The Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Courses

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

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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 45 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 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 that 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 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.

A good example of all of this comes from my discussion forum 3. In posting 12, a student expresses serious misconceptions and mistakes in writing:

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.
The authors left out an important facet of the stock market that deserves clarification. If a general downturn in the stock market occurs, you will not get a 12% return. You'll be stuck with whatever may happen. Many financial experts believe that an occurrence similar to what happened in 1929 may repeat itself in the next 10 years. Our national financial situation is certainly precarious, any small amount of research can tell you as much. 25 years may be too long to wait for something bad to happen. In addition, if a company goes out of business, the stock for that company just fizzles away into nothing. It's gone. It doesn't sit around somewhere waiting for things to get better. It becomes money flushed down the toilet, lost. Any company can go out of business, any 50 companies can go out of business, and your 20% savings may disappear. Better off putting your eggs in several baskets. Baskets that can't sink.

My two responses to this, 12.1 and 12.2, combined for over 2,000 words. This included:

— Referencing a graph showing, “$1.00 invested in stocks in 1925 grew to $2,533.20 by 2004, while $1.00 invested in U.S. Government Treasury Bills grew to just $17.87! That's not a typo, just $17.87. Over the long run the difference grows exponentially, colossally. That's why it is so important to invest your long run savings in a diversified, balanced stock portfolio.”

— A detailed discussion of diversification and index funds; a sample, “It is absolutely true that any company can go out of business, even very big ones, for example United Airlines went out of business. Kmart went out of business. Chrysler almost went out of business in 1980, and would have if the U.S. government hadn't bailed them out, and there is a significant likelihood that General Motors will go out of business, with their bonds already downgraded to junk status, and they were once, not even that long ago, the largest company in the world -- That's why you should never put all of your money in a single stock. You should never even put all of your money in 10 stocks, or 50 stocks. Your money should be divided up amongst at least 500 stocks.”.

— A discussion of crashes and long run versus short run investing, “Aaron correctly notes, "Many financial experts believe that an occurrence similar to what happened in 1929 may repeat itself in the next 10 years.,", but while there is a possibility that there will be a stock market crash over the next 10 years, this is just not that much of a danger when investing over the long run. Why? Because crashes are short lived. Over the long run they tend to get averaged out, and usually very quickly. For example, the two biggest crashes in modern history were the 1929 crash and the 1987. On October 22nd 1987, stocks dropped 20.4% in just 1 day, the biggest 1 day drop in history, even bigger than in 1929, but it didn't even take until the end of the year to erase the entire loss. By the end of the year, stocks actually returned a positive 5.23%. Over periods of 20
years or more, the probability of doing better with "safe" assets like government bonds is minute; the odds are you will do tragically worse, as we have seen.

I later write, “The bottom line is that because of the balance, diversification, and large number of stocks in these portfolios, their historical average return and safety has indeed been impressive. The S&P index goes back to 1925, and in that time its worst year was 1937, when it had a return of negative 35.03%, but even if you put money in the S&P 500 the day before the 1929 stock market crash and the Great depression, over 15 years you would still beat U.S. Government Bonds! You would do much worse during some years of the depression, but the recovery would completely make up for this, for example three years in the thirties had returns of 31.12%, 33.92%, and 53.99%! And $1.00 invested in U.S. T-Bills (1 year government bonds) in 1925 grew to $17.87 by 2004. $1.00 invested in the S&P 500 grew to $2,533.20!”

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. Also, most students type significantly slower than they can talk.

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. To really see why, please read the following from a report by the National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education:

Today’s undergraduate population is different than it was a generation ago. In addition to being 72 percent larger in 1999 than in 1970 (with fall enrollment growing from 7.4 to 12.7 million), proportionately more students are enrolled part time (39 versus 28 percent) and at 2-year colleges (44 versus 31 percent), and women have replaced men as the majority (representing 56 percent of the total instead of 42 percent). There are proportionately more older students on campus as well: 39 percent of all postsecondary students were 25 years or older in 1999, compared with 28 percent in 1970 (U.S. Department of Education 2002b).

The "traditional" undergraduate—characterized here as one who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part time—is the exception rather than the rule. In 1999–2000, just 27 percent of undergraduates met all of these criteria. Thus, 73 percent of all undergraduates were in some way "nontraditional."

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

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3 The character of the undergraduate population depends on the type of institution. At both public 2-year and private for-profit institutions, 89 percent of the students were nontraditional, compared with 58 percent at public 4-year institutions.
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)

As we can see, there has been a large increase in the percentage of students who are non-traditional, those who are parents, or single parents, those who work full time, and those who commute from substantial distances. These nontraditional students are especially pressed for time, and simply may not be able to take some traditional classes that are scheduled during work hours. As a result of their extra responsibilities, they are especially in danger of never attaining their degree. As the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report states in discussing a 5 year panel study it commissioned:

Among nontraditional students whose goal was to obtain a bachelor’s degree at any time, 31 percent had earned one by 1994, compared with 54 percent of traditional students. The attainment rate for highly nontraditional students was 11 percent. Because many nontraditional students enroll part time, one would expect them to take longer than traditional students to complete a bachelor’s degree. If time-to-degree were the only issue, one would expect to find more nontraditional than traditional students still enrolled, but there was no statistically significant difference in the percentages still enrolled after 5 years (23 and 20 percent, respectively). Compared with traditional students, nontraditional students were more likely to change their degree objective (13 versus 7 percent) or leave without a degree (33 versus 19 percent). (page 15)

