

Online Education and the Wild, Wild, Web

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"We are entering a phase where we are going to see the digitization, virtualization, and automation of more and more of everything." (Friedman, 2006, p. 47)

There is no doubt that online education and its other analogous terms (e.g., distance education, distance learning, e-learning, online education, online learning, virtual education, or web-based instruction) are growing by leaps and bounds across all sectors of education,

from corporate training to higher education to K-12 education settings. In the corporate sector, e-learning is an attractive, cost-reducing alternative to expensive face-to-face professional development that can significantly diminish time, boundaries, and expenses incurred in providing training (David, 2006). And, although online education enrollment in higher education has not grown as rapidly as in previous years, the overall matriculation rate has increased steadily. According to Allen and Seaman (2008), in postsecondary education,

The number of students taking at least one online course continues to expand at a rate far in excess of the growth of overall higher education enrollments. The most recent estimate, for fall 2007, places this number at 3.94 million online students, an increase of 12.9% over fall 2006. (p. 5)

Similarly, K-12 settings have seen a great amount of growth in online education. According to a national survey of U.S. school district administrators conducted by Picciano and Seaman (2009), the "overall number of K-12 students engaged in online



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courses in 2007-2008, [was] estimated at 1,030,000" representing "a 47% increase since 2005-2006" (p. 1). These numbers illustrate insurmountable growth, a great deal of which, based on the data, appears to be happening at the P-12 level.

The implications of the unfettered growth in online education are difficult to comprehend. Even so, they are far-reaching, not only for the brick and mortar institutions (e.g., schools, universities, corporations) impacted directly by the opportunities online education provides—and promises—but also for current and future stakeholders.

Further complicating matters are the varied definitions and implementations that exist. For instance, although distance education has its roots in the correspondence courses offered in the 1800s, the term "distance education" is often used interchangeably with "online education" (Saba, 2005). Yet Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006) view "online education as an emerging field that lies at the junction of distance education, human-computer interaction, instructional technology, and cognitive science" (p. 568).

The degree and ways in which technology is utilized in the instructional process in online education is almost as varied as the instructors who teach such courses are. Rice (2006) also contends, "We can only expect the myriad aspects of distance education to become more complex as technological improvements are made in such areas as speech processing, gaming, 3D simulations, and automated speech translations" (p. 441). Clearly the convoluted landscape of distance-, online-, virtual-, web-based education/learning can be difficult to navigate and comprehend. This is problematic not only for those involved in such endeavors, but also for the researchers studying it and the policymakers who aim to shape it.

This difficulty continually emerged recently as a challenge for a group attend-

ing the 12th annual National Technology Leadership Summit (NTLS) in Washington, DC (see <http://www.ntls.info/>). As its website describes, NTLS "brings together national leaders from educational associations, as well as editors of educational technology journals, directors of non-profit foundations, federal policy makers, and corporate representatives" (para. 1). Each year the NTLS has different strands to focus discussion to develop recommendations or guidelines that might shape technology policy and curriculum at various educational levels. This year's strands were: virtual education, performance assessment, and engineering education.

The virtual education group discussed a variety of issues encompassing online education in K-12 settings, including its varied definitions, divergent implementations, affordances, and dilemmas. Frequently, virtual education was described as existing in a "wild, wild west" (or more specifically, a "wild, wild, web") that lacks rules, governance, and quality controls. Watson, Gemin, Ryan, and Wicks (2009) sound the alarm, too, in their report entitled *Keeping Pace With K-12 Online Learning: An Annual Review of State-Level Policy and Practice*, as the following shows:

The rapid growth of online learning has created immense pressure on administrators—from parents, policymakers, and the purse—to offer their students an online option, any online option.... The next five years or so present a challenge to online learning practitioners because they represent a period when online options are ever more widely available, but neither the quality measures nor data are yet in place to fully evaluate those options. (p. 44)

This is, indeed, an interesting time to be involved in any aspect or level of online education. Yet, we should not ignore the challenges before us.

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"DISTANCE EDUCATION IS DEFINED 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) SCHLOSSER, L., & SIMONSON, M. (2009). *DISTANCE EDUCATION: DEFINITION AND GLOSSARY OF TERMS* (3RD ED.). CHARLOTTE, NC: INFORMATION AGE.