E-learning can have positive effect on classroom learning, scholar says

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Traditional classroom teaching in higher education could learn a thing or two from online teaching, otherwise known as e-learning, according to a University of Illinois professor who studies computer-mediated communication, information exchange and the Internet.

Caroline Haythornthwaite, a professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, says that the value of e-learning has been underrated at the college level, and that some of its methods and techniques can augment traditional classroom learning.

"Compared to the more traditional educational paradigm – the broadcast model, where knowledge is delivered from professor to student from on-high – e-learning turns teaching and learning into a shared endeavor," she said.

E-learning is defined as technology-based learning. Lectures, homework, quizzes and exams are delivered almost entirely or completely online. In some instances, no in-person interaction takes place over the length of the course.

A global economy hungry for customized, portable and on-demand educational platforms coupled with the Internet's rise to dominance as the ubiquitous medium of information delivery means that e-learning is increasingly gaining respect as an innovative and viable pedagogical tool, especially for subjects that require multimedia, collaboration tools (wikis, blogs and course-management systems, for example), and other

bandwidth-hungry applications prevalent today.

At Illinois, Haythornthwaite teaches in classrooms real and virtual in the college's 13-year-old LEEP program, a distance-education program that enables graduate students to complete a master of science in library and information science, a certificate of advanced study or a K-12 library and information science certificate online.

For the current crop of more than 700 students seeking a master's degree through GSLIS at Illinois, a little more than half are online students.

Haythornthwaite said she enjoys the robust interaction with her online students.

"With the online classes," she said, "I interact with my students more frequently, dropping into asynchronous discussion daily for a half-hour or an hour. With my traditional classes, I might see them once a week for three hours. If there's a news article I want my online students to read, I can post it and discussion can begin right away. With my classroom students, if I e-mail them an article on Tuesday and we meet for class on Friday, that's one of many things we might discuss. The impact isn't quite as immediate."

Compared with the traditional, face-to-face classroom learning that centers on instructors dictating content and pedagogy, e-learning is a more learner-friendly alternative, also allowing the role of a teacher to be quite different in an e-learning environment, Haythornthwaite said.

"Since there's an emphasis on more learner-centric activities than traditional lecture-based classroom learning, the teacher is more of a facilitator in an online classroom," she said. "Not only does that enhance the collaborative nature of online learning, it also motivates students to be much more engaged and to take more responsibility for what they're

learning."

However much e-learning may reshape education, Haythornthwaite noted that it's not necessarily meant to supplant classroom learning, but is more of a supplement to it. She cited the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's example of putting all of its classroom materials online for non-commercial use in 2001 as an example of how "blended learning" can be created from a mixture of e-learning and classroom interaction.

"No one stopped going to class when all that material was posted," she said. "It simply changed the delivery method and broadened the scope of knowledge available."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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