The report concludes:

Among beginning postsecondary students seeking bachelor’s and associate’s degrees, nontraditional students were much more likely than traditional students to leave without earning any degree. They were most at risk of dropping out in their first year. Compared with their traditional counterparts, nontraditional beginning students who left their first institution were more likely to leave postsecondary education altogether and less likely to transfer downward. (page 19)

It should also be noted that not only are many more students working full time, but they are also doing so at a time when work hours in the U.S. are the highest in modern history. According to an International Labor Organization report (2001), Americans now work more hours than any people in the developed world. Even compared to the Japanese, they work on average 100 hours more per year, or 2 ½ (traditional) weeks. Compared to the Germans, Americans work nearly 500 hours more per year, or about 12 ½ (traditional) weeks. A 1999 report by the United States Council of Economic Advisors found that American parents had 22 fewer hours per week to spend at home compared to the average in 1969. So
certainly students who work full time, especially those who are parents, or even more so single parents, face a formidable task in completing their education.

We would be doing a great service to them, and society, if we could make this easier for them. As we all know, a college degree is increasingly becoming a necessity for a financially secure life, and the educational level of a country’s population is the most important determinant of its economic strength, as well as being crucial to so many things that we value as a society.

Thus, I think it is important for a public university to offer a substantial number of internet courses. Not having to take time off of work to attend a day class can be extremely valuable, and even when night classes are available, usually students attend after a full work day. They may be quite tired at that time, and this may substantially affect learning.

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 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.

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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.\(^5\)

Today millions of Indians have escaped wrenching poverty because modern communications has given them access to advanced education and the intellectual labor market. 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.\(^6\)

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 are seeing 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.

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\(^6\) For details, please see “India bypasses wires to bring Wi-Fi to remote residents”, USA Today, August 18th, 2005, available at: http://www.usatoday.com/tech/wireless/2005-08-18-india-wi-fi_x.htm
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 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. For example, Stanley Kaplan and Princeton Review already have a vast network of centers. Quoting from the Kaplan website:

With more than 3,000 classroom locations throughout the U.S. and abroad [including our student union], Kaplan Test Prep and Admissions has served well over three million students in nearly 70 years. This division prepares students for 35 standardized tests, including entrance exams for secondary school, college and graduate school as well as English language and professional licensing exams. We also offer private tutoring and one-on-one admissions guidance.  

Just one contract with them to proctor exams for say $25 to $50 per, and we would immediately have a network of 3000 locations open long hours with qualified personnel for administering exams. The instructor would just download the exam and instructions to a designated secured website, then the student would come in at an appropriate time and show her ID.

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I would think at $25 to $50 per exam, this would be profitable for Stanley Kaplan or Princeton Review, plus it would bring in students, who would then be familiar with the center and see promotions for its services which include tutoring as well as test prep., so I would think it would be possible to come to a mutually beneficial arrangement.

In addition, reciprocal agreements could be built up between other universities and community colleges to proctor testing for any students in exchange for the $25 to $50 fee.

One could envision one day having hundreds or thousands of colleges or community colleges nationwide and internationally, plus Kaplan and Princeton Review, in a proctoring network. Then, most students could easily find a testing location near home or work where they could reserve a time online to take the exam at their convenience within a testing period specified by the instructor, or the instructor could require that all students take the exam at the same time, but at whichever member of the testing network is most convenient.

An internet course could then have a proctored final, or possibly a proctored midterm and final. A proctored final would only cost the university $25 to $50. An internet course would still be much less expensive than a traditional one with the savings in class room building, maintenance, parking etc.\(^8\)

With a proctored final accounting for 30-40% of the student’s grade, a student who did not learn the material and cheated on everything else would still receive a poor or failing grade. Moreover, a terrible performance on the final, yet excellent performance on all of the other course requirements would provide evidence of cheating. In such a case, a student may be required to duplicate the other material in a proctored environment. Regardless, such threats, implicit, or explicit in the syllabus, could be a strong deterrent.

**Development of Initiative and Internet Skills**

When I got my MBA at the University of Michigan in the late 90s, there was a great focus on training the students for what employers want. At the time there was a strong employer demand for MBAs who could work well with others. Traditionally MBAs had a reputation for being very individualistic and driven, team leaders more than team players. Thus, there was a big increase in group work, which had previously been rare.

A strong shift toward group work also occurred throughout education, in secondary and pre-secondary, as well as in higher education. While group work

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\(^8\) For some traditional classes, the class room cost is negligible as the room is already available, and would just sit vacant otherwise, but with more traditional classes, eventually, as we’ve seen especially recently, more buildings and infrastructure must be constructed and maintained.
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\(^9\), 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 Carolina Chapel Hill 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.

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\(^9\) 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).
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 45-60+ 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 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 61 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 also 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 Power Point. 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.\(^{10}\)

- **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 it is harder to keep well ordered, and most students speak significantly faster than they can type.
Bibliography


