

Online Learning for All Students

The flexible format of online learning gives it the potential to support all levels of student learning.

By Kathleen L. Webb

Back in the day, when most of today's educators were students, online learning wasn't available. In a 2008 article for *Forbes*, Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen wrote, "Despite skepticism about the school system's ability to shift, online classes now account for 1 million enrollments in public education, up from 45,000 just seven years ago." He has a point. At least 27 states have online high schools.

Most of today's educators have had little personal experience in this new world. By the time they got to college, perhaps they were able to experience one class in an online environment. Most probably, the class replicated a face-to-face class. In other words, the online class had a start date, everybody went in lock-step through the class, and everybody finished at the same time. And there was probably also a requirement for students to meet together face-to-face at the beginning of the class and periodically throughout.

Most online learning has taken the typical classroom and extended it to a new delivery method, keeping all the essential classroom elements in place. Using Christensen's nomenclature, I would call that kind of learning environment a *sustaining* innovation—an improvement on the established model.

Christensen predicts that online education will be a *disruptive* innovation—an innovation that begins by serving a marginalized group, such as the students who drop out because the traditional classroom environment doesn't meet their needs. In the beginning, it won't compete with the established model of classroom learning. But it will improve to the point that it's used for all students, not just those who are at risk, because it's a good way to serve the whole student population. At some pre-

dictable point, the innovation will overtake the traditional model and become the new way of doing business.

At the Utah Electronic High School, we've seen that kind of demographic shift in the students who take our courses. When the school began serving students in 1994, we had a small student body and used rudimentary online tools to deliver curricula and credit to local high schools. Nearly all of our students used the school for credit recovery. Since then, state graduation standards have increased and students have less room in their schedules for "passion" classes—classes that they take because they love the content. Now, more than 50% of our students report that they are using the school to accelerate their graduation or to make room in their schedules for other classes. Only 30% say they use our services strictly for credit recovery.

Why Does It Work?

The innovative part of the high school isn't just that it's online; it's in the flexibility that it provides for students. The high school does not compete for the weighted pupil unit, so we aren't constrained by the calendar. A student can begin any quarter class at any time and work at his or her own pace through the curriculum with the support of a Utah-certified teacher.

Why is that flexibility attractive? Let's use an analogy. In the olden days, if you lived in a company town and wanted to purchase something, you went to your company store. If they didn't carry the item you wanted, you had to wait until your trip to the big city to pick up the item or you had to use the Sears & Roebuck catalog and have the item mailed to you. Both involved waiting.

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Nowadays, if you have the itch for something, you can log in to Amazon.com and have the item arrive at your doorstep the next day. That's an unprecedented change in meeting customer demand. That's the kind of flexibility students are beginning to ask for. Many school systems behave like old company towns because they think that they have a monopoly on education. Students and parents are discovering that there are many online learning options.

Online Learning in Your School

So can your school provide students and their parents with this kind of choice and flexibility? I believe that the answer is yes, if you partner with others. But you'll need to do a little homework first.

Research online courses that are available and see what they're using for curricula and how they approach the teaching. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL, www.nacol.org) is a good place to start. Evergreen Consulting Associates (www.evergreenassoc.com/online_education.html) publishes an annual review of online schools. Look at the most flexible and cost-effective models, and be sure to investigate the accreditation standards for online schools.

With that background, you'll be ready to consider what you and your school can do. Ask yourself how your school can embrace a new level of flexibility. Don't think, though, that you must purchase one of these online education services. You may be able to develop them by yourself or in partnership with other schools in your district or state. Following is a suggested scenario for developing your own disruptive innovation for your school.

Utah Electronic High School

Enrollment

In the 2007–08 school year, 20,748 students requested accounts and 6,767 students received credits for one or more classes. (Both of those numbers have more than doubled in the last five years.) About 95% of our student body are high school–age students in Utah, and 6% of those identify themselves as home-schooled students or drop-outs. About 50% enroll in the school's classes to accelerate toward graduation, 30% enroll to make up failed classes, and the other 20% report that they enroll for both reasons.

Faculty

The school employs 75 teachers (mostly part-time) and provides 244 instructional hours a day for 68 courses deployed across 305 classes. Our top three requested classes are Financial Literacy, Fitness for Life, and Health Education II. The school provides a full curriculum, including Horse Management and Driver Education.

Step one. With faculty members, explore the online resources that can enhance the school's regular, face-to-face curricula. Look at the iTunesU offerings of media-rich content. Tremendous teaching resources are available just for the asking.

Step two. If you don't already have a Web publishing framework, such as Drupal (<http://drupal.org>) or Joomla (www.joomla.org), choose one and install it at your school. You must have a way to organize student and teacher interactions. A database-driven framework provides the most flexibility and growth potential.

Step three. Help your teachers learn how to use wiki features with their students to

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RESOURCES FOR ONLINE LEARNING

The International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL)

www.nacol.org

Keeping Pace With K–12 Online Learning www.kpk12.com

SETDA Class of 2020 Action Plan for Education—Learning Virtually: Expanding Opportunities

www.setda.org/web/guest/2020/online-courseware

Sample accreditation standards from the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools

www.northwestaccreditation.org/publications/selfstudy.html

Clayton Christensen's blog www.disruptingclass.com

Utah Electronic High School <http://ehs.uen.org>

create curriculum resources that can be used in face-to-face classes. The best way to create “buy in” and reach time line goals is to do the “crowdsourcing” that a wiki provides. Leverage teacher and student expertise to create an organized, online compilation of learning resources.

Step four. Create assessment strategies that use rubrics and online tests to gauge student mastery of a subject. Figuring out how to help students help themselves by providing transparent self-assessment tools goes a long way to creating a successful learning environment, whether it is face-to-face or online.

Step five. Invite several teachers to begin offering their required classes to students who don't have room in their schedules during the school day. This is where the fun starts for both the students and the teachers.

Step six. Work with your district and state office of education to figure out how to compensate teachers who teach outside the regular school hours.

So, is it as easy as these six steps? No, but at least it's a beginning. The pitfalls are to think that you must reinvent the wheel or to think that you must purchase the luxury wheels. You must find a balance between the two extremes. You may want to begin a discussion group with fellow administrators to work through the implications of online learning in your schools. In partnership, you can begin the journey together.

The primary thing to remember is that you're taking this plunge to respond to the changing needs and expectations of your parents and students. These days, everyone is connected, most students have cell phones, and everything is available on demand, so the education system must transform. **PL**

REFERENCE

■ Christensen, C. (2008, January 23). Disruption in the classroom. *Forbes.com*. Retrieved February 25, 2009, from www.forbes.com/2008/01/22/solutions-education-christensen-oped-cx_dme_0123christensen.html

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