

In Defense of Online Education

Posted on July 27, 2012 by Donald R. Shaffer [www. WordPress.com](http://www.WordPress.com).

Online higher education, in its short life, has been the target for much criticism, some justified, some not. In a recent op-ed in the *New York Times*, Mark Edmundson, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, is the latest critic to take online education to task. In essence, Edmundson argues that online education is flawed because it is a “monologue,” when students would do better with the dialogue of the traditional classroom.

Like Edmundson, I once too was skeptical of online higher education. For over a decade, I taught on traditional college campuses. Eventually, I became a virtual professor teaching online for several institutions, including the for-profit behemoth, the University of Phoenix. My classes at brick and mortar institutions always had had an online component, so I was already familiar with the possibilities of online education. Since then it has become the heart of my professional world, and I have become intimate with its advantages and limitations.

Clearly, Mark Edmundson needs to spend more time in online classrooms. An online class is all about dialogue. In every online classroom, its heart and soul are the discussion forums, where the students converse about the course material with their instructor, and even more importantly, with each other. It is simply not possible to pass an online class without participating extensively and substantively in the class discussion. The courses are deliberately structured that way. An online classroom is all about students interacting and helping each other—in other words, practicing active learning.

Indeed, having spent considerable time in both traditional and online classrooms, I can attest that a lot more dialogue occurs in the latter than the former. A student at one of my online institutions, after reading Edmundson’s piece, wrote on a student club board on Facebook, “I remember so many of my undergraduate classes where the prof. would appear (in one case pipe in hand) right [at] the start of the hour, talk incessantly for ninety minutes and leave right at the end of his lecture. No questions, no interaction, nada!” Anyone familiar with the traditional college classroom knows that this student’s characterization is too often accurate. While the sort of intimate class dialogue and active learning that Mark Edmundson refers to exists there, it occurs with much less frequency than various forms of passive learning, such as lectures, especially at state universities with classrooms bursting at the seams with students packed by budget cuts into large enrollment classes.

So should we shut down traditional university campuses? Certainly not. Traditional and online institutions both serve distinct clientele. Traditional universities are best for students recently out of high school, who in my experience do better in a regular classroom, and benefit from the community and resources of a physical campus. Online learning caters mostly to adult learners, past traditional college age, who have decided belatedly to pursue a college degree, but because of work, family, and other obligations often do not have the time to take classes on a physical campus. These adults, having greater maturity and with real world experience, more often have developed the self-discipline necessary for success in an online learning environment that traditional college students tend to lack.

In fact, established universities should be called to task for their lethargy until now at meeting the needs of adult learners. While declining government support for higher education is partly responsible for this problem, so is the skeptical, dismissive attitude common from the dwindling tenure-track faculty at traditional institutions, who resist online education because they see it as a threat to their relative privilege within the academy. They and the institutions that employ them have left the field of online education by default largely to for-profit companies, who are arguably more innovative and willing to experiment in educational methods, but follow a profit-motive that is alas sometimes incompatible with the best interest of students.

Traditional faculty, like Mark Edmundson and his colleagues at the University of Virginia, should be praised for defending the value of the liberal arts college education, against arguably hasty and ill-considered ventures into online education and competency-based learning, prompted by trustees and administrators afraid of being left behind in a major developing field in higher education. Too many online ventures in higher education today are questionable, as this nascent field struggles to find the paradigm that long has defined traditional higher education in the United States. But Edmundson and tenure-track faculty like him should not be so casually dismissive of online instruction. Even with its faults, on the whole, it is bringing a quality educational experience to a group of students that long have been poorly served by traditional universities and it should do an even better job as its model is refined by further experience.

The truth is, like any education experience, the value of online education is determined largely by the quality of the effort the student puts into it. And for online classes, that quality is structured into the class through the considerable dialogue that is required. They are definitely not a monologue.