The Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Courses

Based on Experiences in Teaching Net Delivered INDV 102: Money, Consumers, and Family; Summer I 2005

Submitted by
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I taught an online course for the first time this Summer, and I must say it was one of the most gratifying experiences of my life. In large part this was due to the extremely important subject matter, and the tremendous feedback of the students, but an important part of what made this course so uniquely successful was the online format.

In some sense, a traditional course can do everything an online course can, and more; in addition it has live, face to face, meetings. After all, a traditional course can always obtain a D2L site, maintain an online discussion board, give extensive take home exams, etc. Anything that can be assigned in an online course can be assigned in a traditional course. Any activity that can be utilized in an online course can also be utilized in a traditional course.

But, in reality, some learning activities can be done better, or more extensively, in an online course. Part of this is that students feel a significant amount of anonymity, which makes them less inhibited about participating in discussion, and in other activities. A traditional class can have online discussion, but people, and the instructor, will still know what the student looks like. They still see him in class and possibly around campus, where they may remember an embarrassing mistake, a bold statement, or a minority or controversial view. Moreover, if the student is sensitive about his ability to speak publicly, his appearance, ethnicity, accent, anything of this nature, this is not an inhibition, or is typically significantly less of an inhibition, when the student will never be seen, as in an internet course.

A student also may be shy about interrupting, or interjecting, in an active in-class discussion. It just may be hard for him to find a pause big enough to make him feel comfortable about jumping in, but this is really not an issue with an on-line discussion board where the exchange is static for minutes or hours at a time, and where, anyway, a student can always start his own separate thread.

Another part of why some learning activities can be done better, or more extensively, in an online course is that by the students not having to attend class meetings, a substantial amount of their time is freed up which can be spent on
things like three day exams of great depth, detail, and introspection, extensive online written discussion, and in depth career research and planning.

It is counter to learning to ignore the reality that student time is limited. Students will only spend so much time on a three credit course. If the instructor assigns an excessive amount of work, especially for a general education course, students will typically either drop the course, not do some of the work, or do everything, but spend very little time, or thought, on anything. This can result in learning everything in a very poor and shallow way, where the disjointed, poor, and/or superficial knowledge and understanding that is gained is quickly forgotten.

Thus, I believe it is important not to waste student time and attention on less important material because it will likely be at the expense of more important material, and even with the more important material, one can only assign so much before the typical student starts to devote too little time and thought to each unit, starts not covering some units, or drops the course.

An instructor may be determined to be tough and assign far more work than is given in an average three credit class, but what is he to do when students start dropping the course in large numbers, or when they start turning in poor quality work — give the bulk of the students poor or failing grades? I believe this is neither tenable nor fair at a public university, and even in an honors course at Harvard there is a limit. There are only 24 hours in a day. So more time spent on one learning activity will at some point have to take away from time spent on another.

The point here regarding an on-line course is that it saves a very substantial amount of student time which can then be very reasonably requested to be put into innovative and valuable non-traditional learning activities. Not having class meetings saves three hours per week, plus travel time to and from. This adds up to 50 to 60, or more, hours over the course of a semester. As a result I was able to reasonably require (and typically receive) long, thoughtful, and thorough replies to the on-line discussion questions. I was able to give long in-depth exams over a number of days, that required an unusual amount of knowledge, and research, and I was able to assign more reading than I would otherwise have thought prudent.

Thus, a traditional course cannot realistically do everything that an online course can and vice-versa. I will now discuss further specific advantages and disadvantages of each.

**Class Discussion**

I had some concern that the learning value of on-line discussion would be less than that of traditional in-class discussion. I was pleasantly surprised to find that,
at least for my class, and I think a great many classes, the exact opposite was true. In-class discussion, although it has important advantages which I will discuss later, has the disadvantage that students, and the instructor, have little time to think about their replies, and can only use the facts and data at their fingertips.

In an online discussion, on the other hand, students, and the instructor, can spend hours or days, thinking about, researching, and crafting their responses. They can include important exact statistics that are not precisely memorized. They can include graphs, tables, pictures, links to articles, videos, and/or a wide range of other resources. The depth, quality, and thoughtfulness of the discussion can be far greater, and I think if one looks at my discussions one will see this.¹

One of the great things about class discussion is that it can bring out student misconceptions – and there are a lot of them in personal finance. Once they are stated, this gives a great opportunity to clearly and effectively show why they are mistaken. Regarding this, online discussion has at least three big advantages. First, as noted earlier, in a traditional, in-class, discussion many students are shy about participating. This is much less true in an online discussion in an online course. There is a much greater feeling of anonymity. The others in the class will see a student’s name posted with her comments, but they will not know what the student looks like. They will never see her and recognize her. If she is uncomfortable with her public speaking or anything else of this nature, this will not be an issue, or inhibition. Plus, as also noted earlier, she will have plenty of time to hone her replies until she is happy with them.

