

The Structure and Pedagogical Style of the Virtual Developmental Education Classroom: Benefit or Barrier to the Developmental Learning Process?

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Abstract

This paper presents both the pro and con sides of online developmental education courses. On the pro side, it argues how professionals in the field support online developmental learning due to its ability to familiarize students with innovative computer technology and virtual communication skills of the Twenty-First Century, and also its ability to cater to the busy, nontraditional student who is 25 years and over within the professional workforce who experience difficulty committing to traditional face-to-face classroom learning. On the con side, this paper argues how online developmental courses would be a major barrier to the learning process due to frequent technological issues encountered by the student, the temptation to engage in academic dishonesty, and also the developmental students' special need for intimate, structured, and nurturing face-to-face instruction. The paper features scholarly, theoretical support for the ideas presented, and logically presents these ideas in an effort to cohesively, professionally, and holistically present the views on both sides of this controversial argument that currently dominates the field of developmental education.

Keywords: Online, Developmental, Virtual, Learning, Students, Education.

In this modern age of technology and virtual learning, online courses are dominating the education field, and becoming increasingly prevalent in modern day society: Distance education has always been known for its departure from the conditions in which teaching and learning "naturally" take place. To some extent, distance education is a pedagogical oddity, often requiring further justification, such as the extension of educational opportunities or the encouragement of lifelong learning. (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006, p. 570)

This passage illuminates how online or distance learning has been commonly regarded as *the other* within the education field, and has for decades been forced to prove its importance within the field. This mentality has deteriorated dramatically throughout recent years, and one significant trend that seems to be emerging onto the forefront is the development of online developmental courses. Many professionals in the field support the development of online developmental courses stating that it would be a step toward promoting and familiarizing developmental students with innovative technology based learning, while simultaneously building the developmental skills that they need to succeed. Moreover, many believe that online developmental courses would support the many busy 25 years and older non-traditional students who are unable to dedicate sufficient time to the traditional brick and mortar institution. Berge (1998) states "online education can be flexible, accessible, and convenient for students; there can often be institutional cost savings and time savings over traditional place-based education" (p. 2). On the con side of this issue, many professionals advocate that online developmental courses are inappropriate in the sense that they would present the battle of struggling with technological issues, which would diminish an already existing fragile learning process.

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Also, students at the developmental level are in need of structured, personalized face-to-face instruction that provides a unique level of comfort, and ease of strengthening weak academic skills in preparation for college level courses. These students need strict guidance, nurturing, and intimate attention from the instructor, which is severely limited, or in many cases non-existent within an online environment. Ultimately, student enrolment in online developmental courses will diminish academic progress, and academic integrity at a high level.

1. Virtual Learning Emerges as the Ideal

Online developmental courses are emerging onto the educational forefront in an attempt to transcend the underprepared student into the high-tech era of technology. Warschauer (1998) states "Online education introduces unprecedented options for teaching, learning, and knowledge building, and can help create communities of inquiry capable of stimulating intellectual, moral, and educational growth among rich and poor alike" (p. 68). Here, Warschauer is illustrating how the online educational arena presents educational growth opportunities for both instructors and students regardless of cultural or financial status. Professionals in the field assert that online developmental learning is the ideal foundational venue for preparing students not only academically, but also for future advanced courses which will incorporate high-tech online learning and responsibilities into the course curriculum. Hoyte (2010) states "Benefits to taking courses online include . . . having the tools to research materials easily, and having access to a variety of instructional formats such as audio, video, web, or team collaborative solutions" (p. 46). Hoyte is highlighting here how participating in online learning encourages academic maturity, and a high level of discipline, which are integral parts of a successful post-secondary education, and also the professional workforce in modern day America. Depending upon the specific field that the developmental student chooses to enter upon completion of their degree, computer skills and virtual communication will be a mandatory function, and there will be professional consequences for computer illiteracy:

Online education has moved to the mainstream of higher education and may surpass all other course delivery methods in quality in the near future. According to a survey of Chief Academic Officers of U.S. degree-granting institutions of higher education, 81% of all institutions of higher education offer at least one fully online or blended course. (Neuhauser, 2004, p. 1)

As we can see from this passage, the online course has become a dominating force within the realm of postsecondary education, and proficiency with online learning is quickly becoming a must. Ultimately, beginning virtual competency at an early stage of the developmental learner's educational career will give them an advanced start to developing the online skills needed for future endeavors. Moreover, many students enter into the academy from homes that lack a computer. For many, the home is completely void of any modern technology of the 21st Century, especially if the student is a nontraditional student of advanced age.

