Online Learning: A Catalyst for Change

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This paper discusses the work of the Michigan Virtual University® (MVU®) and outlines several factors that are influencing the adoption and growth of online learning in public education. MVU will celebrate its tenth year in operation in 2008. As a private nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, MVU was created by the state of Michigan to serve as a champion for online learning. In the early days, MVU focused on workforce development needs and served as a catalyst for change, working closely with higher education institutions.

Today, MVU operates one of the largest virtual schools in the United States. Since its inception in 2000, the Michigan Virtual School™ (MVS™) has given over 40,000 young people the opportunity to take an online course in everything from Mandarin Chinese to oceanography to forensic science. MVU also operates Michigan LearnPort®, an online professional development portal that gives Michigan’s K–12 community—teachers, administrators, school-bus drivers, food-service workers—an opportunity to access online professional development.

National Graduation Rates

According to current research, only 70 percent of students are graduating from U.S. high schools each year. That number—which has held steady for a number of years—is unacceptable. Something needs to be done to address this national crisis. We need to take a closer look at this policy challenge and begin to explore new and innovative approaches to delivering educational services to teenagers. Both recognizing that about a third of our nation’s students are not graduating from high school and knowing the negative employment outlook for high school dropouts should be a big motivator for state and local policy leaders to think about innovation and change.

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According to *The Silent Epidemic*—a report funded by the Gates Foundation—half of those students who drop out of high school indicate that their classes are not interesting (Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., and Morison 2006). This should come as no surprise to most educators and parents. When students are asked to use one word to describe their high schools, they typically don’t respond with words like *exciting, engaging, or fun.* Too many young people think that high school is boring—especially the students who are dropping out.

**Tensions within the K–12 Community**

Five major factors are beginning to converge, forcing the public education system to explore new delivery options such as online learning. These factors are described below.

1. **Time Constraints**

   *Prisoners of Time*—a report published in 1994 by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning—is as relevant today as it was when it was first published. The report looks at the relationship between time and learning, focusing on how much core academic learning can actually be forced into a school day. In order to think beyond the parameters of a six-hour-per-day learning environment, we need to think about how we can exploit and harness the power of technology to engage students after school, in the evenings, on the weekends, and during the summers and other breaks during the year. The school calendar may be the most difficult paradigm to change in public education, and online learning may be the easiest way to shift this paradigm.

2. **Budget Limitations**

   Like most other publicly funded social services, K–12 education struggles with adequate funding levels on an annual basis. As state budget revenues decline or experience limited growth, funding for K–12 education becomes even more difficult. Funding is not a new challenge for public education, and some argue that adding options for student choice, such as charter schools, weakens core support for schools. Budget constraints will likely continue to plague the K–12 community for the foreseeable future. At the high school level, this trend will impact the breadth and depth of curricular offerings available to students, especially in rural and urban schools. Online learning programs may represent a cost-effective strategy for expanding curricular options for students, especially for low incidence courses.
3. Relevance

Increasingly, students struggle to see how classroom instruction relates to their world outside of school. Great teachers work every day to make learning relevant so that students can understand the connection between what happens in the classroom and its importance to their future. Making instruction relevant has become especially difficult as more students use technology outside of school. Significant opportunities exist to use technology-based resources to make teaching more connected to the world of work and students’ personal lives. Most students who take online courses enjoy using the technology and communicating with teachers in the same way they communicate with their family and friends outside of school.

4. Web 2.0 Tools

In the early days of the Internet, most people were only consumers of online information. Today, with the introduction of wikis, blogs, video-sharing Web sites, social networking services, and other Web 2.0 tools, more people are also producers of online information. For obvious security and student safety issues, many of these tools have not been widely adopted at the K–12 level. Increasingly, student expectations will begin to drive the usage of these innovative communication tools. Educators will need significant professional development to better understand how these tools can be used to impact teaching and learning in meaningful ways.

5. Globalization

In *The World Is Flat*—a book primarily focused on how commerce in the world has changed as a result of technology—Thomas Friedman tells the story of a small-business owner evaluating his fast-food business (2005). The owner determined that his drive-up window service was an area of low customer satisfaction with high error rates. As a result, he decided to invest in an Internet connection and video camera, and outsourced the window’s operations to a call center in Colorado. The call center was staffed by a group of women who had been highly trained in telephone skills. Through the video camera and microphone, they were able to take customer orders and instantaneously send them to the kitchen. The process was so effective that the workers in the kitchen couldn’t tell that the order was issued from the call center in Colorado. Within three months, the business owner saw his error rates completely fall off and his sales actually increase.