As a result, most of the students had substantial participation. Part of the reason was because this contributed to their grade, but even here there is an advantage over traditional discussion; D2L keeps a running table with the number of postings each student has made, so it’s easy to see who’s participating and who isn’t, and I let the students know this, so that they won’t have less of an incentive to participate because they think there’s a good chance it won’t be noticed. In a traditional class, if the instructor wants to grade on discussion participation, he must memorize all of the student’s names and somehow remember how well all of them have participated over the course of the term. A student could easily think an instructor is likely to just not remember poor participation, or not be that strict on this given the difficulty of doing so well. With an online discussion, not only is there a table of statistics for each student, but everything the student has ever said is recorded and can be looked back on come grading time to assess its quality.

The second big advantage in responding to student misconceptions is, again, as noted earlier, the much greater time and resources available to do so, and the third is that the response is in writing. A spoken response in class may not be

¹ To see the discussion forums, or any other materials on my D2L site, please use the guest ID: bogus10.student, and password: serlin. For help on how to log onto, and use, D2L, please go to http://help.d2l.arizona.edu/forstudents.htm.
remembered for long, or important parts of it may not be. Students may not be paying attention, or it may largely go in one ear and out the other. With a written response students can refer back to it, and, in fact, to make sure students pay proper attention to important responses, I asked questions referring to them on exams. It would be much harder to do this, or do this as well, with in-class discussion.

I end up covering many important points, tying together a wide range of material, citing many key statistics, and including links to web pages on index funds and IRAs. I asked several exam questions on these important postings to make sure that they were read thoroughly.

So, as we can see, there are important advantages to online discussion in an online course, but there are obviously advantages to in-class discussion too. With an online discussion board students have much more time to formulate and post their responses; as I’ve discussed, this gives important advantages, but it has disadvantages too. The flow of the discussion is slower, and sometimes a lot of quick back and forth, question and answer, can be valuable, as it can get a lot out at once, and gives a logical flow that’s all seen in a short time, where all the parts are fresh in the memory.

Chat can sometimes get a fast flow going, but it’s harder to keep well ordered, and it does not allow for voice intonation and hand gestures, which can sometimes be very helpful for clearly teaching material.

So, my basic conclusion is that for some material, an online course has better discussion, and for other material in-class discussion is better. For my particular course, I think for the vast majority of the material, the online format provided far more valuable discussion. There is a lot of depth, detail, statistics, mathematics, tables, charts, and thought to personal finance. It’s extremely helpful for students and the instructor to have time to think about their responses, gather data, and check facts, and after the learning is gained, it’s very valuable to have a written record, with all of the depth and detail that has likely come out.

Furthermore, with personal finance it is especially important that a student participate and not just rely on learning from the participation of others. The “personal” part of personal finance is important. It is important for each student to think about her own personal situation and future, and give associated feedback and analysis, and ask associated questions.

**Flexibility and Convenience**

This is very important. This is where an on-line course can create a great deal of value.
While traditional undergraduates are generally able to direct most of their energy toward their studies, older students, parents (especially single parents), and students who work full time have family and work responsibilities competing with school for their time, energy, and financial resources. Difficulties in obtaining child care and class schedules that do not mesh with work schedules are just two of the barriers that nontraditional students may encounter. In addition, some of the older students who did not pursue a postsecondary education when they were younger may have made this decision because they were not prepared academically. Consequently, they may struggle when they enroll later. Nontraditional students who enter postsecondary education seeking a degree are, in fact, less likely than traditional students to attain a degree or remain enrolled after 5 years (Horn 1996). To design effective programs and services to help nontraditional students reach their degree goals, policymakers and postsecondary administrators need information on how many students are affected, the details of their enrollment patterns, and the nature of their persistence problems. (pages 1-2)

Many of these students may work, or live, far from school, and making evening classes may require driving in rush hour traffic. Internet courses can be substantial time savers, and make life much easier, thus increasing the likelihood that nontraditional students won’t drop out because there is just more than they can handle.

It should additionally be noted that an internet class can also be very valuable to traditional students. A Campus Health study conducted during the 2000-2001 school year\(^2\) found that 81 percent of incoming freshmen said they planned to work while attending the UA and sixty-one percent of UA students work 11 hours or more per week. With tuition constantly increasing, and at a rate much higher than inflation, students are having to work more and more. Additionally, with student debt reaching dangerous levels, many are opting to work more in order to borrow less.

Again, internet classes can make things easier, and increase the likelihood that a student will make it through to graduation. They can make it easier to juggle student’s increasingly voluminous responsibilities.

Finally, during summer and winter breaks, with many students leaving campus and working more, via the internet may be the only way many students can take classes.

