I can learn how to design online courses to offer exceptional learning opportunities for all learners. I believe online learning has the potential to shake up traditional education in ways that previous educational movements have not been able to, and bring to the forefront core issues of literacy, mathematical, scientific, and artistic achievement that public education in the United States has been facing since the technological revolution of the mid-2000s. However, unless the same scrutiny that traditional education faces is brought to online education, we will continue to lack concrete evidence of online education's efficacy and the other areas tied to it that could use improvement.

References

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