

IMPLICATIONS OF VIRTUAL SCHOOLING



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Summary

As online education in homes and schools continues to develop, traditional experiential learning is subsumed by mediated alternatives.

Post-industrial concepts of education include the use of information technologies, and a preoccupation with skills and knowledge that can be at the expense of values and socialisation usually associated with schooling.

The increased use of online learning will affect students through the values characteristic of the technology. However, student understandings of the world may conflict with the beliefs that schools would want to impart to their students.

Consequently, as students' perceptions are altered by technology use, a dissonance can arise between interpretations of what is important for students to know. It is important for educators to be able to recognise these concerns when planning for future use of online technology

Introduction: The Rise of Virtual Schools

The traditional paradigm of a teacher working in a face-to-face relationship with students in a classroom has been challenged in recent years by several variants of education which use online computers. One of these approaches is the **virtual school**, where there is some temporal or spatial separation between student, teacher and learning materials.

Typically, a student uses the Internet from home or school and the teacher is located elsewhere. In some examples, such as Florida High School, (a virtual school in the USA), there is no school building for the students to attend. Asynchronous communication is often used in these schools, enabling students to interact via web sites and email. These schools have proven popular in the USA and Canada, where new virtual schools appear on the World Wide Web regularly.

Experiential learning is subsumed or affected by its mediated counterpart in both virtual schools and classrooms using online learning. This process represents a challenge to the traditional paradigm of schooling based on direct experience and reflects a similar dramatic shift in society. Online computers are used for banking, shopping, entertainment, holiday bookings, tertiary education, bill payment and many other functions.

Traditional buildings and services still exist as a parallel system, including banks, shopping malls, travel agents, universities and accounts payable offices. However, it is likely that the continued effects of globalisation and technology will affect the ways that people use these services and in some cases even replace them with an online alternative. Videophones, for example, may ultimately eliminate some visits to the doctor, hardware store, or even friends.

In schools, teachers are encouraged to use computer technology by the knowledge that many students find it motivating, and by pressures from parents and school systems. However, computers sit somewhat uneasily in the educational system because they reflect concepts of flexibility and instantaneous access to information rather than a world of timetables, bells, uniforms and other characteristics of the industrial era. Indeed, school systems include three identifiable elements that can be used to conceptualise the purposes of education. These can be understood in terms of pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial concepts.

The pre-industrial era referents can be seen in the medieval imagery of schools as enclaves of power and prestige, accompanied by examples such as heraldic symbolism and Latin mottos. Hogwarts, the school featured in the Harry Potter series of books, illustrates this tendency.

The characteristics of industrial-era schooling can be identified in *Tom Brown's School Days*, where Hughes outlines the factory-like regimentation of Rugby in the Nineteenth Century. These continue to this day, in the separation of learning into subjects, and the hierarchical organisation of power in some school systems.

In the present post-industrial era, the retention of some of the characteristics of schooling from earlier times prompts a reflection on the nature of schooling. This is caused by a misalignment between the values of conventional schools and electronic media.

Virtual schooling and the Purposes of School

From a purely technical point of view it is possible to teach a given body of knowledge or skills by online learning in virtual schools. In *The Struggle for Control of Public Education: Market Ideology v Democratic Values*, Engel has described the concentration on skills that are seen to be necessary in the USA to maintain market position in the global economy.

Arguably, concepts of accountability and performance measurement are linked to the need to produce students who will be able to work effectively in a globalised environment. However, schools have traditionally existed for more than certification or skilling. They continue to be important as agents of socialisation where students are taught concepts such as accepting diversity and difference. By working in face-to-face situations with other students, they learn how to work with others. Concepts such as honesty, sharing, compassion and tolerance are reinforced through activities such as classroom activities and assemblies.

The promotion of mediated learning facilitates socialisation through the values characteristic of that technology. In the case of the Internet, the values that students learn may, however, be inappropriate. It is likely that the Internet promotes a form of cultural imperialism where participants speak English and are concerned with identifiable values relating to capitalism, trade, religion, sexuality and democracy. Not all cultures will share these values and those who support more conservative values may see the Internet as a foreign ideology to be resisted.

Schools will also tend to promote conservative values that promote qualities such as community building and group cohesion. A consequence of this approach is that some school values will be contrary to those that students receive through their online interactions. This problem is compounded because of the way that online environments condition users. The message of online learning is not only what is on the computer screen, but the effects that the technology has on students. It changes the way that they perceive the world.

Marshal McLuhan described this problem in the pre-Internet era, arguing that media affects our perception without our knowledge of it. Nevertheless, the observation that a new technology can change the way that people think or relate to each other is not new.

As early as 1889, an anonymous writer contributed an article entitled *Intellectual Effects of Electricity* to *The Spectator*, lamenting the way in which the electric telegraph reduced reflection and encouraged hasty conclusions:

The constant diffusion of statements in snippets, the constant excitements of feeling unjustified by fact, the constant formation of hasty or erroneous opinions, must in the end, one would think, deteriorate the intelligence of all to whom the telegraph appeals. The result is a universal haste and confusion of judgement, a disposition to decide too quickly...We notice...in all the rising generation, a tendency to jump at conclusions without data, to avoid suspending judgement, to postpone thought to the indulgence of mere surprise...the universal result of the use of the telegraph is to overfill the ordinary mind with undigested and undigestible [sic] scraps of information ... [The] tendency must be to weaken and ultimately paralyse reflective power. (*The Spectator*, November 9, 1889, p.632)

Conclusion: Dissonance and Student Expectations in Virtual Schools

Students' perceptions are altered through the online technology used in virtual and traditional schools and elsewhere in the community. The result is a dissonance between traditional schooling and the assumptions underlying computer-based technology.

The post-industrial educational system is substantially based on timetables requiring teachers and students to be physically in the same place at the same time - whereas the organisational form of online education emphasises flexibility, and the breaking of barriers of time and place. Students who become aware of an uncomfortable tension between the expectations of their school education and the values implicit in learning with virtual schools may be impelled to change their ideas or acceptance of either school education or the virtual school in which they are enrolled.

As daily life is increasingly mediated through a range of information technologies, it is likely that many students will become uncomfortable with aspects of their schooling. Increasingly, dissonance is likely to result not only from the technology used in virtual schooling environments, but in the wider range of online interactions that students are likely to experience. Collectively, the organisational forms and values embedded in media may well run contrary to those traditionally planned for school education.

As virtual schooling continues to develop, there will be both an increase in the number of virtual schools and greater access for students at sites other than home or at their traditional school (Russell 2004). Virtual schools will change the nature of school education because traditional experiential learning is, in part, subsumed by mediated alternatives. Educators, parents and students need to be aware of the possible results of this change.

Schools have traditionally promoted beliefs about communities and individuals which may conflict with the concepts and values learned through online interactions. Parents should ask virtual school administrators questions about socialisation, values and ethics when enquiring about enrolment. An increased awareness of some of the potential problems associated with virtual schools is likely to prompt a timely reflection on the purposes of schooling and our preferences for the future direction of society

References

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