**Record: 1**

**Title:**

AN OVERVIEW OF ONLINE EDUCATION: ATTRACTIVENESS, BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

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**Source:**

College Student Journal Jun2008 Part A, Vol. 42 Issue 2, p449 10p.

**Language:**

English

**Subject Terms:**

\*UNIVERSITIES & colleges  
INTERNET in education  
ONLINE courses  
WORLD Wide Web  
NONFORMAL education  
EDUCATIONAL technology  
CLASSROOMS  
WORKSHOPS (Adult education)  
DISTANCE education

**Abstract:**

Online education has grown tremendously over the past ten years. The increased accessibility of the internet and the World Wide Web has created vast opportunities for non-traditional education through this medium (Karber, 2003). The explosion of technology has also made teaching outside the traditional classroom possible for teachers and has also provided learners with easy access to course material. This paper reviews literature related to online education. Its attractiveness, benefits, and challenges are addressed. Some concerns and recommendations are further discussed. ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR

**Author Affiliations:**

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**ISSN:**

01463934

**Document Information:**

Publication Type: Journal Article Update Code: 20080609

**Accession Number:**

32544879

**Persistent link to this record (Permalink):**

<http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.vu.edu.au/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=32544879&site=ehost-live>

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<A href="http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.vu.edu.au/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=32544879&site=ehost-live">AN OVERVIEW OF ONLINE EDUCATION: ATTRACTIVENESS, BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.</A>

**Database:**

SPORTDiscus with Full Text

**AN OVERVIEW OF ONLINE EDUCATION: ATTRACTIVENESS, BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Online education has grown tremendously over the past ten years. The increased accessibility of the internet and the World Wide Web has created vast opportunities for non-traditional education through this medium (Karber, 2003). The explosion of technology has also made teaching outside the traditional classroom possible for teachers and has also provided learners with easy access to course material. This paper reviews literature related to online education. Its attractiveness, benefits, and challenges are addressed. Some concerns and recommendations are further discussed.

In April, 2005, I attended the annual professional conference of the American Counseling Association in Atlanta, Georgia. While setting up our display to promote our masters and doctoral programs in counseling at Sam Houston State University (SHSU), I was approached by a counseling student who was interested in our doctoral program. However, the first question out of her mouth was nothing related to counseling; rather, it was, "Do you offer any online courses?" Later that day, as I was reading the conference program guide trying for interesting presentations, I could not help but to notice a number of workshops on web-based learning and/or online education. I subsequently attended two of those workshops and met several professors from different universities who had either taught online courses for quite some time or who were currently discovering the best practices for teaching online. These experiences helped me realize at least to some extent the degree of growth in online education.

My responsibilities for the semester included gaining more understanding of online education. Consequently, I made several attempts to enrich my knowledge of distance learning and online teaching. Perhaps, the five things that I share at this point will help others who are embarking on online teaching. First, I consulted with my colleagues who are currently teaching online courses. This helped me recognize the importance of getting materials prepared even before the start of a semester. I also learned that online courses may consume more time than regular classroom teaching. I understood the importance of learning the technology, knowing the technology, and feeling comfortable with it. Second, I attended several workshops regarding online education and established a network with those who are involved in online programs at other universities. These people I will consider as my consultants and support as I begin to design my own online course. Third, I talked with the employees in the division of computer services at SHSU, and I set up biweekly Blackboard training for not only myself, but also for other faculty members of the department. Fourth, I conducted a brief survey with 15 students and two faculty members who had taken or taught an online course before to understand their experience. Fifth, I completed a literature review which gave me the foundation and the background of understanding the need for online education. This paper is the result of the literature review which attempts to explore and understand different areas of online education.

[Review of Literature](http://0-web.ebscohost.com.library.vu.edu.au/ehost/delivery?sid=9da82180-6433-43a9-a7b2-04ced0dd47de%40sessionmgr14&vid=3&hid=21#toc)

**The Popularity of Online Education**

The increased accessibility of the internet and the World Wide Web has created vast opportunities for non-traditional education through this medium (Karber, 2003). The explosion of technology has also made teaching outside the traditional classroom possible for teachers and has also provided learners with easy access to course material (Coyner & McCann, 2004).

