

On-campus, Online, and Blended Learning

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The proliferation of for-profit universities, the growing presence of online courses and programs, and the government-published reports that people will change jobs/careers multiple times in a working lifetime have caused higher education to explode. Learners, older than 25, were labeled *non-traditional* to distinguish them from 18-25 year olds. The passage of time and the widespread use of social media technologies across generations have erased the distinction. All remarks in the editorial relate to post-secondary learners and instruction.

Let us begin with the current landscape. The major settings are on-campus, online, and blended learning, where blended is defined as partially on campus and partially online. On-campus includes many venues – large lecture halls, small classrooms, laboratories, and more. Online refers to electronic set-ups, primarily Internet through Learning Management Systems (LMSs) and computer-based television. Blended covers everything from an initial on-campus meeting, to several on-campus meetings for exams, to one on-campus and one online meeting per week and more.

On-campus classes were the standard for hundreds of years. The general thinking was that higher education was not for everyone. Some succeeded; those who could not, failed. Most people never tried. The industrial age did not require a society of college-educated people. Bit by bit, society transitioned to the age of technology/communication. Many labor-intensive jobs were taken over by technology. Left for the non-highly educated were service jobs in retail, child care, food providers, cleaning services and similar, low-paying fields. High school graduation, once regarded as the end of the rainbow, became the necessary step for college entry; the pot of gold required four more years of schooling.

The technology that changed the job market changed the education market as well. The explosion of the Internet through the World Wide Web (WWW) browsers and the LMSs that followed quickly in the mid 1990s paved the way for online learning. Yes, there were earlier options for dis-

tance learning but none offered the touchy-feely, interactive capabilities now possible in an electronic venue. So, three things came together at relatively the same time: the workplace required a more educated citizenry, colleges could not accommodate the growing number of prospective students, and computing technology made possible a classroom alternative.

During the 1990s, the number of people who sought college degrees grew precipitously. College became an entitlement rather than a privilege. A bachelor's degree meant increased career options, better promotion opportunities, higher earnings, and lower unemployment. Moreover, the government made it increasingly easy to obtain tuition loans. No longer did colleges hold out the promise of becoming an educated person; the desired outcome became tied to the job market.

Fifteen years ago, colleges were overcrowded; travel was becoming increasingly time-consuming and jobs were demanding more and more of people's time. Online learning was the perfect solution. What could be better than gaining knowledge and skills any time and any place appropriate technology was available? As it turned out, some people could not pace themselves satisfactorily and some felt isolated with no physical contact with teachers and classmates. The original notion of scalability, in which electronic classes could accommodate all who register, was quickly abandoned as unmanageable, unhappy experiences for all. Some online courses were built with minimal on-campus participation, but after September 11, 2001, travel became more burdensome.

Although online learning continues to expand, the first decade of this century witnessed an explosion of blended learning initiatives. Some added on-campus components to online courses; others added online components to on-campus courses. Just about every course, despite the venue, added a LMS component for instructional and administrative functions. Increasingly, we read that blending is the perfect solution for higher education. For example: Two classes could share classroom space during the week; one meeting would occur in the classroom and the second on-

line. Travel would be cut in half and people-interaction would take place weekly. It sounds really good until one considers the people who are not within commuting distance or those who do not own appropriate technology to attend to the online portion without coming to campus.

All solutions are good under certain circumstances. Options mean competition and competition compels each initiative to become as good as possible. What works for one person may not work for another. The keys to successful mastery are well-trained teachers who are masters of the subject, instructional design that facilitates learning, and learners who invest the necessary time and intellectual energy in learning. In every format, applied learning technologies improve the playing field.