Learning Online: What research tells us about whether, when and how. A review.

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In order to discuss online learning and its implications on education and curriculum design, a couple of important topics need to be looked at first. In the book Learning Online, four are addressed in the first chapter. First, the incredible growth of online learning over the last fifteen years. Roughly a third of students are taking at least one online course and in the corporate world 33% of training is delivered online with 75% of technology training being delivered online. These numbers could impact today’s education system pretty severely when it comes to looking at budgetary concerns. They can also be impacted by budget concerns.

It seems the K-12 education system has lagged behind higher learning establishments but even there the trend is gaining traction. In public schools the cost is fairly prohibitive. But the falling prices of high quality technology and the increasing availability of high speed internet are allowing schools to catch up. The demand is there as well. In one study 43% of middle and high school students request some form of online learning. In a world where more and more people are shopping, making reservations and communicating entirely online, this only makes sense.

The next factor in the growth of online learning is the belief that it can address some of education's persistent challenges like the achievement gap. The US has a large dropout rate and schools are turning to online learning to help meet the needs of those students.

Economics is a third factor. Online courses can help relieve the budget crunch that districts face when attempting to meet the needs of every student.
And finally comes the simple belief that online learning can provide a better learning experience because it can individualize a learner's experience. All of these factors can have an impact on my own world in terms of curriculum design and education but most especially are the financial concerns. As schools realize they can provide education cheaper to mass numbers through the use of online learning, what happens to teachers?

Chapter five discusses how teachers are integrating online learning with their own curriculum. An increased access to high speed internet, low cost technology and an increase of applications for use in education, teachers are attempting to use online learning to gain leverage in teaching today's kids.

In blended instruction schools are looking to take advantage of online learning to increase instruction without increasing costs. One such way would be to create extra blocks of education, where students work online through third party programs to support classroom instruction, while being monitored by a paraprofessional. I immediately see this as a problem though. In my opinion, this is just the first step towards eliminating teachers as an important element of education. Or at least diminishing their purpose. Boosted by the success of this extra program, budget minded districts may look for further ways to provide education to students without paying expensive teachers. This could lead to elimination of teaching jobs, or a reliance on this online learning model and abuse. I envision gymnasiums lined with hundreds of students working on math programs monitored by just a couple of paraprofessionals as a replacement for teachers.
Admitted, this could be a knee jerk response and an over sensationalizing of the issue, but there was a time when consumer goods were made by people, earning wages. While the chapter gives many advantages to blended learning, like adding variety to learning and enhancing student engagement, I have reservations. With the increase in technology, corporations made the move towards robotics, eliminating jobs. Could education be the next victim of the industrial revolution?

Chapter six discusses online schools and universities. Online degrees have their advantages. First comes the ability to tailor a schedule to meet the demands of the program. This is the most important advantage to me. I am able to complete this program at ECSU only because I can do it online. Between my work and family schedules, I would not otherwise be able to attend classes in the traditional manner. Online degrees increase access to higher education to many more people. But in contrast to this advantage, there are detractors to the value of online degrees. Some see the movement as simply another diploma mill. And others question the value of a degree offered by a forprofit corporation. These corporations take advantage of federal student aid. And perhaps more troubling is the value of these forms of education placed upon them by the students themselves. 44% of all student loan defaults are associated with students who have attended forprofit universities.

Is there a need to address this concern? Does the flexibility of online learning outweigh the cons presented by detractors? Should online, forprofit universities be held to the same standards as traditional universities like ECSU
who are offering online programs as alternatives to their classroom offerings? Is there a way to increase the perception of value in the eyes of the students? Well that question has a more direct answer already addressed in chapter 3. Schools in Alaska require the completion of an online course in order to graduate. This will help instill more of an appreciation in online learning which appears to be a trend that will only grow in the future.

It is my opinion that every change to the status quo will have it's growth problems. While these trends can be seen as detractions against online education, I would offer that some of the statistics, such as the high default rate are products of the system, not the tool. The corporations, and students, are only taking advantage of the system provided to them. That is where the first steps to improving online education should be taken.

One of the important issues in online learning is that it requires a high degree of independent learning and organizational skills. Students who lack these would be at a disadvantage taking online courses. Chapter seven offers several ways to support these students. One being Credit Recovery in that students who have dropped out of classes can recover some of that time by testing out of the parts that they have mastered, leaving them to focus on the parts they still need work on. In my own life this could have been a great benefit. It took me two years each to pass Algebra one and two. I had to repeat each class. Through a credit recovery program, I could have spent time during the summer for example working on the parts I could not pass while passing over the parts I mastered, rather than simply repeating the entire course. The biggest
benefit of this would have been allowing me to take other classes rather than using slots in high school to repeat math. These could have been enrichment courses like band, which I could not fit into my schedule. I wonder how many students missed out on opportunities for enrichment by toiling away repeating instruction they already mastered.

The book Learning Online: What research tells us about whether, when and how, offers a thoroughly flushed out review of online learning. I appreciate the advantage and disadvantage approach. It is also very relevant to my current educational program and the way I teach in school. One of the most important questions raised whether or not online learning should be addressed at all. I think it's benefits far outweigh its detractions and believe our countries education system could use the change to keep up with the incredible growth of technology. Students simply learn differently than they did hundreds of years ago and we need to evolve in kind.
References