

Internet homeschool classes

May 20, 8:28 PM ·

Well, we're deciding what virtual classes we want to tackle this year, and none of us is too excited at the prospect. We dipped our feet into the world of Internet learning this past year, with lackluster results. Maybe it's us, maybe it was this particular course, or maybe it was just a fluke, but for whatever reason, the experience was not a positive one - other than the fact that both kids received high school credit in Spanish.

In order to satisfy the foreign language requirements needed to enter most colleges, I had both my children take Spanish I with Florida Virtual School. It was probably a bit premature on my part, given that neither of them was a high schooler last year. My reason for doing so seemed sound at the time. We had been using an elementary/middle school Spanish program ourselves for a couple of years, and I felt that it was better for them to take Spanish I while the vocabulary and verbs were fresh in their minds rather than risk losing what they'd learned by waiting until they were older. This approach did have some advantages; they were able to breeze through certain units, such as telling time, days and months, etc. However, it didn't seem to outweigh the negatives in our day to day dealings with the course.

One of the major stumbling blocks we faced was that instead of enrolling in Florida Virtual School, they were placed in Hillsborough County's virtual program (a part of the state's organization, yet run more in line with the public school system). Little did I realize how important this error would turn out to be. Unlike FLVS, HVS has nearly no flexibility and each student is not on his or her own schedule, but participating under the school system's calendar. When my two children were placed in the class, they were told that they were "four weeks behind." Well, in typical homeschooler fashion, I asked, "Four weeks behind who?" How could we be behind anyone when we just started? Only later did I fully realize we were expected to pace ourselves with the county, follow their holidays, and finish the course on their deadline. This fact alone was enough to irritate the independent spirit I hadn't realized had developed so strongly during the past four years of homeschooling.

Once they completed more of the class, my children also started chafing at the busy work assignments they often found themselves doing. Being used to reading and discussing works at home, they were unused to having to "prove" on paper that they had read or learned something. Maybe this was a good thing to confront - it will happen sometime in their futures anyway - but coupled with the annoyance of hurrying to catch up with classmates they never saw in order to satisfy a teacher's sense of order sent them over the edge. Now, Spanish itself was an enemy rather than an interesting language to study.

I think this, most of all, bothered me about the entire virtual learning experience. Part of my homeschooling efforts are aimed at approaching education as a positive, lifelong endeavor. I hope to instill and feed that curiosity about the world so that my children

want to learn throughout their lives, not simply to achieve a certain grade point average or even a specific degree. Yet, this class experience brought us right back to the school mentality we had left far behind when we started homeschooling: Just do the work required to score well on the test and satisfy the standards. It doesn't matter what you remember later or if you have any interest in the subject, just follow the syllabus and check off the assessment list.

I'm not sure if it is simply an unavoidable aspect of institutional education, but the very rote learning methods and resulting lack of inspiration in coursework is a good portion of what caused me to investigate homeschooling in the first place. So, when we faced some of those same circumstances in our first Internet class, I was disappointed.

So, you may ask, why in the world are we thinking about taking *more* virtual courses? Well, my daughter is taking one right now on FLVS and enjoying the material covered even if some of the assignments are redundant. The subject matter is of more interest to her - world cultures - and she knew what to expect this time around. Also, even though she started the class in late March, she was behind no one and has only her own pacing schedule to follow. Her teacher appears to be independent of any traditional school system (unlike the Hillsborough teacher) and more readily available for communication. Thus, it is a more pleasant experience, even with the inherent "schoolishness" we seem to have an aversion to now.

Also, with only one foreign language credit, my children need another to satisfy any college entrance application they may face in the future. So, we are faced with another virtual school class or risk taking an unaccredited class that may cause questions to be raised later. I'm hoping that with what we've learned we'll be better equipped to handle the virtual world of education and that FLVS' flexibility will help us face this part of our homeschooling experience with more positivity. My daughter likes the independence from me in doing her own classwork and learning something more on her own; my son likes the idea of validation and credibility that these Internet courses provide. So, we may be on the virtual track now (or part of it anyway), but I don't think we're ready to give up our readings, discussions, and home-based activities just yet.

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