

# The Promotion of Online Education in U.S. Universities

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by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **The Promotion of Online Learning in U.S. Higher Education**

Over the last two decades, online education has grown episodically, due to factors such as a “greater choice of programs and coursework; higher levels of comfort with the technology; and the inherent convenience and flexibility that online programs offer” (Hill & Serdyukov, 2007). However, the biggest spike in popularity is due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which interrupted in-person education worldwide. Now, as learning models have integrated digital methods, many organizations are advocating for continuing in that direction. Technology companies’ business interests lead many of them to promote online education. The US Distance Learning Association (USDLA), a trade association primarily representing companies that sell educational technology, is a proponent. So is the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), the members of which includes both corporations and academic institutions. Educational software companies, such as Desire2Learn (D2L), are also directly engaged. Other organizations, however, are more cautious about online education. Such groups include the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the Network for Public Education (NPE), public school district officials, and some university student groups who have warned that remote learning is no substitute for in-person class meetings.

Nearly 11.8 million (75 percent) of undergraduate students in the U.S. are enrolled in at least one distance education course, and that number continues to grow (NCES, 2020). Educators, students, and administrators disagree about the optimum application of online education. Even those who maintain that the classroom experience cannot be matched generally agree that online education is a useful supplement. Others, however, favor greater integration of online education, often citing reasons of cost or access. To advance their diverse positions on

online learning, such groups offer open membership, provide online statements and resources, and engage in social media discussions and blogs.

## **Review of Research**

Researchers often disagree about the efficacy of online learning relative to in-person learning. Some studies have found that students and teachers generally welcome online learning, but with reservations about its implications for retention and attendance. Even 20 years ago, in a meta-analysis among students in the U.S., Roubides (2003) found that “E-learning is the most favorite mode of distance education today.” However, this was with the view that learning is only meant to prepare students for the workforce, and an online environment would allow schools to save on expenses while upskilling students. The review emphasized core subjects such as science and math, and less on artistic subjects such as literature and drama. In a study across 29 Austrian universities, Paechter and Maier (2010) found that students “appreciated online learning [for] its potential in providing a clear and coherent structure of the learning material, in supporting self-regulated learning, and in distributing information,” but for learning itself they preferred face-to-face settings (Paechter & Maier, 2010). Manegre and Sabiri (2020) found a similar result with teachers, who “generally feel they get to know the students better in virtual classrooms than in other teaching environments.” New data from the RAND Corporation, however, indicate that teachers in completely remote learning environments reported “higher student absenteeism and less student work completion than teachers in face-to-face classrooms” and felt they “needed more support and guidance in planning instruction than their colleagues who were teaching in-person” (Schwartz, 2022). Overall, there continues to be mixed reviews on which mode of learning is best suited for both learners and educators.

In a meta-analysis sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, Bailey and Jaggar (2010) found no evidence that “fully online delivery produces superior learning outcomes for typical college courses,” and that it “may even undercut progression among low-income and underprepared students” as it limits their ability to ask for help without a strong internet connection (Bailey & Jaggar, 2010). In a study of a computer-based English as a Second Language (ESL) writing course at a conservative Christian college, Warschauer (1998) agreed, warning that technologies are “almost always implemented in a top-down fashion, which leaves in place traditional teacher-centered instruction” in which students learn passively.

A 2021 study published in the *Frontiers of Education* states that as the mode of instruction seems to change from in-person to online learning, the reality is that it is actually evolving from teacher-centered education to student-centered education. In teacher-centered education, the “teacher plays a role as the source of education, and students are recipients of his/her knowledge” (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021). In contrast, student-centered education emphasizes the “role of students in knowledge production in the class” (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021). The researchers go on to explain how student-centered instruction has “currently benefited many new technologies by using the internet and other advanced technological tools to share, transfer, and extend knowledge” (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021). Whereas most research so far has focused on the effects of virtual and in-person learning on students and teachers, this study evaluates what really is altered when these environments have switched, which is the technique of teaching. Carmody and Berge (2005) add to this by stating that there is “no single instructional model that will guarantee effective teaching or learning in every situation” and what “engages one class may disengage the next.” They argue that rather than the mode of instruction itself, the “skill, flexibility, motivation, and orientation of

the instructor and student are the guiding factors that lead the learning process” and the most effective methods are “those that engage the six dimensions of human existence: physical, social, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual” (Carmody & Berge, 2005).

While “education” and “learning” are often used interchangeably, there is an inherent difference in how these words are interpreted, which can be explained through educational philosophies. There are five main philosophies of education, two of which are essentialism and existentialism. Essentialism focuses on core curriculum, while existentialism focuses on individuality (Parkay & Hess, 2000). In essentialist classrooms, teachers are authoritative figures, whereas existential classrooms are student-led with the teacher’s role being to simply guide. An essentialist outlook places emphasis on memorization of material, skilling students for the workforce, and proper notetaking. Existentialism, on the other hand, values experiential learning, inner reflection, and abstract thinking. This reveals two different viewpoints on education – one being to train (essentialism) and one being to liberate (existentialism). When the term “learning” is used, it is often in an essentialist outlook, where the right things should be studied and discipline is a top priority. The term “education,” however, provides more of an existentialist view where self-awareness and responsibility are emphasized. In the argument on the potential of online learning to in-person learning, it is important to recognize how education is defined, as it contributes to how various entities view the practice and consequently which methods are favored by each.

