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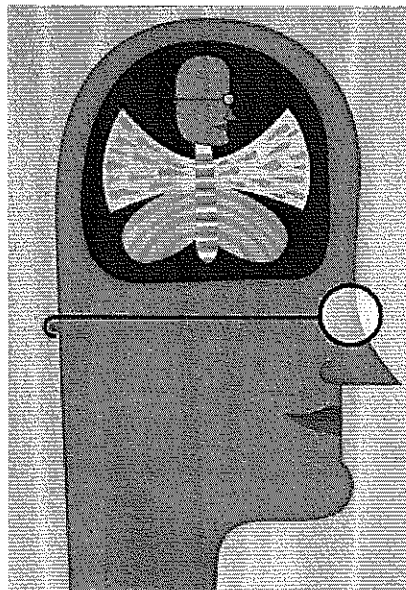
Online Learning

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Why I Changed My Mind About Teaching Online

By Glenn A. Hartz



Joyce Hesselberth for *The Chronicle*

In 1998 I wrote an article for a national newspaper that was highly critical of online higher education. Among other things, I said, "We're on the edge of something very dangerous," and "Technology always seems to put us once removed from the best learning atmosphere."

I've now offered an online course myself—"Introduction to Ethics." I thought you might be interested in what prompted my change of mind.

First, the culture has changed drastically. Social media, e-mail, and texting have displaced personal contact in a way that would have been hard to predict. Electronic media have become the standard way of communicating. Even dating is often done online. The intimacy of the Internet seems to make people feel close to those reading their words, and all complicating interpersonal conflicts are conveniently avoided.

In an online course, the black or white board comes down from the wall and resides in that same comfortable space: monitor, laptop, tablet, even in the palm of your hand. Lecture becomes soundtrack. PowerPoint presentations become occasional interlopers. High-definition photos and videos and movie clips dominate the show. And make no mistake, it is a show—this is entertainment education. Assuming that the content is there, the course is now judged largely

on how artfully and smoothly the elements meld together into a coherent, pleasing whole.

It's now possible for students to feel closer to you when you're the virtual speaker and ghost engineer than when you're physically standing in front of them—even if you're saying the same things. My generation finds that astonishing.

A second reason for changing my mind was the abrupt shift in student preferences toward online courses. Students often want to work while attending college, or they just want flexibility. An online course offers them a convenience that live courses do not: no set schedule. Add to that the savings of money for fuel and driving time, and the online option is nearly irresistible.

Students often sign up for an online course even when the same course is simultaneously taught in a traditional format by the same person. Recently I offered live and online sections of the same course in the same semester. The online section filled up well before classes began; the traditional one ended up half-full.

Third, I was eventually convinced that cheating could be avoided. I had heard stories of "hired scholars" who took exams and wrote papers in exchange for a fee. At first I required students to come to campus and show a photo ID before taking their exams. But recently I administered exams online and found no evidence of cheating, probably because of the time limit and the need to understand points from my lecture. (Papers are another matter, but they are problematic in any class.)

I also found that students did about the same level of work in the online course that they did in the traditional one. (A few had taken one of my "live" classes.) Grade distributions were comparable across all sections.

Finally, my fears that online education would eliminate student contact were allayed. I had direct e-mail exchanges with students on the course's discussion board, and they often had illuminating conversations with one another there. I set up an option for students to write to me confidentially if they wanted to. And they did—sometimes about personal matters I would never have heard about otherwise. Again, the Internet provided a comfortable setting in which trust could develop.

I came to regard online courses as much less dangerous than I had thought. I even found a sort of synergy developing between online and traditional versions of the same course. I often used audio tracks recorded during traditional lectures as the basis of the online course. I turned my paper handouts into slides, and my board work into screen-capture videos. I lecture without notes, so students don't know what I'm going to say before I say it. Later, if the audio track is edited for an online class session, the suspense is still there, giving life to the presentation.

I also went in the other direction, using many of the video clips and visuals I developed for online courses in traditional ones.

So, do I *like* online courses? My answer is that it doesn't matter. The students like them, and we have to adjust to their demands. In a very short time we've gone from dictating scheduling and offerings to accommodating student preferences. And that troubles many faculty members who are resisting teaching online.

There is a lot of foot-dragging out there when it comes to developing online courses. It is true that some courses—those with performance, lab, or practicum components, for example—cannot and should not be turned into wholly online courses. But many can

be. Often a traditional lower-level class consists of a set of slides with instructor voice-overs and could easily be a slide show.

A while ago, my dean responded to a question about the threat of online courses by saying that the university had already survived the largest possible challenge to its existence: publishing. So it didn't have much to fear from online courses.

At the time, I silently disagreed. I thought books were quite different from the flashy, colorful, entertaining experience that was just beginning to come to the computer screen.

I now think the university will survive, but it will be in a different form. My hunch about books was right. Books wait to be read (and sometimes never are). But a high-definition video with rich audio in a slick arrangement packages education in a television-episode format. It grabs you in a way that the printed page—or the sage on stage—never can.

The students already know that. It's just taking us a while to catch up.

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