Why Virtual Schools Exist and Understanding Their Culture

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Introduction

With technology rapidly changing, the demand for and dependency on various instructional tools continue to increase in the educational environment. The new technologies have also afforded innovative communication and instructional possibilities (Debevec, Shih, & Kashyap, 2006). From television to online education, new technologies have proven to maximize the depth, accessibility, and flow of information to students (Tinker, 2000). Therefore, technology should evolve as a powerful teaching tool that can provide students access to resources and equip them with the support necessary to build twenty-first century skills.

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Distance learning has been in existence for many years. Initial distance education efforts began with media such as radio, correspondence through mail, and then through videoconferencing. The Internet eventually became a popular medium for online instruction and learning. While online college courses were common, virtual K-12 schooling was still somewhat new. It was not until the mid-1990s that virtual schools began to use the Internet to offer online courses. Some schools implemented the changes due to the improvements in technology and changes in the student demographic, such as home schoolers, elite athletes, or remote areas where schools are not able to provide students access to certain content areas.

Virtual schools, distance education, e-learning, and online learning are all terms that are used synonymously to describe the changing field of nontraditional instruction (Saba, 2005). These terms may confuse individuals who are unfamiliar with technology-based delivery methods. Although various definitions exist, the most commonly published definition is by the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT). According to Schlosser and Simonson (2002), AECT

defines distance education as "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors" (p. 1). The four major components of the definition of distance education are: (1) the program is institutionally based; (2) there is separation of teacher and student; (3) there is some form of interactive telecommunications; and (4) the instruction includes varied resources and environments that facilitate learning (Schlosser & Simonson, 2002).

Online K-12 virtual programs offer a new learning environment that transcends the traditional brick and mortar buildings of the past. Types of virtual school programs that target the K-12 population depend on such factors as the number of students served, programs offered, and whether it is full-time or part-time, virtual schools that target the K-12 population are operated by five basic types of online programs: (1) schools operated by regional agencies and consortia of educational entities, (2) schools operated by state education agencies, (3) schools operated by universities, (4) schools that are operated by local public schools, and (5) schools that receive a charter from a local district, state board, or university (Watson, Winograd, & Kalmon, 2004). Although this is not an exhaustive list, virtual schools are usually categorized under one of the five basic types of online programs (Watson et al., 2004).

A virtual school consortium is usually a combination of institutions participating in a joint venture to offer online courses. Such partnerships often require the participating schools to provide a teacher for one period a day in exchange for a set amount of students to take online courses. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) (2009) defines a state-led virtual program as an online program that is created by legislation or by state-level agency and/or administered by the state education agency for the purpose of providing online learning opportunities across the state. Most state-led programs do not offer a diploma; therefore, students are required to be enrolled in a traditional school. University-based online programs or K-20 initiatives allow K-12 students to take college courses as part of a joint venture with universities and community colleges. Traditional face-to-face schools offer virtual programs as part of their local district. In addition, there are online public charter schools run by private organizations. They are usually government funded and follow government regulations; however, virtual charter schools typically use a commercial curriculum.

According to the Center for Digital Education (2008), 24 states offer a state led program, seven states offer online learning statewide, and 14 states have no program in place. Beyond the state-led programs, online charter and multidistrict programs become increasingly popular (Center for Digital Education, 2008). With focus on improving traditional education, the National Education Technology Plan proposes seven key objectives to implement change in schools: (1) strengthen leadership, (2) utilize innovative budgeting, (3) improve teacher training, (4) support e-learning and virtual schools, (5) encourage broadband access, (6) progress toward digital content, and (7) improve achievement by student data management (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). The emphasis on supporting virtual schools in public education demonstrates a need to adapt to the changing needs of students. According to the U.S Department of Education (2001) under the No Child Left behind Act, "a virtual school can be among the schools to which eligible students are offered the opportunity to transfer as long as that school is a public elementary or secondary school as defined by state law" (p. 13).

As an alternative to traditional public school, K-12 virtual schools offer a custom-

ized environment that can be rigorous for the student who is looking for a challenge, or a self-moderated pace for the student that might need a little extra time (Barbour, 2008). According to Susan Patrick (2009), president and chief executive officer of iNACOL, the key benefit of virtual schools is that every student has access to the best education possible. By providing flexibility with time, location, and learning style, virtual schools provide individual online instruction and access for students who might not have the opportunity to take certain courses within their school setting or schedule. In other words, virtual schools can fill a gap and offer important resources to students by providing access to education.

