

Is Online Education Benefiting or Hurting Our Fields?

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Technology and the Internet have changed the way students learn and teachers teach, and online education has become increasingly popular in the past few years. Distance education, virtual high schools, E-learning, interactive video, and online courses are prominent features of the modern educational landscape (NASPE, 2007). Most colleges and universities that offer face-to-face courses are also providing graduate courses and even complete master's programs online (Brown & Corkill, 2007); students with jobs and families are turning to online adult and continuing education courses for professional development; and an increasing number of K-12 school districts across the country are giving students the option of fulfilling some of their credits by taking online classes.

AAHPERD is currently involved in some types of web-based professional development. For example, The Health Education and Promotion Network (HEP Network)—which resulted from collaboration between the American Association for Health Education (AAHE), the Foundation for the Advancement of Health Education (FAHE), and Health Enhancement Solutions, Inc.—offers web-based instructional courses in health education and promotion. The HEP Network allows universities that have health education faculty to expand their offerings, and those that do not have health education faculty to fill that void. The courses are offered in two formats: (1) graduate credit offered through various colleges and universities, and (2) professional development (CEU) credits leading to the completion of a “Certificate Program” for teachers and educators (AAHE, n.d.).

Pros and Cons of Online Education

Online education has obvious advantages, including location and schedule flexibility, cost, convenience, independent learning, and online networking opportunities, to name a few. However, there are also limitations and disadvantages associated with online education (see Buschner, 2006). Professionals in the fields of sport, physical education, recreation, and dance may be especially concerned about the effect of online education when the courses involve teaching movement skills that, many may say, cannot possibly be taught or learned well in an online setting. It may even seem counterproductive to turn to online education—for which students will be sitting in front of a computer—when the ultimate goal is to help students become more physically active. In the case of educators and administrators looking to complete their degree, get certified, or reach other professional development goals, concerns may exist about the absence of face-to-face contact and the quality and effectiveness of online instruction.

Of course, these are valid concerns. However, appropriate online instruction can be extremely valuable to teachers, preservice professionals, and students. And since new approaches will continually evolve, it is critical that students and professionals find ways to benefit from online education and use it to their advantage. In fact, many health, physical education, sport, dance, and recreation professionals, including AAHPERD members, are already doing so.

K-12 Online Education

Particularly in K-12 schools, online education must be carefully designed so that student learning is not compromised (see “Recommendations for Online Physical Education” on pg. 29). Students need immediate and specific feedback and demonstrations, as well as structured practice opportunities in order to perform a specific movement skillfully. In addition, many sport forms would be much more difficult to learn and practice alone. Children and youth also benefit socially from interacting with teachers and peers. However, there are certainly ways in which online courses can complement instruction by providing resources, pictures, and videos of skilled performance and reinforcement of principles related to skills and fitness. This is also potentially an opportunity for the inclusion of students who otherwise cannot participate in instruction due to illness or injury. Online courses have the potential to reach previously disengaged students (Ransdell, Rice, Snelson, & DeCola, 2008) and have been helpful in dealing with students with eating disorders, mental health issues, and other chronic health problems.

Jayne Greenberg, executive director for physical education and health literacy at Miami Dade County Public Schools, said that at first she was upset to hear that the public school system wanted to offer high school fitness classes through their virtual school system. "I wondered, how could PE possibly be taught online? I didn't want online classes to replace what we do in the gym and the face-to-face instruction delivered by a certified physical education teacher," she said. "But, I decided to try it out as an online personal fitness teacher in order to get a valid opinion. Actually, the curriculum is excellent. It's in alignment with the state and national standards, and it teaches kids to do pre- and post-fitness testing on their own. The issue is whether or not students follow the curriculum." Students are provided with activity logs and parents need to sign off on what their children do. Some students and parents take the classes seriously and benefit from them, while, as it can be expected, others don't.

"Teaching online classes was a lot of work," said Jayne. "I had to go online every day in order to communicate with students and offer feedback. I also had to grade papers... it was very time intensive. I personally prefer not being tied down to the computer, I much prefer interacting with my students face-to-face." The main concerns that Jayne has about online education are the lack of supervision and the risk of injury (are the activities safe to be practiced without being monitored by an instructor?), the difficulty of providing authentic assessment, and the fact that some students may not learn enough independently. Still, students who take their online classes seriously can benefit from online personal fitness and health courses as much as they would were they in a classroom. Online classes can also benefit students who are being homeschooled or who live in rural settings and may not have access to certain courses needed to fulfill their credits or get advanced placement (J. Greenberg, personal communication, December 12, 2009).

Health education and health-related fitness are also being offered online at school districts across the country (Ransdell et al., 2008). HealthTeacher (www.healthteacher.com), for example, is a provider of online health education resources for K-12 schools that is being used by thousands of teachers nationwide. It provides the resources, tools, and background materials needed to educate students about making healthy lifestyle choices. The over 300 lesson plans are aligned with National Health Education Standards and they focus on five key areas: health, nutrition, mental health, family life/sexuality, and tobacco use. Innovative programs such as this one provide education opportunities for teachers, students, parents, and entire schools districts, and have the potential to improve the health and lifestyle of all involved.

Postsecondary Online Education

As mentioned earlier, most colleges and universities are already offering undergraduate and graduate courses online as well as complete master's and doctoral programs in the fields of health, physical education, recreation, sport, and dance. Not all classes are appropriate for online delivery, but many programs have benefited from complementing traditional classroom offerings with online education (Ransdell et al., 2008). Quality online instruction should give students the opportunity to actively interact with their instructor and fellow students (Brown & Corkill, 2007). Interactive online discussions can provide students with invaluable educational learning opportunities. Students in an online setting have a unique opportunity to discuss and reflect upon issues that are happening across the country, share teaching strategies, and network with fellow professionals or students in various geographical locations.