**Cost**

An internet course requires no classroom, thus saving on building, parking, and maintenance costs. An increase in internet courses could decrease the need to build new facilities and infrastructure in a time of budget cutting.

**Global Reach**

Internet courses allow the University to help people all over the world develop their potential. They are part of what acclaimed international affairs analyst Thomas Freidman calls the flattening of the world. A key part of what he means by that is the flattening of the international playing field, where people in the developing world are much less disadvantaged in their access to knowledge, education, and opportunity.

Thus, internet courses can provide great opportunity to people in need in developing countries, but in developed countries too they can increase student opportunities and horizons. Students from The University of Maryland or the University of Madrid can take unique courses from the University of Arizona and vice-versa.

**Video and Other Multimedia**

Of course, if a Wildcat were taking a course in Cervantes from the University of Madrid it would be great to see the instructor on video. My own course did not have any videos, but this was the first time I had taught it, or any other internet course. The next time I plan to have a series of videos available on my D2L site ranging from several minutes to a half hour or more. Sometimes they are a more efficient way to learn, for example my course utilizes Excel. I believe students will learn how to use this program much faster and better if I explain it with my voice in the background while they see what I’m doing with the program on their screen, than if I just explain it in writing.

In the not too far future internet courses may also use teleconferencing and advanced electronic blackboards.

**Academic Dishonesty**

This is a serious drawback of typical internet courses. They rely on the honor system and the difficulty of finding or paying someone qualified to do the students work for him. There is also the risk of getting caught. This may be small, but no one likes taking even a small risk of being expelled from college for

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cheating, and I emphasize this risk in my syllabus. In an academic dishonesty section I state, “Academic dishonesty is extremely serious. Any evidence of such will be turned into the deans office and may result in expulsion and a permanent mark on your records.”

Nonetheless, it is difficult to catch internet cheating, and for some classes extremely difficult. It would clearly be better to have most exams proctored, as in a traditional class. Traditional classes obviously aren’t immune to cheating either; they still typically have take home exams, take home papers, and/or graded homework, but at least a large portion of the grade is proctored where cheating is very unlikely. If a student learns little, even if he cheats on everything else, he will still receive a poor or failing grade because of his performance on the proctored exams, and doing excellent on the other material, but not having a clue on the proctored exams, will certainly raise suspicion.

So, again, this is a serious problem with today’s typical internet course. I believe this problem could, however, be solved at a relatively low cost. My suggestion is to set up a national, and later global, testing network. This sounds like a huge and difficult project, but I think a substantial network could be set up by just establishing a few contracts.

Development of Initiative and Internet Skills

A strong shift toward group work also occurred throughout education, in secondary and pre-secondary, as well as in higher education. While group work may have been lacking in the past, it can be argued that it is now sufficient, or even excessive.

The literature on Millennials, those born between 1982 and 1995, describes a group immersed in group projects starting in elementary school. According to Neil Howe, author of Millennials Rising (2000), in an excerpt from a CBS news 60 Minutes interview (2005), “If you go into a public school today, teamwork is stressed everywhere. Team teaching, team grading, collaborative sports, community service, service learning, student juries. I mean, the list goes on and on.”

Because of the unprecedented amount of structure and group activity permeating their lives, Howe expresses the criticism, “Sometimes, they don't know what to do if they're just left outside and you say, 'Well, just do something by yourself for a while,'” says Howe. "They'll look around stunned. You know, 'What are we supposed to do now?'” (CBS News (2005)). The CBS News article goes on to state that Dr. Mel Levine, a professor of pediatrics at the University of North

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4 This general group has also been called Generation Y and Echo Boomers, as their parents are typically Baby Boomers. Their birth years have also been defined as between 1980 and 1994 (Weiler (2004)), and 1977 to 1997 (Business Week (2005)). Good surveys of Millennial and related literature are DeBard (2004) and Weiler (2004).
Carolina Medical School, and renowned learning expert, “is now researching a book on young people entering their 20s. He is concerned that groupthink is stifling initiative.”

Thus, it may, in fact, be beneficial for students to have some experience with courses, like most internet courses, where they work primarily independently, where they have to take the initiative and think on their own. This is an important part of most careers too, as well as working well in groups.

**Group Activity**

The last section notwithstanding, group activity is still very valuable. How valuable, however, depends on the material. Some material is much better learned in a group than individually, some is moderately better, and some material is learned better through individual thought, concentration, and/or creativity.

I personally do not think for the material in my personal finance class students were at much of a disadvantage by not being able to engage in *traditional, face to face*, group activity. They still did engage in nontraditional group activity via their internet discussion, and with future advances in technology, or just creative utilization of current technology, one could envision many valuable group activities.