Engaging in an online developmental course becomes a form of enlightenment for the student, and in the words of the literary field, it is the ultimate journey from innocence to experience. It is an opportunity for the student to become the leader of their own learning and development, rather than the instructor conventionally dictating all levels of the student's education:

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, the instructor remains the center of the classroom. In an online environment, however, the instructor soon takes a backseat. The role of the instructor can be altered to become more akin to a facilitator than a lecturer, while allowing them to become active learners can alter the role of students. Students are empowered to learn independently and even to teach one another. (Kassop, 2003, p. 2; Richardson & Swan, 2003, p. 69)

In this passage, Kassop is suggesting how the online experience not only builds and strengthens the student's academic weaknesses, but also their innermost confidence and self-esteem as a person and a leader. Many students come into the developmental classroom with a negative psychological state regarding their academic competency as the result of a poor secondary education, or standardized test scores that have dehumanized them into mere numbers or statistics. Exposure and productive experience with virtual learning can strongly minimize, or even eliminate these negative stigma related aspects that shatter student's self-confidence. This new skill of online learning and communication becomes the father of the developmental student's new identity. An identity that surpasses the stigma of "under preparedness" and emerges as "prepared."

Moreover, online developmental courses would allow the student to obtain the foundational education that they need without interrupting their professional fields, and familial obligations. Stokes (2000) states "the target population for many technology-based distance learning programs is the nontraditional student who may be combining education with work and family while dealing with time and location constraints" (p. 161). Stokes' arguments here illuminates the educational situation within many community colleges across the nation in the sense that the community college has become an idealized educational option for the nontraditional student age 25 and above who are forced to possess three identities, which are parent, spouse, and student, in an effort to acquire an education. In this very complex life situation, the online environment becomes idealized at the highest level as it enables one to achieve an education from any corner of the globe via the computer screen. In this current day of modern working adults, and the dramatic downfall of the economy, many individuals would find it rather difficult, if not impossible to attend their required developmental course in a traditional face-to-face format. Many would diminish the quality of their assignments, and ultimately, cease to submit assignments altogether due to the inconvenience of traveling to the traditional brick and mortar campus. Ultimately, the student would be forced to make a choice between the face-to-face course, and their job and family. Morally and ethically, the student will choose obligation to their family and economic well-being in an effort to avoid a swift shattering of their life and efficiency as a productive, independently functioning adult. The online developmental course is essential in this case as the highly obligated working student with familial obligations possesses few if any educational options to further their academic growth, development, and overall professional status.

2. Barriers Associated with the Virtual Developmental Education Classroom

Regarding the con side of this controversial debate, many believe that the implementation of online developmental education courses would present learning barriers originating from not only technological difficulties, but also a lack of personal, collaborative interaction with the instructor, which is integral to the student's cohesive academic development:

In comparison to face-to-face education, in a 100% online course it is harder to transfer communication elements like body language or intonation. Therefore, online courses have to make more intensive use of the available interaction methods. Interaction is one of the most important components of any learning experience, and it has been identified as one of the major constructs in distance education research. Learners consistently report frustrations related to collaboration. Technology cannot facilitate effective teaching and learning . . . good teaching must always involve mentoring, internalization, guidance, group activity, and strong socialization. A lack of social interaction is the single most important barrier to online student learning. (Rienties, Tempelaar, Waterval, Rehm, & Gijsselaers, 2006, p. 328; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005, p.35; Vrasidas & Mclsaac, 1999, p. 23; Mehlenbacher, Miller, Covington, & Larsen , 2000 p. 170; Marra & Jonassen, 2001, p. 306)

As these authors have highlighted in the above passage, effective interaction is an integral aspect of a student's academic success and in virtual learning environments, social interaction with the instructor, and other peers tends to be significantly low, which can severely cripple not only intellectual growth, but also the student's psychological motivation, and self-efficacy as they work to achieve excellence developmental students enter the classroom with an uphill academic battle of acquiring the basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills needed to progress toward advanced college courses. Acquiring these foundational skills via a computer screen creates an isolated learning environment for the student and robs them of the intimate, nurturing, hands-on approach provided by the traditional face-to-face classroom setting.

