

Dispelling the misconceptions of online education

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Online education in Canada provides learners with a flexible, inclusive and quality educational experience.

By JEFF VALLANCE & BARBARA WILSON-KEATES | JUN 18 2018

We read with interest the recent opinion article, “[Online learning isn’t as inclusive as you may think](#),” published by *University Affairs* in early May. We feel the authors provided a limited perspective regarding online education and online learners. We disagree with several of the authors’ contentions and generalizations, which we outline below. We also direct the authors and readers to sources that may help to address some of the issues the authors raise.

First, the authors suggest online learning provides opportunities to those who might otherwise have been “excluded from or marginalized in higher education.” This is a generalization for which we feel perhaps the wrong words were chosen. At Athabasca University (AU), where we teach, we see no indication that our students come here due to feelings of exclusion or marginalization.

The online educational context in the Canadian landscape is no longer regarded as an inferior experience, a last chance effort to earn a degree, or a simple way to upgrade an elective course for transfer. Rather, we do know that the students pursue programs at AU because they can access quality programs, both undergraduate and graduate, that are flexible and fit their own schedule regardless of their circumstances (e.g., employed full time, family commitments, geographic location). The online context affords them the flexibility to continue their education.

Second, the authors suggest interactions (student-to-student, faculty-to-student, and faculty-to-institution) are limited and may lead to feelings of isolation and a lack of community. The quality and degree of interactions within an online course are driven by the instructor. An instructor can certainly prevent feelings of isolation and lack of community by acquiring some background knowledge and understanding of the many strategies that have been proposed in the literature. In our experience, the instructor needs to move beyond simple discussion-based activities and course readings, which unfortunately epitomizes many online courses and programs.

While a student can be anonymous in a traditional classroom and float through a class without interaction, we find that strategy is incongruous with the online class. With personalized learning, multiple discussion threads, and extensive instructor involvement, it is our experience

that online learning provides more opportunities for interaction with classmates and instructors.

Throughout the past decade, much has been published regarding recommendations and strategies to prevent isolation and a lack of community, and we direct the authors to [an excellent resource](#) written by three AU faculty members, Sherri Melrose, Caroline Park and Beth Perry. While the resource targets health professionals, the concepts, strategies and applications span disciplines. Our students report feelings of connectedness and community, mainly due to their similar circumstances, including (but not limited to) life stage, work/professional situation, and geographic location.

To this end, we also recommend [a paper by Nicholas Croft and colleagues](#) titled “Overcoming isolation in distance learning: building a learning community through time, space and sector.” While this article indeed suggests that the online environment has the potential to result in detachment and alienation, the article presents excellent strategies to create a successful virtual learning community.

With respect to faculty feeling isolated, [research by Ryan McLawhon and Marc Cutright \(PDF\)](#) suggests otherwise as 95 percent of online instructors reported above-average job satisfaction with their online teaching roles. Nonetheless, while some faculty may indeed report feelings of detachment and alienation, these feelings are not exclusive to the online context and are as present in the traditional “bricks and mortar” environment.

Third, the authors suggest that it is difficult to move past the one-size-fits-all model of online learning, and that learning and ownership is constrained in an online environment. Virtual learning environments have continued to grow over the last decade and what may have been considered difficult before has now changed. Janna Anderson refers to [the term “E-empowerment”](#) and succinctly describes effective models of online learning – models that students and faculty delivering exemplary online learning experiences embrace:

“Advances in distributed computing, computational intelligence, database management, and pervasive systems are allowing the facilitation of customised courses and degree programmes, built to meet the needs of specific individuals anytime, anywhere. Computer-based learning modules can be programmed to fit different people’s learning styles, personal backgrounds, and interest. They allow self-pacing and flexibility and generally lead to a more efficient and beneficial educational experience for learning who are self-motivated.” (p. 305).

In our program in the faculty of health disciplines at AU, efforts are made to ensure students are E-empowered. Both undergraduate and graduate students tailor their learning experience by applying their professional background and experiences. Course assignments are relevant and personalized (rather than the administration of prescriptive and generic course assignments). Instructors in our program encourage a tailored experience by engaging in continuous feedback and evaluation throughout the course, and recognizing and considering different student learning styles in the course.

Athabasca University is one of four comprehensive academic and research institutions in Alberta. A member of the Canadian Virtual University-Université virtuelle canadienne consortium, AU is a leader in university-level online education. Within our faculty of health disciplines, we have both faculty and sessional instructors successfully teaching in the online context across a variety of undergraduate and graduate programs. While online learning is not simply the transfer of face-to-face content into digital form, there are now numerous resources available to help bridge the gap and transform successful face-to-face methods into virtual domains to create engaging content and environments that drive student and faculty engagement and success.

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Other stories that might be of interest:

- [Online learning isn't as inclusive as you may think](#)
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