Online education has grown tremendously over the past ten years. One report by Singh and Pan in 2004 showed that over 54,000 online courses were offered by universities in the U.S. with over 1.6 million student enrollment in 2000. Another survey from the United Stated Education Department, as cited by Lyons (2004), stated that the enrollment for distance education courses grew from 750,000 in 1994-1995 to 2.9 million in 2000-2001. The revenues in the online industry were forecasted to climb from $550 million in 1998 to $11.4 billion in 2003 (Singh & Pan, 2004).

Distance learning, especially online education, has gradually become an integral part of teaching in higher education (Lyons, 2004). Many colleges and universities in the U.S. are now providing distance education to students all over the world, and some even collaborate to offer online classes (Lyons, 2004). For example, the University of Phoenix has claimed to be the specialists of online programs while Yale and Stanford University in the United Stated joined hands with Oxford University in England to offer classes to their alumni since 2000. Some universities even provide degree programs via the internet without any residency requirement (Lyons, 2004).

**What Causes The Shift?**

Historically, teaching and learning were confined to classroom settings with few instructional strategies including lectures, discussions, and field trips to stimulate the learning process of students (Deal III, 2002). Karber (2003), however, stated that the growing demand for education and the limited funding available for expanding physical facilities in many universities have altered the traditional way of delivery. The communication and information revolution beginning in the nineties has also shifted our perspective of teaching and learning, and as a result, classrooms are no longer the only setting for education (Deal III, 2002).

The advance of technology and the development of the internet and the World Wide Web have "opened doors to the classroom to the world around us" (Deal III, 2002, p.21). Online education has then become the vehicle to help access to the underserved populations (Singh & Pan, 2004). Taking over the emerging market, online education has reached out to thousands of learners around the globe (Deal III, 2002; Karber, 2003).

Online programs, according to Karber (2003), have become a feasible solution for contemporary education. This author claimed that the flexibility of online education has helped many self-motivated and mature students who want to earn a degree while working full-time supporting themselves and their families. Nowadays, teachers and students no longer need to be separated by distance and time (Deal III, 2002). Online programs serve as a catalyst to enable the paradigm shift to take place in education, making educators/academics think about and study how such programs are best delivered.

**Why Is Online Education So Attractive?**

When comparing traditional teaching with online teaching, Karber (2003) attributed four reasons for the attractiveness of online programs. First, individuals who have work or family constraints can benefit from online learning. Lyons (2004) identified three groups of students who find online programs attractive. They are "busy working people, often on shift who want to advance their career, frequent travelers, those who physically find it difficult to attend college and parents who want to, or have to, spend more time at home with their children" (p. 448). Another study indicated that online courses also appeal to school leaders and administrators. Reeves and Brown (2002) reported one online program for superintendent's certificate in one Texas university and 90 educators signed up for the first class. Classes were run by superintendents serving as adjunct prolessors. This example showed how online programs address the needs of this population of educators.

Second, online programs are convenient for those students who live in crowded cities since travel back and forth to campus is no longer necessary. I, personally, have heard students complaining about commuting and requesting to have classes in their local area. Online programs can be a solution to their problem. Deal III (2002) recognized that online programs also reach out to students in remote communities who did not have the opportunity before. The flexibility of staying home while getting a good education makes online education appealing.

Third, students can choose different universities that offer online programs since physical distance is not an issue in the virtual environment. Students are not limited to the few universities near their area, and they have more freedom to choose where they really want to study. Fourth, students can obtain a broader perspective on various topics since they are able to interact with students from all around the globe. Online programs also attract students all over the world who desire to pursue a degree in higher education. I could only imagine what that will be like to have a classroom of students from Asia, Europe, Africa, America, Australia, and other parts of the world together to discuss an educational issue. Students' experience and perception would definitely be enriched.

**Unique Characteristics of Online Education and Its Technology**

One unique characteristic of online programs, according to Karber (2003), is the contact between the teacher and the students through the use of emails and other electronic means. There is minimum or zero face-to-face interaction between teachers and students. Other means of teacher-student communication are "posting of student work on Web pages; asynchronous discussions; live, Internet-based conferencing; and streaming audio and video" (Karber, 2003, p. 534). Unlike traditional classrooms where immediate verbal and non-verbal feedback can be given to the entire class, teachers of online programs recognize the significance of offering prompt feedback on students' assignments and questions (Karber, 2003).