Developmental students are in need of close monitoring in an effort to ensure that each assignment is being completed correctly, and as professionally as possible. For example, if a student with a severely weak writing background is given an assignment to construct a two-page essay on a selected topic, the student needs the intimate one-on-one tutoring, interaction, and collaborative guidance with not only the instructor, but also other peers in the class who can provide unique, diverse compositional insights which will help the student's writing effectively come alive. This unique level of peer collaboration and instructor monitoring is highly diminished in an online environment due to the cold, lifeless nature of the computer screen. In this type of desolate learning environment, student's attention and motivation tend to deteriorate at alarming rates:

A recent report in the *Chronicle for Higher Education* found that institutions report dropout rates ranging from 20 to 50 percent for distance learners. And administrators of online courses concur dropout rates are often 10 to 20 percentage points higher in distance offerings than in their face-to-face counterparts. Research on the online environment shows that interaction among students and between the instructor and students is critically important for student satisfaction and retention. (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005; Frankola, 2001; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006)

These numbers are quite disturbing considering the large number of students who choose to pursue their education via the virtual classroom in an attempt to maximize educational convenience and flexibility. The virtual learning environment consisting of forum discussions, chat sessions, and the convenience of e-mail communication are indeed excellent innovative forms of communication and learning, but the developmental student should have the comfort of solely focusing on the academic aspect of the course in an effort to ensure that the foundational development will not be compromised by various technological issues common to the online environment in an effort to narrow these wide percentages of failure and dropout rates. Diaz (2002) states "many educators imply that the observed high dropout rates should disqualify online education as a high-quality option to traditional education" ("Drop Rates," para. 1). Possibly if the industry of online learning would lessen its idealization of the virtual classroom above the traditional face-to-face learning environment, many students may begin to analyze on a more thorough level if an online learning environment is right for them. Many students who possess a very hands-on, or visual learning style tend to frequently exhibit poor performance in an online environment due to the lack of hands-on nurturing, and visual interaction with the instructor and peers, which ultimately contributes to this low retention rate.

Developmental students frequently struggle with the basic skills necessary for effective college level academic functioning. As a result, Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) state "some students in distant learning programs and courses report feelings of isolation, lack of self direction, and management, and eventually decrease in motivation levels" (para. 4). The traditional face-to-face classroom that holistically prioritizes student centered pedagogy, and personal, intimate presentation of learning objectives free of possible technological obstacles, will ultimately be a classroom that academically transcends the developmental student from underprepared to prepared status:

Several studies and experiments have been conducted that found technical essays produced by ESL College students in Japan using computer workstations were not as well organized and were significantly shorter than hand written essays. Results of a study with college students in Taiwan found that face-to-face discussions that preceded writing activities in a traditional classroom were superior to computer-mediated discussions in producing written comments and explanations of their plans for writing more. Students in the face-to-face group could support and refute each other's arguments better. (Al-Jarf, 2002)

Here, Al-Jarf challenges the pro candidates of the controversial online versus face-to-face- debate to acknowledge how academic performance, collaboration, and effective social interaction is highly energized within face-to-face classrooms across the nation versus the online environment. The rhetorical content of these student's assignments were much more scholarly and well developed. Also, interestingly illuminated here is the fact that oral communication and argumentation is much stronger in the traditional face-to-face environment compared to the virtual classroom. This study ultimately strengthens the argument of how the face-to-face environment provides not only a high level of personal academic nurturing, and uniquely focused instructor attention for the students, but also a greater opportunity for students to engage their analysis of the eyes, tone, mood, and the overall emotional state of their peers which is an integral aspect of daily, real-life experience beyond the classroom setting.

This type of physical, analytical observations of concrete characteristics unique to other human beings is impossible when merely sitting in front of a computer screen. The face-to-face environment ultimately transcends the intellect and the aesthetic senses of the self, and the student is allowed to effectively grow with the completion of each assignment unburdened by potentially problematic technology. Issues such as an ill functioning computer, an assignment failing to submit properly, or accidentally deleted assignments, which slows, or in many cases completely stops the learning and development process are non-issues in the traditional face-to-face classroom. Brill (2001) states "a slow connection to the internet alone can be a source of great frustration for a learner and quickly impact his/her motivation to maintain time on task (Carr, 2000)" (p. 348). In the face-to-face classroom, all assignments are simply submitted in hard copy format, which ensures full, accurate receipt and evaluation of the student's academic work, ultimately resulting in a much more confident, cohesive, and learning centered developmental classroom.

