

Second Thoughts on Online Education

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¶ 1 Let the computer do the teaching?! Some studies, expert opinions and cost pressures all point toward a continuing shift to education online. A major study last year, funded by the Education Department, which examined comparative research over 12 years, concluded that online learning on average beat face-to-face teaching by a modest but statistically meaningful margin. Bill Gates, whose foundation funds a lot of education programs, predicted last month that in five years much of college education will have gone online. "The self-motivated learner will be on the Web," Mr. Gates said, "College needs to be less place-based."

¶ 2 However, recent research, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, comes to a different conclusion. "A rush to online education may come at more of a cost than educators may suspect," the authors write. The study compared the grades achieved in the same introductory economics class by two groups of students — one group online, and one in classroom lectures. The 312 students were undergraduates at a major state university (unnamed, at the university's request).

¶ 3 Certain groups did notably worse online. Multilingual students online fell nearly a full grade lower than multilingual students that took the course in a classroom. Male students did about a half-grade worse online, as did low-achievers, who had college grade-point averages below the mean for the university. The difference certainly was not caused by machines replacing a small classroom teaching environment. In fact, the classroom in the study was a large lecture hall which seated hundreds of students.

¶ 5 David Figlio, an economist at Northwestern University and co-author of the paper, says that at first he had thought that the flexibility of the Internet — the ability to rewind and listen again — would probably give the online coursework an advantage for all students over traditional classroom teaching. It turns out that this was not the case.

¶ 6 So what accounts for the difference in outcomes? Mr. Figlio has a few theories. For the poorer performance of males and lower-achievers, he says the time-shifting convenience of the Web made it easier for students to postpone viewing the lectures and cram at the last minute just before the test, a study habit which generally does not lead to good results. It's partly a stereotype but also partly true, Mr. Figlio says, that female students tend to be better (than males) at time management, spreading their study time over a semester. "And the Internet makes it easier for students to avoid and postpone listening to lectures," he explained. This is a notable difference from a "real-life" classroom lecture which is only offered at a specific time and date.

¶ 7 The lower performance by multilingual students online, Mr. Figlio says, might be a result of students missing the body language of the lecturer and other classroom cues, which could be more important to a student whose first language is not English. When students are learning online, they lose the ability to ask an immediate question in class, during breaks or right after the lecture.

¶ 8 A question raised by the study is whether a shift to online education will widen the achievement gap between the best students and others. In other words, the weaker students may suffer. Never-the-less, Mr. Figlio says he uses online teaching tools and finds them valuable.

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