For example, with today’s unprecedented level of globalization and outsourcing, many students may have careers involving work with people over the internet, engineers in Singapore, customer service managers in India, factory managers in Mexico, or Chile, with the recent passage of CAFTA, computer programmers in Israel, managers in Europe involved in a global product launch, etc.

Thus, it may be valuable to have internet courses where students are assigned group projects where they must collaborate over the internet and via the phone. This may be especially valuable once video conferencing becomes widely available and more sophisticated.

**Conclusion**

From my experience and research, I find that there are both advantages and disadvantages to an internet course. These include:

**Advantages**

- **Greater Anonymity** – Greater anonymity can increase both the honesty and quantity of discussion participation
• **Discussion Grading** – Discussion participation can be graded much more accurately and easily as D2L keeps track of the number of postings and a written record exists of all participation.

• **Time Savings** – The time savings from students not having to travel to and from and attend class, typically 50-60+ hours per semester, can allow for much greater time to be spent on other learning activities, such as online discussion, which has important advantages over traditional in-class discussion, including students, as well as the instructor, can put more time, thought, and research into their input and enter the discussion more easily.

• **Flexibility, Convenience** – The flexibility, convenience, savings of travel time, and absence of conflict with work hours are very valuable to all types of today’s students, but especially nontraditional ones who’s numbers have increased greatly. 58% of the students at public 4-year institutions are in some way nontraditional, with many being single parents. These students are especially at risk of never attaining their degree, as studies have shown. Internet courses can make life much easier, thus increasing the likelihood that nontraditional students won’t drop out because there is just more than they can handle. Traditional students also benefit significantly. A Campus Health study conducted during the 2000-2001 school year found that 81 percent of incoming freshmen said they planned to work while attending the UA and sixty-one percent of UA students work 11 hours or more per week.

• **Cost Savings** – An internet course requires no classroom, thus saving on building, parking, and maintenance costs. An increase in internet courses could decrease the need to build new facilities and infrastructure in a time of budget cutting.

• **Initiative and Internet Skills** – In the last 20 years a strong shift toward group work has occurred throughout education, in secondary and pre-secondary, as well as in higher education. While group work may have been lacking in the past, it can be argued that it is now sufficient, or even excessive, for example top learning expert and University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Medical Professor Mel Levine has expressed concern that groupthink is stifling initiative. In an internet course, to a large extent, students learn to be self starters and work independently, skills which are also valued in careers as well as working well with others. Students as well improve their internet skills and may learn how to collaborate with others over the net and phone, as is necessary more and more in today’s global and highly outsourced world.

• **Global Reach** – Internet classes allow someone living hundreds of miles away from the nearest university, where roads and other means of access are poor, to learn from world class universities, through just a satellite dish or telegraphed Wi-Fi system and public computers at a library or community center, or at kiosks like those going up all over rural India. Thus, internet courses can provide great opportunity to people in need in developing countries, but in developed countries too they can increase student opportunities and horizons. Students from The University of
Maryland or the University of Madrid can take unique courses from the University of Arizona and vice-versa.

Disadvantages

- **No face to face meetings** – Clearly this entails a wide range of disadvantages. Hand gestures, voice intonation, and facial expression, can all be very important in efficiently making things clear and conveying valuable nuance. But how important will depend on the material. For students who aren’t self-starters, or whose self-discipline or motivation are not sufficient, a lecture can force them to pay attention to and learn the material, because if they do not, and/or do not take good notes the material will be lost come exam time. This illustrates a disadvantage of PowerPoint. Students are not forced to pay attention and take notes (which can do much to internalize and force concentration) because they may think that they can always just look at the slides later. Thus, the material may just glaze right by.\(^5\)

- **No Traditional Group Projects** – In an internet course students cannot work on group projects in the traditional face to face way. They can however work together over the internet and by phone, or through teleconferencing, which we can expect to become increasingly accessible and sophisticated. This kind of electronic group work may provide valuable experience, with the world’s increasing globalization and outsourcing.

- **Academic Dishonesty** – Typical internet courses do not have proctored exams and are thus substantially more susceptible to cheating. I think it likely, however that this problem can be largely solved with the formation of a proctoring network, which would charge $25-$50 per exam. The network could start simply with contracts with Stanley Kaplan, which has 3,000 centers nationally and internationally, and The Princeton Review, and could gradually expand with reciprocal agreements with other colleges and community colleges. Such a network would provide a convenient close by method for students to take a proctored final or other exams.

- **Speed and Mediation of Discussion** – With an online discussion board students have much more time to formulate and post their responses; this gives important advantages, but it also has disadvantages. The flow of the discussion is slower, and sometimes a lot of quick back and forth, question and answer, can be valuable, as it can get a lot out at once, and gives a logical flow that’s all seen in a short time, where all the parts are fresh in the memory. Chat can sometimes get a fast flow going, but is harder to keep well ordered.

Bibliography