Many software packages, including Blackboard and WEBCT, are in the market to assist professors to create online programs (Lyons, 2004). With the help of these software packages, a wealth of information can be posted for students to access quickly through the internet. Singh and Pan (2004) illustrated four essential functions of these software programs. First, online students can read or listen to an electure over and over until it is understood. The ability to gain input repeatedly helps to consolidate teaching concepts to students. Second, the conference function or the online discussion board serves as a public arena where students and instructors can post their questions and answers. This makes discussions of current events, controversial issues, and response to specific questions possible.

In addition, the announcement and communication function enables instructors to post their announcements and inform students of any upcoming events or assignments. Professors can also have the option of communicating with individual students or groups of students. Also, students can submit their homework as an attached file to an email message, and when the homework is corrected, it can be returned to the student via email (Lohr, 2001). Professors can post a homework assignment, and students will have no excuse for not knowing what to turn in. The real time discussion, live chat, or virtual classroom has replaced the face-to-face interaction of the traditional classroom. This can be done with the entire class or small groups once they agree on a specific time to meet in Cyberspace. These times must be established in the beginning of the course and should be posted in the syllabus. Lohr (2001) gave an example of the virtual classroom which includes the videos of the students, their names, and a chat section. Instead of a traditional classroom interaction, an instructor and the students can communicate exclusively via the chat section. The advantage is that the conversation can be saved as a text file and posted for students to review.

**The Benefits of Online Education**

There are a number of benefits in taking online courses. Accessibility is one of the most essential benefits reported by Coyner and McCann (2004). Students can gain access to information including syllabi, course assignments, scoring guides, power-point presentations, and supplemental materials 24 hours a day and seven days a week. Hammonds (2003) stated that this method of teaching allows students to be flexible in their use of time. Online education provides a viable option for those who did not have the opportunity before because they live far from campuses or have limited time for campus education (Deal III, 2002). Furthermore, it serves the needs of students from various backgrounds and age ranges. People who are not able to have access to tradition classrooms because of time, geography, financial considerations, family, and work constraints can have access to the resources online (Davison, 2005; Karber, 2003; Taylor, 2003). Online education provides a time-independent and place-independent learning environment which makes it convenient and flexible for different learners (Deal III, 2002; Hammonds, 2003).

Because of the availability of information, students can study in any location at any time of the day according to their schedule. Online programs also make it possible for parents to drop off their children at a soccer practice and work on their class project at the same time (Reeves & Brown, 2002; Deal III, 2002; Lyons, 2004). Even teachers, according to Lyons (2004), can enjoy the flexibility of teaching at home instead of going to campus, and there are fewer hours spent photocopying class handouts for students.

Deal HI (2002) suggested another benefit of online education is its frequent and timely feedback between teachers and students. This feedback system, substituted for the face-to-face classroom instructions, has made online programs more effective (Deal III, 2002). Multi-media experience is another significant benefit of online education that motivates learners (Davison, 2005). Deal III (2002) reported that "there is a range of multi-media tools available to create instructional materials to display text graphics, animation, video, and interactive simulations" (p. 22). The communication technology also creates more interactivity between instructors and students and among students themselves. Using synchronous or asynchronous communication techniques, students are engaged with one another in their discussion (Reeves & Brown, 2002). Deal III (2002) suggested that the fear associated with face-to-face discussion is reduced by electronic communication and the stereotypical attribution based on ethnic or cultural background is largely excluded (Karber, 2003; Lyons, 2004). Since students have to work in groups, online courses also encourage team building and group-work for success (Aune, 2002; Coyner & McCann, 2004). Online education also encourages independent learning and builds accountability of students (Coyner & McCann, 2004). Since students can review the lectures repeatedly, they gain more control over their learning and have more to say on what they wish to learn through the feedback system.

Online education is highly affordable due to the fact that most people have their personal computers and internet connection at home and the tuition costs can be lower because of the reduced use of physical classrooms and other traditional classroom resources (Deal III, 2002); however, at times the cost is more than a regular course. The larger fees attached to the tuition indicate that the university will have more money, but save it by not having the cost of electricity or classroom cleaning. Online courses may be a cost effective solution for some universities to continue to provide quality education when finances are tight (Davison, 2005). For some colleges, the notion even exists that there is no need for colleges to construct more buildings and parking lots to accommodate more students (Taylor, 2003).