## **Membership**

To not only express but also advance their point of view on online learning, many organizations offer membership for like-minded individuals to voice their opinions on the topic as well. A prime example of this is seen in 2020, where students from York University led by

sociology professor Cary Wu “came together as a virtual group to discuss what makes in-person classes unique and different from online-learning” (Ong, 2020). The group agreed that in-person settings improve focus, community, motivation, and routine, and every subject could be taught perfectly in person. An existentialist stance can be seen in their discussion, as in-person education is favored mainly due to the “organic discussions” and “social experiences” that allow students to “ask more questions and seek more answers” rather than just consume the material (Ong, 2020).

A more formal form of membership can be seen with the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA), an organization dedicated to the “development of distance learning for education” through focusing on the legislation impacting the distance learning community (USDLA, 2020). They launched the Distance Learning Accreditation Board (DLAB), claiming that technology implementation into the classroom needs a “*systematic* approach to improvement” since distance learning has come “from the fringe to the forefront of education” (Flores, 2004). Membership levels are shown on the website, with higher levels being able to vote on the members for the DLAB and even serve on it. The USDLA views learning from an essentialist perspective, as it aims to meet the “training needs of learning communities” exhibiting a view that students must be coached in every subject to be successful (USDLA, 2020).

Membership through selection is also popular, as seen in the Online Learning Consortium Institute (OLC), a collaborative community of higher education leaders and innovators dedicated to advancing quality digital teaching by integrating “online education into the mainstream of higher education” (OLC, nd). They mainly serve their purpose through educating instructors on how to adapt to online learning platforms, as evidenced through various programs and resources

on their website. While basic membership is included, this organization highlights its competency through requiring applications to its various leadership programs in different subject areas. Robert Ubell, former OLC board member and vice dean for online learning at New York University's Tandon School of Engineering, expresses his sympathy with faculty who are reluctant to moving into the "exotic, suspicious digital world" (Ubell, 2017). He explains, however, that "professors with the deepest resistance are those with the least familiarity with digital instruction" and pulls graduation and testing data from online graduate programs at NYU Tandon School of Engineering to support his claims (Ubell, 2017). He encourages students to be inquisitive on their own, affirming how open college course platforms such as Coursera, edX, and Khan Academy can help students to broaden their scope in many areas beyond the classroom. For the most part, Ubell is keen on how virtual environments can draw out existentialism in education and favors the majority of coursework to be online with few exceptions.

### **Provision of Online Resources**

Proponents for online education also include coordinators of Learning Management Systems (LMS) sites, which provide the software for the administration and delivery of educational courses or training programs. Desire2Learn (D2L), for example, offers "flexible and robust learning solutions" for online learning through the technology it produces (D2L, 2022). Some of this technology includes Brightspace, Wave, and Content Solutions, which are all online course platforms for different needs, whether educational or business-related. It continues to grow with over "500 universities and colleges already using Brightspace" (D2L, 2022). The platform also has a "Teaching & Learning Master Class" allowing educators to "master the art and science of teaching" (D2L, 2022). D2L's CEO, John Baker, states that D2L is "picking up a

lot of big corporate clients as they tackle the re-education, reskilling, and upskilling of their workforces to support the future of work” (Kronk, 2019). He goes on further to promote competency-based education, claiming that “students are working twice as fast, scoring higher on exams, and retaining the knowledge for longer” (Kronk, 2019). Kronk completely favors online education for all uses, educational and professional, as D2L will profit exponentially from more users on their platform. The emphasis on essentialism as opposed to existentialism is apparent, as importance is placed on training and reskilling students rather than autonomy in learning.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is an organization of higher education professionals who strives to get educators acclimated to changing educational environments. While the organization isn’t inherently against the concept of online education, it presents its concerns with the new movement. The AAUP released a statement on online and distance education, stating that it “invariably presents administrative, technical, and legal problems usually not encountered in traditional classroom settings” and raises “basic questions about standards for teaching and scholarship” (AAUP, 2016). Although the organization cautions against relying too much on technology, it provides online resources for educators to navigate the challenges of teaching in a digital environment. To illustrate its perspective on online learning in higher education, the AAUP lists programs for individuals to partake in, such as its “New Deal for Higher Education” program which seeks to pursue reform related to “academic freedom and governance... technical and vocational education... and a host of other challenges that have diminished our national capacity to educate our communities” (AAUP, 2021). The AAUP presents a strong existentialist point of view, as one of its oldest statements from 1940 states how the “common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition” and



that “freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth” (AAUP, 2022). AAUP’s core mission is to advance and protect academic freedom, honing in on an individualistic and exploratory view of education.

