



Ten Ways Online Education Matches, or Surpasses, Face-to-Face Learning

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Can online courses match traditional face-to-face (F2F) courses in academic quality and rigor? Can online courses achieve the same learning objectives as F2F courses? Can students learn as much and as well online as they do in F2F courses? Not only is the answer to these questions a resounding "yes," but there are many ways that online courses may actually surpass traditional F2F classes in quality and rigor. Here are 10 ways in which I believe online education excels:

1. Student-centered learning: Academics have recognized for years the shortcomings of the faculty-centered classroom, but it has been difficult to break away from the paradigm. Whether the classroom instructor uses lecture, discussions, role playing, small group activities, or any other technique, it is still the instructor running the show. In an online environment, however, the instructor soon takes a back seat. Students are empowered to learn on their own and even to teach one another. Particularly in the discussion group mode, students have the opportunity to explain, share, comment upon, critique, and develop course materials among themselves in a manner rarely seen in the F2F classroom. Students serve as instructors to their classmates, and together they worked toward learning goals more effectively than if they had been provided with the answer by the instructor.

2. Writing intensity: For many years, our colleagues in the English department have told us that the best way to teach students how to write more effectively is to have them write *more often*. Online education has made this maxim a reality. On average, online courses are far more writing-intensive than traditional classes have ever been. In both F2F and online classes, major assignments are submitted in written form. But in an online course, general discussions, requests for elaboration or assistance, answers to directed questions, group projects, most assignments, and many tests and quizzes are in written form as well.



3. Highly interactive discussions: One of the most exciting features of an online course is the discussion forum. In the traditional F2F classroom, the instructor asks a question, and the same four or five extroverted students inevitably raise their hands. They offer spontaneous, often unresearched responses in the limited time allotted for discussion. In the online environment, discussions enter a new dimension. When an instructor posts a question on the asynchronous discussion board, every student in the class is expected to respond, respond intelligently, and respond several times.

Many online students have indicated that this is the first time they have ever "spoken up" in class and that they enjoy the opportunity. Similarly, instructors say that it is a pleasure to hear the surprisingly compelling ideas of the more introverted members of their classes. Many online instructors have also observed that the relative "anonymity" of online discussions helps create a level playing field for women, homosexuals, students with physical handicaps, and members of other potentially marginalized groups, as they can participate in class activities without being stigmatized. Moreover, the format gives non-native speakers of English extra time to contemplate questions and compose appropriate answers.

In addition to prompting more discussion, online education fosters higher-quality discussion. Before students respond to an instructor's discussion question or to classmates' posted comments, they can refer to their course materials and think through their answers. As a result, students have the opportunity to post well-considered comments without the demands of the immediate, anxiety-producing F2F discussion, which often elicits the first response that comes to mind rather than the best possible response. Finally, asynchronous discussions are not limited to a few minutes of live class time; they frequently last for a week, and it is not unusual to have 100 or more student postings during that period of time. When was the last time that you saw that many well-reasoned responses in a F2F setting from the majority of the students in attendance?

4. Geared to lifelong learning: In their everyday lives, individuals do not have a teacher at their side to direct them in their acquisition of new information. One of the roles that we need to perform as educators, then, is to teach students to find and learn information on their own or in concert with their colleagues. The online environment fosters self-motivated education. Students direct their own use of Internet links, search engines, discussion boards, chat, e-mail, and other media. While such resources cannot guarantee student initiative, they establish a framework that gives precedence to the autonomy of the learner.

5. Enriched course materials

6. On-demand interaction and support services: Help is only a click away in an online course. Instructors can offer many types of interactive learning aids on their course sites (e.g., flash cards, immediate feedback tests, and PowerPoint presentations). Contact with the instructor and classmates through e-mail can occur any time, not just during traditional (limited) on-campus office hours. Students can also use e-mail, chat rooms, and discussion boards to establish impromptu or scheduled study groups that defy conventional time and space restrictions. Just as importantly, an online course site can make a whole host of campus services available to students, including registration, academic advising, financial aid information and forms, services for students with disabilities and 24/7 libraries.

7. Immediate feedback: Even though they do not see a teacher across the classroom every day, online students generally have greater access to instructors. Traditional students rushing off to their next class or off-campus jobs often cannot squeeze in a question to their instructor. Online students, however, can and do e-mail countless questions to their professors and frequently engage in a dialogue that would be hard to duplicate in the F2F world.

On a more formal note, online tests and quizzes can be constructed with an automatic grading capability that provides immediate feedback and references to text and class notes that explain the correct answers. Assignments, including grades and editorial comments, can be returned to students more promptly and usually with more detail than in the F2F environment. There is no need to wait for the next class to return an assignment.

8. Flexibility: Students with family or work responsibilities are often unable to commit to a traditional course because they cannot be in the same place at the same time for 15 consecutive weeks. Even if a course schedule is acceptable, limited enrollment may be a problem: A student who attempts to register for a Thursday night course only to discover that it is closed has no other immediate options. The advantages of online learning, however, include ample opportunities for students to pursue coursework at any time that fits into their busy lives.

9. An intimate community of learners: Strange as it may sound, one instructor after another notes the surprisingly close relationships that they have developed with their online students. They say that it is common for participants in online courses to develop a strong sense of community that enhances the learning process. Probably as a result of the relative anonymity of online courses, students are much more prone to open up and reveal information about themselves in e-mails and on discussion boards than they are in the F2F environment.



10. Faculty development and rejuvenation

In conclusion, online education is one of the most exciting enhancements to contemporary education. Online education is neither right for all students nor right for all faculty, but it frequently meets the needs of both for an exciting, high-quality educational experience. As with any instructional mode, the quality of online courses varies, but the potential—often met and still expanding—is on a par and in some respects even better than with the traditional F2F mode. Admittedly, it is up to future research to support or reject the impressions I have reported in this article. The important point, however, is that online education *can* be done well, and the demand for it is such that we all have to work to make it better. It is here to stay for all of the right reasons.

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