While online learning could involve a single course or even a single lesson, a virtual school is a complete educational institution that delivers instruction primarily online. The first two large-scale virtual schools in the United States were Florida Virtual School (FLVS) and Virtual High School (VHS) in Concord, Massachusetts (Rice, 2006). In 2006, Michigan became the first state to mandate virtual learning, with the mission of providing each student with a virtual learning experience prior to high school graduation (DiPietro, Ferdig, Black, & Preston, 2008). The number of virtual schools is expected to continue growing.

This steady increase presents exciting possibilities, but also daunting challenges. Some reasons for choosing virtual schooling include flexibility in scheduling, convenience, self-paced learning, and access to courses not offered at their local school (Rice, 2006). However, funding problems result in major growth impediment for virtual schools. Most money issues center around operating, administrative and marketing expenses, course development, and acquisition of hardware and software. Only a minority of states are considered virtual school friendly. Florida and Illinois, for example, have legislation that allows for virtual school growth (Center for Digital Education, 2008). Other states, including Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, have legislation that allows for the creation of virtual charter schools (Center for Digital Education, 2008). Other challenges for virtual schools include authenticity, responsibility, accountability, and accreditation.

In addition, virtual schools must address issues such as enrollment boundaries, class size, accountability, and funding. In order for these concerns to be resolved, virtual schools must develop appropriate policies. Few schools have developed and enforced policies that address issues that are unique to virtual schools (Hassel & Terrell, 2004). For any school to exist, it must have policies that are in place and can be enforced.

Commercialization of online education results in additional challenges. The initial process of online course delivery is complex and expensive because it requires certified teachers who need software development skills (Barbour, 2006). Blackboard, eCollege (formerly Real Education), and Embanet, among other commercial entities, provide an array of design, development, and administrative support for online course development. There are typically three types of online commercial entities: providers of course tools, providers of groupware, and providers of administrative support. Development and ownership of online teaching material poses issues for many. Issues of copyright, ownership, and fair use arise between the school and the commercial vendor.

Most virtual school programs construct courses that meet the highest standards, offering a highly interactive learning environment, certified teachers, and a program that serves varied learning styles and intelligences. The courses are usually web-based, facilitated by a teacher and provide both asynchronous and synchronous delivery. In a study of distance education use in rural schools, Hannum, Irvin, Banks, and Farmer (2009) reported that the most common K-12 subjects taught using a vir-

tual environment are foreign language, mathematics, English, psychology and/or sociology, and U.S. history. Like traditional schools, virtual schools have a curriculum, faculty, students and, most of the time, administrators or governing boards. Once the model for advanced placement classes and remedial courses, virtual schools now provide supplemental coursework, and core curriculum.

With technology playing an integral part in everyday life, students expect technology to be used throughout instruction to create authentic application (Bedard & Knox-Pipes, 2006). Understanding instructional design as it relates to integration of technology helps teachers recognize the pedagogical issues when using technology to enhance the process of teaching and learning (Okojie, Olinzock, & Okojie-Boulder, 2006). According to Simonson (2008), distance education is not about the technology but rather the techniques, methods, and approaches of course design and instructional delivery that make it an effective learning environment. Clearly, technology plays a key role in the delivery of distance education; however, schools need to remain focused on the instructional outcomes that the media provide. Educators should focus on content and needs of the learner, and then determine the best instructional delivery method. When the focus is on how to teach the content, the instructor can make a better decision on which technology is best suited for the delivery method. The National Education Associatioan (NEA) (2006) concludes that for distance education to be successful, the focus must remain on teaching and learning, and not as much on the medium.

When the instructional goals and objectives are clearly defined, the technology resources can be identified. As distance education defines the Internet as its medium of choice, the instructional focus moves toward an interactive student-centered learning environment. Online courses offer flexible and unlimited access to course content, resources, and instruction. The materials can also be presented to accommodate a variety of learning styles. According to Keegan (1996), one main character that sets distance learners apart from traditional classroom learners is their autonomy. Overall, the greatest benefit of virtual courses might be the students' feeling that they control their learning.

The steady growth rate of virtual schools across the country demonstrates the desire of students and parents to be given the choice of learning options. It is almost certain that all states will build some type of virtual schooling, as encouraged in the National Educational Technology Plan developed by the U.S. Department of Education. However, despite the steady growth, barriers will continue to challenge online K-12 virtual schools. It is important for virutal schools to develop standards and policies to address these barriers. Each virtual school environment promotes various levels of teacher involvement, student and teacher interaction, and content that make the development of standards and policies challenging.

With the expected growth of virtual schools, the educational model becomes more decentralized and transforms into an educational model in which the school is brought to the student (Center for Digital Education, 2008). Therefore, virtual schools should build on the foundation of teaching and learning through effective instructional methods based on a specific and realistic mission and philosophy. They should continue to develop programs that strive to provide students with broader educational opportunities and increase access to more resources.

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