Virtual High Schools: The High Schools of the Future?

Join a class composed of students from different states and countries chatting and learning together yet never leaving their homes! Virtual courses, virtual student lounges, virtual yearbooks, and virtual graduations; is this the education of the future?

When Winter Park, Florida, 12th -grader Luke Levesque took his computer class, all he had to do was roll out of bed and turn on his computer. Luke was completing his education at [The Florida High School](#), a virtual high school. California, Nebraska, New Jersey, Hawaii, Utah, Washington, and Oregon -- among other states -- also offer online classes.

And more distance learning classes are being added all the time.

"Distance education finally brings democracy to education. It gives the student in East L.A. or Brentwood, or Martha's Vineyard, or Harlem, or Pakistan an equal opportunity to content curriculum and to people with many perspectives," says Tom Layton, technology teacher at Eugene, Oregon's 63-student [CyberSchool](#). "I believe students who learn with each other will learn *from* each other. Until now, the single biggest factor influencing the quality of education was where you live. If you don't believe me, ask any real estate agent. For the 21st Century it is not going to be where you live, but how you are connected."

DISTANCE LEARNING HAS MANY BENEFITS

Students who take cyber courses proceed at their own pace. If they need to listen to a lecture a second time, or think about a question for awhile, they may do so without fearing that they will hold back the rest of the class. Through cyber courses, students can complete a degree more quickly, or repeat failed courses without the indignity of being in a class with younger students. Students have access to an incredible variety of enrichment courses, or can participate in internships or work and still graduate with their classes.

Cyber education has many other advantages:

- It permits students in small, rural, or low-wealth school districts to take specialized courses that would ordinarily not be available to them.
- It provides home schooled students with instruction in subjects their parents might not be able to teach, such as foreign languages or computer skills.
- It meets the needs of school phobics, those in hospitals or recovering at home, dropouts who would like to get back in, expelled students, single parents, and students in other states or even other countries looking for nontraditional educational solutions.
- And, in an age when many of our schools are overcrowded or crumbling, cyber learning makes financial sense, too, because schools using distance

learning do not need to modernize or build new buildings in order to provide quality cyber instruction.

THE VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL

One of the first pre-college level virtual schools, The Virtual High School, was started in 1996 by the Hudson (Massachusetts) Public School System and the Concord Consortium. More than 850 students from 43 high schools and 13 states are registered there. "In Center, Colorado," says Virtual High School Director Bruce Droste, "physics is still offered after the physics teacher left, and in Amman, Jordan, and Alaska students take a geometry course previously unavailable to them."

At the Virtual High School, an asynchronous (students are not all online at the same time) interactive program, attendance is taken when students log on to their computers. The asynchronous nature allows students from around the world to be in class together. "I don't see this as a substitute for schools as we know them," says Droste, "but rather as a powerful tool for enrichment." Each school in the cooperative contributes one site coordinator who participates in a graduate-level course on the design and development of network-based courses and then develops a cyber course. That school can then enroll up to 20 of their students in any Virtual High School course.

OTHER SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOLS

Instead of enrichment and specialized courses, Utah's Electronic High School offers core curriculum. Teachers determine the classes' content, and then hire teams of high school students enrolled in a special two-year multimedia program to create the Web pages and graphics. The collaboration produces highly interactive courses rich in multimedia resources. The students enrolled at the Electronic High School complete coursework independently and submit assignments and receive teacher feedback through e-mail and on-line chat, having as much contact with the teacher as they desire. In one year an astounding 12,000 students earned at least one credit through Utah's statewide Electronic High School.

Fifty students this year earned a high school diploma through Colorado's Monte Vista's On-Line Academy. What makes this school so special is its student body. The majority are dropouts and students who have been expelled. Eighty percent of the student body receives funding. The Academy also provides computers for needy students and reimburses students who complete the year the cost of Internet dial-up accounts. Sixteen to 20 peer tutors, who earn one computer credit for their work, interact with the online students, build Web pages, and help construct the online courses. The peer tutoring system is set up to provide extra support for the student body, one that often does not have a parent's involvement to help them stay motivated. The On-Line Academy relies on asynchronous instruction, primarily e-mail and HTML-interfaces.

Several of the schools include synchronous (real-time) as well as asynchronous instruction in their programs. The Internet Academy, located south of Seattle, offers students the option of taking a unit with a group or independently. Those who opt to take the class with a group meet in the chat room every Monday to review their assignments and ask questions, a process that usually takes about 30 minutes. The transcript is then posted on the unit's Web page later in the week for those

who -- for legitimate reasons -- couldn't make the chat. Students who choose to take the unit independently provide weekly reports via e-mail, chat, or telephone each Monday. After the formal chats, the teacher is available for one-on-one chats or to trouble shoot. E-mail and phone calls occur all day long, too.

Other schools using similar instruction are Canada's [Fraser Valley Distance Education School](), serving approximately 500 students, and Hawaii's [E-School](), which uses a multi-user community known as MOO. E-School balances synchronous learning with asynchronous options, allowing 24-hour access from all time zones at hours that are most convenient to individual students.

Cyber instruction is a very new field. Many individual schools, consortia, and support organizations constantly test methodologies, often with varying degrees of success. All are learning as they teach. Some virtual schools offer unscheduled, self-paced, relatively non-interactive courses. Others offer courses for a defined length of time, and students interact with one another either asynchronously, when it is convenient, or synchronously, in real time. Each system has its own advantages, but says Tom Layton of Oregon's CyberSchool, "To me the big story is that all these kids are taking classes over the Internet and think that it's not all that unusual. It amazes me that they feel this is so natural, and that it fits easily into their vision of normal life as we head to the end of the 20th Century…We think it is going to be like the VCR. One week you don't know anybody who owns one, the next week you don't know anybody who doesn't."

A virtual education is not for everyone, but when the traditional schools of the 21st Century include some of the technology options for their students available in the virtual schools of today, will the instruction be so very different?

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