

K-12 Online Education is Increasingly Hybrid Learning

Michael B. Horn

Over the last decade, growth in K-12 online learning has exploded. Online enrollments—any instance of a student taking a half-semester course—have soared, and the total number of students taking online courses, either part time or full time, has climbed rapidly (Adkins, 2009; Picciano & Seaman, 2009; Watson, Gemin, Ryan, & Wicks, 2009).

The growth has been so rapid in high school that in the book *Disrupting Class*, the authors project that by 2019, 50% of all high school courses will be online. Ambi-

ent Insight projects that by 2014, 10.5 million pre-K-12 students will attend classes online (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008; Adkins, 2009).

Along with its rapid growth, online learning bears other hallmarks of a disruptive innovation. A disruptive innovation is one that transforms a sector characterized by expensive, complicated, inaccessible, and inconvenient products or services into one where the products or services are far more affordable, simple, accessible, and convenient (Christensen et al., 2008). It is this transformative potential that is increasingly catching the eyes of policymakers, including leaders at the U.S. Department of Education and some governors, and foundations, from Gates to MacArthur, as having the potential to not just change the medium of learning but to change schooling itself from the present monolithic, factory-model system into a far more student-centric one.

Online learning, like all disruptive innovations, has begun small by serving those who are unable to consume or access the mainstream product or service. In the case of online learning, this has meant it has begun in advanced courses that many schools are unable to offer; in small, rural, and urban schools that are unable to offer breadth; in remedial courses for students who must retake courses in order to graduate; with home-schooled students and those who haven't been able to keep up



Michael Horn,
Innosight Institute,
100 W. El Camino Real, #74B,
Mountain View, CA 94040.
E-mail: mhorn@innosightinstitute.org

with the regular schedule of school; for students who have not been able to take a class because of a scheduling conflict; and for dropouts (Picciano & Seaman, 2009; Watson et al., 2009).

And as with all disruptive innovations, online learning is predictably improving, which is allowing it to grow in places where a mainstream and traditional face-to-face educational system often readily cedes ground.

One dimension of this improvement can be seen in the changing assumptions and definitions for what online learning means. Increasingly the growth in online learning is less and less of a fully distance phenomenon and more and more of a blended or hybrid one in which students combine elements of online learning with elements of a face-to-face learning experience (Picciano & Seaman, 2009; Watson et al., 2009).

These hybrid or blended arrangements take a variety of forms, and there is still no agreed upon set of definitions in the field for the various terms in use (Watson, 2008). Some make distinctions based on the percentage of content that is delivered online versus face-to-face (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). Others have drawn the distinction that there are hybrid or blended *programs* and hybrid or blended *courses*—and use the words hybrid and blended interchangeably (Patrick, 2010). There are several other definitions and taxonomies in use as well.

Either way, the hybrid models in particular have drawn the interest of many foundations. There is some sense to this attraction. Over the last decade, aided by online learning, home schooling has grown extremely fast as well. There are disagreements about the numbers, but all estimates have the same trajectory; the number of home-schooled students has grown from roughly 800,000 in 1999 to anywhere from 1.5 million to just over 2 million today. When one plots this growth on a substitution curve to determine if the

home-schooling movement is growing in accordance with an S-curve pattern—as online learning is and a disruptive innovation does (Christensen et al., 2008)—the answer is that it is not. The growth flattens out around 5 million students—or just under 10% of the U.S. K-12 schooling population.

This is logical. School is not only for learning; it does many other things as well, including a custodial job—“keep my child safe and productively occupied”—for many parents and society. For children, it also does a social job, as it allows them to have fun with friends. Ten percent of children is likely the upper-most limit of students who come from families that have the structure or socioeconomic wherewithal to handle these other jobs. As such, most children will need a physical place to learn at least some of the time. Therefore, marrying a brick-and-mortar location with the potential of online learning to transform schooling by, among other things, making the element of time a variable rather than a constant, is an exciting path.

There are many hybrid programs of different forms attracting attention. Rocketship Education is a small network of elementary chartered schools based in California in which its students learn online for a block of time each day. The rest of the time they learn in a more traditional face-to-face setting. The students in Rocketship schools not only have stellar test scores, but also the schools themselves cost significantly less to operate than does a typical chartered school in California.

At the Chicago VOISE Academy, a district-run high school, students attend school on a regular schedule. Once in the classes, however, they do the majority of their learning online with the aid of in-person teachers (Sloan & Mackey, 2009). A growing number of schools like the Hoosier Academy in Indiana are structured so that students come in for a traditional face-to-face learning experience a couple of days a week and then work

online from a remote location the rest of the time (Cavanaugh, 2009; Watson, 2008). And in Houston, Texas, the ProVision Charter School has established a learning lab for its high school students. Called the Vision Academy, the students learn online with virtual teachers and are supervised by paraprofessional learning coaches.

As stated earlier, many traditional schools use online learning to allow students to take courses that they would not otherwise have access to. Several have dedicated spaces for students to take these online classes with teachers or other adults by their side. Wichita Public Schools, for example, has space in each of its high schools where students retake online courses to recover credits. Wichita, like an increasing number of districts in the United States, has also set up alternative schools to serve dropouts. These alternative schools are often located in shopping malls and utilize online learning to offer students a wide range of courses. Students come and go according to their own schedule and have access to teachers and other adult supports on site (Mackey, 2010).

A plethora of different types of blended-learning environments already exists today. With the continued rapid growth in K-12 online learning as well as increasing dollars from funding sources going toward hybrid learning, we can expect only more to emerge in the coming years. As these models develop, researchers will have a dual challenge before them: not only will they have to wrestle with how to define and categorize the new models that emerge, they will also need to learn which models work best for which circumstances and students. Doing so will not just

advance the research; it will also push education toward a student-centered future.

REFERENCES

- Adkins, S. (2009). *The US market for self-paced elearning products and services: 2009-2014 forecast and analysis*. Monroe, WA: Ambient Insight.
- Allen, I., Seaman, J., & Garrett, R. (2007). *Blending in: The extent and promise of blended education in the United States*. Needham, MA: The Sloan Consortium.
- Cavanaugh, C. (2009). *Getting students more learning time online: Distance education in support of expanded learning time in schools*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.
- Christensen, C., Horn, M., & Johnson, C. (2008). *Disrupting class: How disruptive innovation will change the way the world learns*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Mackey, K. (2010). *Wichita Public Schools' learning centers: Creating a new educational model to serve dropouts and at-risk students*. Mountain View, CA: Innosight Institute.
- Patrick, S. (2010, March). *National online and blended learning landscape*. Presentation for the Donnell-Kay Foundation.
- Picciano, A., & Seaman, J. (2009). *K-12 online learning: A 2008 follow-up of the survey of U.S. school district administrators*. Needham, MA: The Sloan Consortium.
- Sloan, J., & Mackey, K. (2009). *VOISE Academy: Pioneering a blended-learning model in a Chicago public high school*. Mountain View, CA: Innosight Institute.
- Watson, J. (2008). *Blending learning: The convergence of online and face-to-face education*. Vienna, VA: iNACOL.
- Watson, J., Gemin, B., Ryan, J., & Wicks, M. (2009). *Keeping pace with K-12 online learning: An annual review of state-level policy and practice*. Evergreen, CO: Evergreen Education Group. Retrieved from <http://www.kpk12.com/downloads/KeepingPace09-fullreport.pdf>