**The Challenges of Online Education**

Coyner and McCann (2004) encouraged instructors of online programs to prepare, plan, and complete course information and materials before the start of the semester. It seems clear that significant upfront planning and organization is a vital challenge. Another challenge for instructors is to translate the entire course from the regular classroom to the web-based environment (Reeves & Brown, 2002). Modification of materials to adjust to this new online environment is not an easy task, and instructors need to be extremely organized, dedicated, and committed (Reeves & Brown, 2002). Lyons (2004) and Coyner and McCann (2004) agreed that it is necessary for online teachers to spend a significant amount of time to pilot and revise their courses to enhance smooth delivery. Karber (2003) concluded that both teachers and students invested more time and effort in on-line courses as compared with traditional classroom teaching.

With technological challenges frequently encountered when teaching online, Coyner and McCann (2004) alluded that materials currently used in a classroom setting may or may not be compatible with the electronic format, and some elements, such as video clips, may not be accessible to students. Online teachers may also struggle with a lack of technical support and/or resources to design appropriate materials. Both teachers and students are recommended to acquire adequate technical skills before they enter the online environment (Davidson, 2005). To prepare students who are unfamiliar with the technology, teachers may find themselves at times spending more time in technological training than teaching the content material of the course (Coyner & McCann, 2004).

Another challenge identified is the expectations of online students. Since students have continued access to information, Lyons (2004) and Taylor (2003) stated that teachers are expected to offer instantaneous feedback whenever a question is posted or an assignment is turned in. Sometimes students may appear rude and demanding in their emails and responses to their class discussion; some are more likely to question their grades while others do not take their deadlines seriously (Lyons, 2004). To minimize the flow of emails and maximize communication with the whole class, Taylor (2003) urged instructors to post the student's questions and the instructor's answers on the classroom discussion board. Karber (2003) advised that it is imperative for teachers to make all effort to reduce misunderstanding.

**Some Concerns and Issues for Discussion**

According to Singh and Pan (2004), "there are concerns about the accuracy, lack of complexity and depth, and the commercialization of the Web, suggesting flaws in the quality of information, and the possibility of bias" (p. 303). Although one research study indicated that online teaching does not have an adverse effect on students (Hammonds, 2003), a survey of the literature revealed that little has been done to compare the effect and student attendance of online programs with traditional programs (Buck, 2001 ; Singh & Pan, 2004). According to Buck (2001), many educators are skeptical of online education and view it as inferior. Since online education is a fairly new industry, more outcome research may be needed to measure its effectiveness and success. On the other hand, courses requiring face-to-face meeting may not be a good fit for web-based education (Coyner & McCann, 2004).

Taylor (2003) believed that online education is not for everyone with specific concerns being issues for lower student performance and the rate of retention. Students who have trouble with motivation and self-discipline may sign up for an online class but disappear half way through the course. Lyons (2004) relayed that the use of the internet might affect student's interest negatively. Student isolation and its impact on teamwork and interpersonal skills also posed a concern (Singh & Pan, 2004). In addition, students who require more personal assistance may consider online interaction inadequate and feel frustrated; students who are less independent may feel overwhelmed with the immense resources (Coyner & McCann, 2004). In order to be successful in the online environment, students must acquire a set of skills such as writing, communication, time management, organization, and the ability to work independently (Deal III, 2002).

Evaluation of online students also stirs debate. Deal III (2002) critiqued how teachers of online programs would know who they were evaluating without meeting with students face-to-face. Lyons (2004) added that plagiarism could be a potential problem in online programs. To resolve these issues, Deal III (2002) advised the use of clear and precise rubric-based assessment, while Lyons (2004) suggested that students complete a performance-based examination in a nearby test site. Lyons also suggested that teachers be creative with their essay questions by avoiding standard questions.

Reeves and Brown (2002) suggested two types of favorable online teachers-one that feels very comfortable with the technology and one that wants to take risk and expand the boundaries of teaching. Some universities have relied solely on adjunct faculty to teach online courses, while other universities have tended to stay with their full-time faculty members. One reason for using full-time professors is to ensure similarity of the online versions of courses and the face-to-face version in the traditional classroom. To ensure quality of the online education, universities do not want to make distinctions between what they do online and what they do in the classroom. Our Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas, has utilized both full-time faculty as well as adjuncts. The adjuncts have been experienced in teaching the courses and have had training from the University Computer Services in terms of use of the delivery system, Blackboard. The content and types of innovations used for teaching has been supported by several workshops and by a departmental online mentor. The differences between adjuncts and full-time faculty in the course evaluations from the student are equivalent. Our departmental faculty believes that the support that faculty members receive makes all the difference in their effectiveness.