The multiple and repetitive exposures to specific topics and issues through online discussions also produce more positive learning outcomes for students. And the fact that most online programs have been developed so recently guarantees that they will address current educational and content trends. It's reasonable to assume, therefore, that online programs based on current research and practice will benefit students all the more. As for the quality of instruction, many university instructors teach both online and face-to-face courses, so frequently the same instructors teach a given course in the classroom as well as online. In response to huge enrollment increases, some universities have hired independent contractors as adjuncts, who often are practitioners involved in the local school districts and are therefore well qualified for the job (Brown & Corkill, 2007).

The University of South Florida, for example, offers a master's degree in physical education online. Online courses for the degree include curriculum and games, adapted physical education, grant writing, dance and gymnastics, and learner assessment, among others. The College of Education's School of Physical Education and Exercise Science also offers undergraduate online courses on nutrition and sport and society. More than 100 students from all over the United States are currently working toward the Master of Arts in Physical Education. About 80 percent of them are already teachers, so their main goals are often to improve practice or become certified in an alternative specialty (S. Sanders, personal communication, January 12, 2009).

Steve Sanders, Department Chair and co-director of the XRKade Research Lab at University of South Florida, has had the opportunity to help faculty design online master's courses and has administered and taught online courses himself. "Students are happy with the program, because most of them already have a full-time job and taking courses online is convenient for them. They also benefit from immediately putting into practice the content they learned in class," said

Steve. "Since there is no face-to-face interaction with the professor, there is a discussion board where students and the instructor can discuss topics or questions of the week, discuss readings, network, and offer suggestions, all of which benefit students greatly. In fact, I believe that more of this kind of interaction goes on in an online setting than in a traditional classroom." Steve also referred to the Florida Virtual School (a public school funded by the state, now in its 12th year) online physical education program for 9th through 12th grade and said that many universities are going to online options. "Online education is surely going to stay with us," he said, "though I think it shouldn't take over completely; online courses are better for graduate programs and experienced teachers and not necessarily for undergraduate programs where beginning teachers need hands-on experiences."

Lisa Hansen, who is also co-director of the Research Lab at University of South Florida, has taught many sections of an online course and has helped develop and improve it. "Online courses can be beneficial if created properly," said Lisa. "Unfortunately, because they are online, many courses are overloaded with students, making it difficult for an instructor to provide all students with the adequate amount of feedback and learning assistance." But she believes that online courses can be very beneficial if the instructor is tech-savvy. "Learning how to use online sources outside of the typical PowerPoint lesson, recall quizzes, and simple discussion-board chats enhances the learning experience. I have learned that many students will be more creative when provided interactive lessons." This does not apply to all types of courses, though. "Some courses need face-to-face interaction for the appropriate learning to occur, especially in pedagogy when we are teaching students how to teach" (L. Hansen, personal communication, January 10, 2009).

There is no doubt that online master's and doctoral programs are dramatically changing the way that teachers and administrators are preparing for or improving their work. Eventually, as online education becomes more extensively available, and as more people participate in it, it is likely that "it will be accepted as equal in richness and quality to face-to-face classroom programs" (Brown & Corkill, 2007).

Sources:

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Recommendations for Online Physical Education

NASPE's Initial Guidelines for Online Physical Education are intended for educators who are considering the implications of preparing and teaching online physical education courses at the high school level. NASPE believes that online physical education should not be a student's only option for completing physical education requirements. Instead, a combined approach—requiring face-to-face classes by a certified physical education teacher that are amplified with online assignments, readings, movements, chat rooms, and examinations—is a more reasonable instructional alternative for this subject matter.

NASPE's position statement on online education discusses the advantages and disadvantages of online physical education, and offers the following guidelines for a successful program:

- Students should go through an approval process for taking online courses and should secure permission from parents, teachers, and administrators. Prior to enrolling in online physical education courses, students should have an adequate level of knowledge and skill in both physical education and technology. Students should have completed and passed a developmentally appropriate elementary and secondary physical education program based on NASPE's standards.
- Teachers should have adequate professional development and training specific to online instruction and must be aware of the required time commitment to work in an online environment. An enriching online learning experience requires a certified physical education teacher who is experienced in the traditional classroom and gymnasium setting. The teacher should serve as a positive role model by taking an online course before teaching his/her own.
- A quality online physical education course should be aligned with the national standards for physical education. The curriculum and courses should be standards-based, relevant, meaningful, and challenging. A variety of sport, dance, aquatics, outdoor, and exercise courses might be offered at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels.
- Accountability for learning and student motivation are two reasons for assessment. If there are no opportunities for hybrid courses and in-person assessment, alternative assessment should be used. Teachers must set realistic, appropriate, and incremental goals for student learning.
- The number of students taking an online physical education course must be considered, because it can affect the quality of teaching and learning and the amount and quality of feedback offered by the instructor.
- Students and teachers need to adjust to a new schedule and must commit sufficient time to online courses.
- School and community facilities should be available for learning. It is the parents' responsibility to make sure that facilities are safe and available, and it is the student's responsibility to have the knowledge to access it. The teacher should become familiar with the facilities students will be attending.
- School districts, students, teachers, and parents must share the responsibility of assuring that equipment and technology systems are accessible, working properly, and safe.
- Course and program evaluation are critical for the development, validity, and relevance of online learning.
- Online physical education courses should serve and be available for students with special needs, including disabilities and language barriers.

Source:

NASPE. (2007). *Initial guidelines for online physical education* Retrieved February 2, 2009, from http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/pdf_files/pos_papers/OnlinePE.pdf.