

Distance Learning Op-Ed.
Erin R. Mason

Charles M. Schulz, the award-winning cartoonist responsible for warming our hearts with Snoopy and the Peanuts gang, took only one formal art education course—and it was a correspondence course by mail.

Correspondence courses have come a long way since the days of Charles Schulz.

This fall, more than 29,000 students in the state of Connecticut have taken online courses—the modern incarnation of distance learning.

Higher education is now offering a great product called online education. Students must still commit to signing onto the class two to three times a week, doing the work, and meeting the deadlines, but there's now incredible flexibility. You choose the time to sign onto the online course, take your exam, or submit your assignment.

As a distance learning professional, I receive numerous questions about the merits of online learning. The prevailing belief is that an online course where students and teachers never meet cannot be of the same quality as a traditional “brick and mortar” or lecture-driven class.

Learning in an online environment is active, as students are responsible for reading, researching, analyzing, and evaluating material. In education theory, these activities are referred to as higher-order thinking. Instead of learning that Hartford is the capital of Connecticut (lower-order thinking), students are taught to think about why Hartford is the state's capital.

When questioned about the merits of online learning, I think of large university classes where hundreds gather in lecture halls to learn statistics, history, or astronomy. The professor does not know each student, does not take attendance, and cannot determine who—out of scores of students—understands the material, needs more attention, or is using instructional time for a power nap. Feedback comes only from a midterm and a final, a few quizzes, and arrives weeks after the test has been taken. Lectures prevail. Isn't this the true “distance learning?”

In our online classes, the average class size is 22. Professors can tell immediately, based on weekly discussions, assignments, and quizzes who is “getting it” and who is not. Professors can work with each student individually, through online communication and collaboration, and provide encouragement that cannot be given during the middle of a lecture.

Education is great, and everyone could use a little more of it. Educators dictate what courses you needed to take and when to take them. Educational institutions

are only open at certain times, and only offer certain classes a few times a week, on certain days.

People are used to adjusting work schedules, family, community, social, and spiritual activities, around taking classes. Maybe that's feasible for some, but not so easy for others.

Online education is portable, academically sound, interactive, and provides instant feedback so you'll always know how you're doing in the class. In addition, you won't have to find a babysitter, put more gas in your tank and—even better—you can incorporate education into your life instead of having to rearrange your life around taking classes.

Think about it. It worked for Charles M. Schulz.

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