If you can outsource a drive-up window service at a fast-food restaurant, then organizations can outsource just about any service, including education. When we think about globalization in Michigan, we inevitably
think about losing automobile manufacturing jobs. The possibility of outsourcing educational service is scary to most people in the United States. However, the use of online learning will continue to globalize instruction in this country and elsewhere. Michigan Virtual School has a cadre of online teachers scattered all over the state of Michigan who teach online part-time. Most of these educators are full-time classroom teachers in public schools. Policy leaders need to begin to explore how the use of the Internet will give them access to high-quality teaching resources not available in their local community. Teaching world languages online will likely become the first academic area to fully explore online global education solutions. MVS provides Mandarin Chinese language courses online through a unique partnership with the Confucius Institute at Michigan State University (MSU). The online instructors for these courses are native speakers from China who are enrolled in graduate programs at MSU.

**National Trends in Online Learning**

Online learning is becoming more common throughout the United States at all levels of education. Last year, it is estimated that over one million K–12 students and approximately 3.5 million college students took an online course. In most states, student and parent demand for online learning at the K–12 level is not being adequately supported. The amount of public support for state-sponsored virtual schools varies, and most states are struggling to develop a funding mechanism that is predictable and stable, and that can accommodate future growth.

There are currently many common misperceptions about online learning. One idea espoused by critics is that it signals a depersonalizing of education. The experiences gained by MVS instructors suggest just the opposite. They claim it is easier to personalize the classroom and differentiate instruction because of the significant one-on-one communications in online classes. Many MVS instructors indicate that they get to know their virtual students better than the students in their regular classrooms. Technology is changing human communication in unpredictable ways, and we need to figure out how to harness this tool to benefit teaching and learning.

An interesting phenomenon is happening in the United States compared to around the globe in terms of online learning for K–12 education. In the United States, we are using online learning primarily as a supplemental resource rather than as a reform strategy. In Singapore, they close their schools for one week and migrate all their learning online for that period. This strategy forces teachers to be prepared—they deal with a lot of
natural disasters in Singapore, and also want to be prepared in the event of a bird flu pandemic that shuts down schools for a month or longer. So Singapore is looking at online learning as a reform strategy, as are countries like China and India.

**Michigan’s Policy on Online Learning**

In 2006, the Michigan legislature passed a law that revamped the state’s high school graduation requirements. One of the requirements included in the new law is that students take an online course or have a meaningful online learning experience prior to graduation. This experience can be met in one of three ways: (1) they can take an online course from an online provider like MVS, a community college, or a local school district; (2) they can have an online learning experience of at least twenty hours in duration; or (3) they can have an online learning experience embedded in each of the sixteen courses that make up the new Michigan Merit Curriculum—the core courses that every student must take.

Today’s students need to know how to use the technology, but their experiences using technology tend to be focused on recreational and entertainment applications. Most students do not use technology for significant formal learning activities. Michigan’s new online learning requirement will provide all students with an opportunity to learn how to learn in a technology-rich environment.

**Conclusion**

Public education is serving a different group of students today than it did fifteen or twenty years ago, and there’s a gap between how young people live outside of school and how they are expected to live and work inside of a classroom environment. To a large extent, this gap is related to the use of technology, and unfortunately that gap is getting wider, causing more of our young people to feel disengaged with our public education system.

Whether you want to lose twenty-five pounds, learn how to cook a French dessert, make a shirt out of duct tape—whatever it is that you have a personal goal for—you can go online and find other people around the globe who have a similar interest. The Internet is aggregating geographically dispersed individuals with common interests and learning needs. Obviously, this expands the learning economy. Some refer to this as the democratization of learning. For others, it’s a scary idea because it brings up traditional turf issues.
The latest numbers from the Pew Foundation suggest that as of late 2004, about 87 percent of teens use the Internet on a daily basis (2005). According to Everett Rogers’s Innovation Adoption Curve, successful innovation takes time (2003). We are in the early stages of the online learning movement for the K–12 community. In the next ten to fifteen years, this technology will become more mature, and our comfort level with it will increase. The K–12 education system in the United States has much to gain from the adoption and use of Internet-based instruction that provides alternative pathways to learning and matches student interests.

References


