A Teacher's Experience: What I Learned Working in Online Schools

By Cherie Ichinose

With increasing participation of both teachers and students in digital learning, opportunities to better educate our youth are at an all-time high.

Technological advancements have transformed the school house into a limitless portal of accessible knowledge. Today more than 1.5 million K-12 students are engaged in some kind of online learning, according to The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL). Further, in a 2013 report titled "Keeping Pace With K-12 Online Learning," the Evergreen Education Group identified 30 states that offer full-time, multi-district online-school options in their education systems. Such schools accounted for an estimated 310,000 enrolled students receiving a full education regardless of their geographic location—an option that would not have been possible without online-learning technology.

I have over 16 years of experience teaching mathematics in traditional public schools, universities, and online schools. Following several years at traditional schools, I began teaching online through K12 Inc., a national operator of online and blended schools. I spent eight wonderful years working as an online teacher, primarily through one of K12's partner schools, California Virtual Academy, working closely with teams of dedicated teachers, educators, and school leaders who shared a passion for meeting the education needs of every child. I held many roles at K12, including high school mathematics teacher, Title I teacher, and a lead teacher. Through my experiences, I came to realize much about the dynamic nature of online education and the potential it has to accelerate individualized learning.

First, it must be said that online schooling is not for everyone. It is not for every student, nor is it for every teacher. Some individuals are not well-suited for online schools, just as others are not well-suited for traditional schools. Both education models have unique characteristics that, depending on the person, can be seen as an advantage or disadvantage.

A Different Mindset

That does not mean, however, that one model is inherently better than the other. Unfortunately, a false narrative exists that traditional and online education models are in conflict with one another. From that narrative springs a number of myths and misconceptions. For example, one of the more common myths about online learning is that teaching online is easier than teaching face-to-face. I disagree. Teaching at an online school does not require any less professionalism, training, or education than are
required at a traditional school. In fact, I would argue there is an increased level of diligence, compassion, and understanding required when teaching online. At the end of the day, no matter what your teaching platform, you are still a teacher, responsible for encompassing all that this prestigious title represents. Online teaching isn't "easier" or "harder"; it is simply different, requiring a different mindset for both teachers and students alike.

On my first day as a teacher at a traditional public high school, I was eager to teach a new and impressionable group of learners. I came prepared with my syllabus and the lesson for the day, and I was able to immediately interact and connect with my students. My first day of online teaching varied little in terms of my excitement and enthusiasm. I prepared my syllabus and the lesson for the day and looked forward to meeting my students. However, I found myself waiting for my students to interact with me.

At first, I was bothered by the silence. Why weren't they coming to me to seek all of the knowledge I wanted to impart to them? In the past, it required little more than walking into the classroom. The learning environment we shared was tangible; it was set in a single place and time. However, I soon realized my mindset was part of the problem. I couldn't just expect students to reach out to me. In the online environment, I had to do more than just deliver content and wait for engagement. It was about building the teacher-student relationship in a different and dynamic way.

My interactions with students in online schools took place whenever and wherever the need arose. I met "virtually" with students where they were. This often occurred with the use of newer communication technologies like web-conferencing, email, text and instant messaging, as well as with traditional methods such as phone calls and letters home. I had countless "virtual" interactions with my students, all of which, in many respects, mirrored the interactions I had with students in traditional schools. My students embraced it and took full advantage of such opportunities. More importantly, their increased engagement led to significant improvements in their academic performance.

In the report "Learning in the 21st Century: 2010 Trends Update," Project Tomorrow found that students reported they received more attention from their teachers and were more comfortable asking questions online than in the traditional setting. Why is that? I believe it is because online learning environments provide a rare opportunity for students to learn with constructive anonymity; they are free to journey through their learning experience without the pressures and judgments engendered by differences in academic need, socioeconomic status, or other circumstances. For many students this freedom is exactly what they need to thrive.

And yet it is important to clarify the difference between constructive anonymity and isolation, because they are not the same. While teaching at K12, I would hold live daily sessions open to both students and their parents. My goal was to provide an atmosphere where students would feel comfortable learning mathematics both as individuals and as part of a larger group. This keeps students present and engaged in the learning process. It is no secret that mathematics can be intimidating, and if students isolate themselves from their teachers, they will isolate themselves from the content.

**Flexibility and Freedom**
Though online students may work independently, they are not isolated learners separated from their peers. Online schools often have lively and robust communities, with clubs, school activities, field trips, service projects, and even proms and graduations. At K12, I was a part of graduation ceremonies honoring hundreds of students each year. I watched kids recount their experiences with each other and rejoice in their collective success, not at all concerned that their educational journey was traveled on a less conventional road.

The appreciation these students had for their teachers made a huge impact on me. I saw graduates honor teachers for the difference they made in their lives, even though they had never met face to face.

When I was with K12, I was given the opportunity to be a part of their National Mathematics Lab, a nationwide initiative designed to assist at-risk students in 5th through 11th grades. These at-risk students came to K12 schools sometimes three or more grade levels below in math after falling behind or dropping out of traditional schools. K12 teachers provided students in this program daily supplemental mathematics instruction both with the peer group at their school and on a national level with a mathematics content expert. This intervention helped many at-risk students achieve better academic gains and improved the chances that they would continue in their education.

It takes a high level of engagement and commitment for students to succeed in online schools, whether the student is at a remedial or advanced level. That is why, as I said earlier, online schooling is not for all children. The same holds true for teachers—online schools are not the right fit for all of them.

I can understand how some teachers, especially those new to online schools, may feel isolated from their students and their colleagues or experience early frustrations. Interactions between colleagues and students in online schools must be purposeful, active, and ongoing. I’ve had the privilege of working with amazing teachers over the years, both in online schools and face-to-face in traditional schools. I am blessed to have benefited from both relationships.

I started teaching online with K12 when my son was three months old and my daughter was two years old. I have continued to teach online ever since. Teaching online gave me flexibility and freedom to be a teacher and a mother and earn my Ph.D. without sacrificing the quality of any endeavor. A healthy work-life balance is important to teachers, and advancements in education technology—including online schools—have enabled many educators to achieve greater career satisfaction.

I’m an advocate for online learning. I’ve seen its successes, believe in its potential, and understand its challenges. I am not alone. Thousands of other teachers and professional educators across the U.S. have similar positive experiences. Having witnessed firsthand how online schools have successfully impacted young lives, I believe it is not a matter of if, but when, online education becomes the new benchmark for normative learning.

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