Moreover, the online classroom also invites unethical behavior such as cheating. For example, at the developmental level, many students enter into college scared with a psychological feeling that they are intellectually less than compared to students enrolled in college-level courses as a result of the powerful negative stigma that overshadows developmental education. As a result of this intellectual lack of confidence, the developmental student is so engulfed with a desire to overcome this labeling of less than that rationality is succumbed by desperation. Ultimately, this leads the student to engage in academic dishonesty in an effort to achieve high grades on assignments. From personal experience as a community college English instructor, several students have been caught completing online exams on campus computers for developmental students.

When questioned about the incident, the accused students expressed that they engaged in academic dishonesty because they wanted to ensure that they received an A on the exam, and that they did not feel that they had the intellectual capacity to complete the assignment independently. This incident clearly illuminates the harsh reality of not only how the stigma associated with developmental students has severely damaged their ethical, and professional nature as students and adults, but also how the need for close instructor monitoring of assignment completion is highly necessary in the developmental classroom. Although academic dishonesty does indeed occur among students across all academic levels, as instructors, we must remember that our developmental students will eventually reach the level of prepared. Therefore, we have a responsibility to diminish the opportunities for academic dishonesty as much as possible, especially at the developmental classroom level in an effort to plant the seeds of confidence and ethical behavior early in student's academic and professional journey.

In a face-to-face classroom setting, students actively and intimately familiarize themselves with the course content, and exam material due to the instructor's close monitoring. Students do not have the opportunity to participate in academic dishonesty such as hiring other students to complete online exams and assignments for them. Although the traditional face-to-face environment does not completely eliminate all opportunities to engage in academic dishonesty, it certainly does diminish them compared to the virtual environment. For many students, especially the nontraditional age 25 and older student, the developmental classroom is their first introduction to not only the college setting, but also to establishing a strong foundation of ethical, professional academic behavior. Keeping developmental education virtual free is a strong step in facilitating, and encouraging a trend of academic honesty, and self-confidence with the developmental student's academic abilities. The student's answer to assignment difficulty is intimate tutoring and face-to-face collaboration with the instructor and peers within the classroom community, rather than unethical, dishonest behavior, which ultimately demoralizes the student on all levels.

3. Conclusion

Considering the many compelling pro and con arguments that exist regarding this controversial issue of online developmental courses, each postsecondary institution and developmental studies department have a responsibility to professionally collaborate ideas, and effective pedagogical methods to educate their students. The online versus the face-to-face course is a critical issue within the field of developmental education. Although there are strong points of consideration on both the pro and con sides of the issue, ultimately the side that presents the most thorough level of student learning is the side that must be prioritized in the field.

As discussed above, there are indeed many benefits to the online developmental course such as convenience for busy working adults who are obligated to familial responsibilities, and also the opportunity to gain experience with innovative technology based education for those students who significantly lack technological skills in their background. These points considered, the traditional face-to-face classroom proves to be the most ideal learning environment for underprepared learners because focused, intimate, undivided attention from the instructor firmly outweighs convenience and technology exposure as presented on the pro side of this issue.

There are a multitude of opportunities for students to participate in online learning and enjoy the luxury of convenience later in their academic careers when the appropriate developmental skills have been acquired. For instance, students can gradually introduce themselves to the online learning setting by enrolling in a "flipped classroom" or "hybrid" learning setting. These innovative learning settings are comprised of 50% face-to-face and 50% virtual learning, which provide students equal exposure to the pedagogical nature of both settings.

At the developmental stage, students need to thoroughly engage their intellect and dedication to the foundational skills needed to progress beyond the developmental classroom into college credit courses, and also utilize the unique, intimate instructor attention, which is given in the face-to-face classroom. Overall, the virtual developmental classroom tends to minimize learning due to frustration with technological obstacles, and lack of instructor availability. The traditional face-to-face developmental course is clearly the answer to not only a holistic, student centered learning environment, but ultimately a major step in transforming a student's academic status from underprepared to college-ready. Only then will professionals in the field begin to abolish the dark stigma that has engulfed developmental education for decades.

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