

To start this month's Teacher's Corner we will investigate the opportunities and pitfalls of online learning. By reviewing the literature on online learning, we can better understand how to implement it in our own teaching contexts. This week we will define terms common in the field of online learning and investigate the pros and cons of using online learning as part of our classroom practice.

ONLINE LEARNING: DEFINITIONS

The discussion around online learning is troubled by a lack of a clear definition of online learning. Learning through Internet-based tools can take a variety of forms and it has at different times been referred to as Internet learning, distance learning, Web-based learning, and distributed learning. Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia and Jones (2009) define online learning as "learning that takes place partially or entirely over the Internet" (p. 9), a broad definition which highlights one of the challenges of online teaching and learning: it can take many forms. This broad definition provides teachers the flexibility to customize online learning to almost any pedagogical approach they would like to take.

Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia and Jones' (2009) definition makes no difference between learning that occurs entirely online versus partially online. However, researchers have begun to separate online learning into two broad categories: *online learning* and *blended learning*. In online learning (sometimes called distance learning), all of the course activity takes place online with little direct interaction between the teacher and students. It is often considered a form of self-study and massively open online courses (MOOCs) are a great example of this approach. Students will visit a website to watch videos, take quizzes, and engage in discussion boards with minimal teacher interaction. In blended learning, students will often have a classroom component that is supported by Internet-based materials. These materials will often be selected for their ability to expand upon the material covered in class and clarify the ideas presented by the teacher.

Both online and blended learning can occur *synchronously* or *asynchronously*. In synchronous online learning, the teacher and students meet at arranged times and learn in real time, often communicating through live video or chat applications. In an asynchronous online environment, no real-time communication occurs. However the teacher and students communicate through emails, online discussion boards, or blog postings.

The best approach for your teaching context should be determined by your student population. Small class sizes with a localized population can make effective use of synchronous online material, while teachers with larger classes or classes with students in different time zones should consider building a course designed for asynchronous communication.

ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING: WHAT TO CONSIDER

Over the last decade, much of the research interest in online learning has been centered on MOOCs. These courses initially showed the promise of delivering wide-spread education to tens thousands of learners around the world all sharing the same learning space. However, the power of MOOCs has diminished in recent years, and new research suggests they are troubled by low engagement and completion rates. Stein (2013) reports that course completion rates for MOOCs average 4%, and only half of all students who register complete the first assignment. These large MOOC-style courses appear to work well for highly motivated, self-directed learners, but for many students these courses appear to lack the social component of the face-to-face classroom.

Therefore, when developing materials for online learning, it is important to design materials that allow students opportunities for communication and collaboration similar to what they receive in the classroom. Flesvig Bruland (2013) states that “learners who receive instruction in an environment with reduced opportunities for interaction, such as the online environment, do not exhibit proficiency levels as high as those who receive instruction in a face-to-face environment” (p.141). Flesvig Bruland suggests that this lower proficiency level was the result of students disconnecting from the online class materials which lack a social and communicative component. Online learning should be designed to maximize student interaction with others and avoid more worksheet style activities such as fill-in-the-blank or multiple choice activities. As Canole (2013) argues, engaging online materials should:

- Encourage reflection
- Enable dialogue
- Foster collaboration
- Apply theory learnt to practice
- Create a community of peers
- Enable creativity
- Motivate the learners

How does a teacher develop engaging online materials that fulfill the above criteria? This month’s Teacher’s Corner will offer suggestions to make the most of online learning for your classroom. Each week of this month’s Teacher’s Corner we will examine the background of the three most common ways to bring online learning into your classroom: fully online, blended learning, and a flipped classroom. We’ll also introduce digital tools that you can use to make your online learning space engaging and motivating for your students.

References

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