Also voicing its concerns with the movement towards online learning is the Network for Public Education (NPE), an advocacy group committed to strengthening and protecting the integrity of public education. The organization is very public about its opposition towards the “privatization of public education” and “demonization of teachers” (NPE, 2019). They released a report on the enrollment trends regarding virtual charter schools, explaining how there was a large jump in online enrollment although virtual charter schools “have long been the worst-performing schools in the charter sector” (Strauss, 2022). Upholding the report with data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data (CCD), the organization concludes that those “who believe in market-based schooling see the expansion of low-cost virtual schools as a victory” whereas those “who believe in high-quality schools view the expansion of virtual charters as a cause for serious concern” (Strauss, 2022). The data is provided as an online resource on the website for users to view and analyze trends from. While the organization only really speaks of virtual education in charter schools, they note that “online schooling is a flawed option for most students, with kids often returning to district schools far behind academically” and that “virtual schooling is the poster child for the failings of school choice,” therefore needing “extensive reform” (Strauss, 2022). The NPE exhibits an existentialist take on education, as they “support schools that are subject to democratic control” and “offer a full and rich curriculum for all children” (NPE, 2019). They affirm that public education is a “pillar of our democratic society” and online-based environments, especially in charter schools, are just a “source of enormous profit” rather than the key to a liberating education.

## **Social Media and Blogs**

Perhaps the biggest medium to share diverse perspectives on a subject is social media. A blog post from KIPP Texas Public Schools provided four main benefits why they favor in-person learning, in that it forms stronger connections, creates stronger academic experiences, improves mental health, and suits different learning styles. Different learning styles such as visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinetic are limited by online learning, whereas in-person instruction allows instructors to “have a good perspective on whether the children themselves are utilizing them to their best ability” (Indakwa, 2022). A strong emphasis on existentialism and individuality in learning is placed, as “many learners find their most enriching development experiences in experiential and personalized learning” and being in a classroom allows teachers to “guide each student according to their unique abilities” (Indakwa, 2022).

A recent Reddit thread from the unofficial student and alumni-run University of Waterloo subreddit account created a poll on what made online learning superior to in-person learning. The post got 5 upvotes and 15 comments, most of which said that “the pace is just much more customizable” and there’s “no wasted time in commute” (Reddit, 2021). While most comments are praising the transition to online schooling, there are a few claiming that depending on the subject matter, in-person learning is better, especially if the class is “very hands on and engaging” (Reddit, 2021). An essentialist attitude can be slightly seen, as a comment with 9 upvotes expressed how their favorite part about online learning is “that you're able to focus on the material you need to,” indicating that knowledge is achieved through memorization of material (Reddit, 2021).

Jim Kutcher, the Program Director of the M.S. in Social Entrepreneurship in the University of Maryland, Baltimore County Graduate School, speaks on a podcast of how an

online environment actually enhances experiential learning. Bringing up examples such as lab work, art class, and research, Kutcher claims that it is “so much more enriching for [students] to come to [the answer] by themselves” and hybrid environments allow them to have that autonomy while still having a faculty as a facilitator (Riley, 2023). He states that “the best thing a faculty member can do [in the online environment] is to be quiet” so students can go through the trial-and-error process on their own, as well as draw their own conclusions (Riley, 2023). When asked about how his students responded to his hybrid methods of teaching, he stated that students were used to sitting in a more lecture mode of instruction, and now were suddenly put into this “crazy world” where they were on their own in a virtual environment, yet they found it very “positive, freeing and refreshing” (Riley, 2023). This podcast is displayed on Moving the Needle, which seeks to hear the different perspectives of industry leaders on reaching the “pinnacle of their sport” of which Jim Kutcher utilizes to explain his perspective regarding the virtual environment for experiential learning (Riley, 2023). He displays a unique existentialist point of view, as he believes students should have their own individuality and limited teacher involvement, and the best way to go about this is through a hybrid model.

## **Conclusion**

The underlying argument on whether online or traditional methods of teaching are superior is contingent upon how people view education in general. The USDLA, D2L, various students on social media, and others exhibit an essentialist point of view, as they value learning the exact material and developing the skills for the workforce, and therefore tend to prefer online learning. The students from York University, the AAUP, the NPE, KIPP Texas Public Schools, and others, however, view learning as existential and liberating, and are cautious of how online learning can contribute to that mission. They tend to lean towards in-person education. While

either side isn't completely against the other alternative mode of education, there is a solid debate on the optimum mix of technology in education and how exactly to proceed with integrating it. Rather than focusing on the technology itself, individuals and organizations should reevaluate their definition of what education truly means to them going forward, and proceed with what methods will best carry out that interpretation.

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