Other concerns include teachers' refusal to teach online programs because of the lack of personal interaction, the use of copyrighted material in online programs, and the debate on the ownership of the material created for web-based instruction (Singh & Pan, 2004). Another related issue is how minority and lower-income students can have access to modern technology (Singh & Pan, 2004) and an issue with challenged learners who required special accommodations. Coyner and McCann (2004) urged teachers to address these issues during the design stage of an online program.

**Suggestions and Recommendations**

Karber (2003) stressed the importance of training and developing a group of qualified faculty members to teach online courses while Eastmond, Nickel, du Plessis and Smith (2000) suggested a model for incrementing online programs. Their fourstage model, including awareness, faculty support, faculty skills, and department effort, starts off heightening the awareness of individual faculty members and ends up involving the entire department in building online curriculum. During the awareness stage, faculty members are provided with workshops to demonstrate the use of the technology. Next, when faculty members are ready to test out the new environment with its technology, they need technical training and support to design their curriculum. During the third stage where faculty members are teaching online courses, they need teaching assistants and other related support to revise and improve the materials. And finally the online instruction moves to the departmental level where the entire curriculum will be put together.

Teachers are recommended to attend workshops or conferences, and gather resources on online programs before designing such courses (Davison, 2005). Developing good rapport with the curriculum designer, other instructors teaching online courses (Coyner & McCann, 2004), and technical support staff is crucial (Davison, 2005). Acquiring the technical knowledge is necessary for teachers, and at the same time having a responsive technical staff to safe-guard the technology is important as well (Karber, 2003). Teachers also have to bear in mind the choice of technology which allows both synchronous and asynchronous communication (Singh & Pan, 2004), and the compatibility of teaching materials with the technology (Karber, 2003). Teachers are suggested to clarify with the institution on the copyright issues beforehand (Singh & Pan, 2004), and to adhere to the American with Disabilities guidelines when designing and developing the course content (Coyner & Mccann, 2004).

In developing working relationships with students, it is recommended that teachers manage communication expectations from the very beginning (Davison, 2005). Hardware requirement and desirable connection speeds to ensure efficiency must be specified to the students (Singh & Pan, 2004). Teachers are advised to set parameters especially about the availability and response time, and notify students when they are away or unavailable (Lyons, 2004). In addition, it is crucial to allocate weekly assignments and communicate with students on a regular basis (Aune, 2002; Lyons, 2004). Viewing the course and coursework from the learner's perspective and anticipating possible problems can be helpful in order to develop acceptable solutions (Coyner and McCann, 2004). Furthermore, Karber (2003) asserted that it is important to provide technical support and other student services to online students. Karber (2003) also recommended new students to demonstrate their competency in the use of technology before being admitted to online programs. One recommendation (Lyon, 2004) is for teachers to connect weekly reading assignments with discussion and summarize the teaching points of the previous week. Another suggestion from Davison (2005) is to set up a cyber-cafe forum so that students can ask questions while other students can answer. Teachers need to understand that students learn differently online and students need to be encouraged to participate to enhance their learning experience (Aune, 2002; Singh & Pan, 2004).

Lyons (2004) advised teachers to personalize the online experience as much as possible by addressing students by name, signing the teacher's own name at the bottom, and proofreading their email messages before they are sent. Lyons (2004) also asked teachers to be flexible, since online activities can be easily interrupted by technical problems, and to prepare to extend their homework deadlines. Inviting students to come to campus at the beginning for orientation and at the end of the semester to take the comprehensive final examination are other suggestions (Singh & Pan, 2004). Lastly, Coyner and McCann (2004) encouraged teachers to continue to revise and improve their coursework when necessary to ensure appropriate content and materials.

[Conclusions](http://0-web.ebscohost.com.library.vu.edu.au/ehost/delivery?sid=9da82180-6433-43a9-a7b2-04ced0dd47de%40sessionmgr14&vid=3&hid=21#toc)

Deal III (2002) urged educators to pay special attention to what online programs can provide: An education at the learner's own pace and learning style without the constraints of time or place. When effectively managed, online education can empower learners to reach their career goals and to meet degree or certification requirement. Online education also reaches out to places where educators have never touched before and creates opportunities for the underserved and people living on the other side of the world. As a consequence, online education brings job security for faculty members and increased enrollment to universities. Online education posts a new challenge and brings a new paradigm to educators, and its potential is still an undiscovered territory waiting to be explored.

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