

10 Myths about Online Learning

Online educators find that there are some common misperceptions about online learning. Recently, the National Council for Online Learning (NACOL) queried its membership, which is comprised of experienced online educators, to discover the most common myths and to offer insights as to why they are myths indeed.

1. Myth: Virtual schools are a separate delivery system from traditional education.

Truth: There are more than 500,000 enrollments in online courses across the U.S, in schools and districts, meeting rigorous state academic standards as virtual schools provide courses to students inside schools. Online courses are in all 50 states and make it possible to offer advanced courses or instruction that are otherwise not offered at the local level.

2. Myth: Online courses are for gifted and talented students only.

Truth: Online courses have worked well with students of all kinds, including at-risk students, students in urban and rural areas, those with limited English proficiency, and those with special needs. Online learning has also been used successfully as part of systemic reforms to help students who are performing below grade level in large urban school districts.

3. Myth: Online courses lack interaction.

Truth: Students typically have more one-on-one interactions with their teachers and fellow students in online courses, especially when team projects are assigned. Teachers report getting to know their students better, and students who are shy or do not think well “on their feet” tend to contribute more in online environments. Students are often actively interacting with both resources and others in online environments.

4. Myth: Online students are isolated and therefore will be socially disadvantaged.

Truth: In fact, students often engage actively both online and off as they complete assignments and socialize with other students and adults in their schools, at home, and in the community. Online students typically take only one or two courses online, blending their learning opportunities with traditional instruction in brick-and-mortar schools.

5. Myth: Online teachers have easy jobs.

Truth: Online teachers report that they work much harder and spend more hours online than in the classroom but that they love it. They do not simply “move a class online” and “put up what they teach.” Online instructional design, writing, management of instruction, and communicating with students can take considerable time and be quite different from what goes on inside a traditional classroom.

6. Myth: Online courses have to be developed from scratch.

Truth: Many online courses already exist that meet state standards and are accredited by recognized organizations. These online resources have been developed by states, private business, and independent organizations. At least initially, collaborating and sharing these options may be more cost-effective and practical for school systems than developing online instruction in-house.

7. Myth: Online courses are easier for students than regular courses.

Truth: Most online courses are not condensed or easier versions of regular courses. They are aligned to rigorous state standards. They require active participation and operate in settings under supervision of state-certified teachers, require students take state assessment tests, have attendance policies, and have competency-based academic progress requirements in effect.

8. Myth: A student is more likely to cheat online.

Truth: Cheating is no more prevalent online than in the classroom. In addition, there are many technological ways to deter it and track it. In many cases, the online venue and communication enables teachers to get to know their students' idiosyncrasies and skills much better. Teachers say that student writing has a voice and that it is often easier to spot work that is inconsistent or unlike earlier communication in online environments.

9. Myth: Virtual schools are about technology.

Truth: Virtual schools are about curriculum and instruction for students. The “medium” is not the message because the student, instructor, content, and learning goals are key. Networks simply make it possible to provide communication, access to extended resources, and use of sound, graphics, video, text, interactivity, and other digital capabilities to strengthen instruction. Most schools have the basic technology, Web browsers, plug-in software, and access that are needed.

10. Myth: Online courses represent an “add-on” to already burdened school systems and teachers.

Truth: Online education does not represent an “add-on.” It does represent an opportunity take advantage of online resources; enable teachers to help students learn in ways that match students’ needs and learning style, and transform schools. Online courses may or may not decrease costs, depending on how budgets are allocated and how online courses are integrated into instruction. Training and support of teachers is important.