

Advantages and Disadvantages of Web-based Learning

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Advances in communication technology since the mid-1990s have made e-learning (sometimes known as “virtual learning” or “distance education”) a feasible educational option. The idea is that a teacher can reach students in remote locations, which enables students to learn subjects to which they wouldn’t otherwise have access.

Not everyone has embraced this development. Critics charge that it is cold and impersonal, and although there are opportunities for classroom camaraderie (through e-mail and electronic bulletin boards, for example), it doesn’t replicate the experience of a real classroom. Historically, virtual learning has tended to be a little dry, relying mainly on text and graphs to convey information. Advances in computing power and communication networks are changing this, but multimedia-learning experiences remain richer and easier in a traditional classroom setting. What’s more, e-learning almost certainly requires more student initiative than traditional classroom learning. Why? In a virtual classroom, teachers are less likely to notice when students daydream or slack off. It is probably this fact that leads to allegations that e-learning is less effective than traditional classroom learning. Finally, web-based learning requires relatively sophisticated technology and knowledge. This may be beyond the scope of some individuals, though it probably isn’t an issue for a school or organization of any size.

In other aspects, though, e-learning far surpasses its traditional counterpart. One major advantage is that allows anyone, anywhere, to study anything. For example, a small school in rural Oklahoma is unlikely to offer its students a wide variety of language classes; the school is too small for the school district to justify hiring teachers of, say, Russian or Arabic. In a traditional classroom environment, students with an interest in those parts of the world would simply be out of luck. Thanks to web-based learning, however, students have access to relatively obscure subjects. There is, in fact, a huge library of courses and

training offered around the globe. Web-based learning has made it possible to study nearly any subject from nearly anywhere in the world.

A second major advantage is that some types of web-based learning allow students to progress at their own pace. This is not true of virtual classrooms that are conducted in real-time. However, many web-based learning packages are offered in modules, which students work through individually, at their own pace. Moreover, an electronic forum enables students to meet with teachers in one-on-one sessions. The ability to work through the material at the student's own pace is a dramatic advantage over traditional teaching methods.

The upshot is that web-based learning cannot replace, and will probably never replace, traditional learning. However, it is in some ways far superior, so students who meet certain criteria will find it invaluable. In order to maximize its effectiveness, educators must develop new teaching techniques designed to overcome the limits of e-learning.