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The Learner Who Compared Online Courses to Face-to-Face Courses

Jim was a doctoral student at a large university located in the United States. In his day job, he served as the dean of teaching at a neighboring community college, responsible for evaluating and improving teaching practices. Jim's profile picture, in which he donned a red t-shirt and waved to the camera, aligned with the sense of warmth and hospitality that I got from his strong Southern accent. Because he had responded to a survey prior to our meeting, I had developed a mental picture of Jim's background: He was in his early fifties. He had access to a computer and mobile device at home and reported that he was comfortable using the internet to learn about topics of interest and to troubleshoot his devices. Even though he had a Facebook account, he almost never used it. He had also never used Twitter or uploaded a photo or video to a photo- or video-sharing website.

I was excited to talk with Jim because he had just completed his very first online course. Though my questions were about his experiences in the particular course he had taken, his re-

sponses seemed to naturally gravitate toward comparing those to his experiences in face-to-face courses. “I had a sharp learning curve,” he admitted. “I’m new to online learning, so I didn’t know what kind of expectations to have. I heard going into it that it’s something that you have to stay on top of every moment or else you fall behind, which isn’t always the case with traditional classes.” The course he had just completed was compressed and therefore fast-paced, which required him to be online every day to complete daily activities that ranged from reading to writing reflections and responding to peers. He described it as “kind of like an intensive education,” which he thought provided “greater depth into my studies, into my work in the course than I had in some of my traditional face-to-face courses.” He reported engaging with his peers in a more active way than he was used to, which led him to the realization that physical copresence is not a necessary prerequisite for a high-quality learning experience. “It probably hit me toward the end of the first week. In a traditional face-to-face course, I don’t always feel as connected to my classmates, even though I’m going to be sitting right next to them, engaged in face-to-face conversation. But [in the online course] by continually responding to their questions or asking questions of their assignments, I kind of felt a sense of connection. . . . It was a greater sense of connection than I thought I was going to have.”

Listening to Jim describe his experiences reminded me of the many conversations and debates I have been involved in that ultimately boil down to whether face-to-face education is better than online education. I have had versions of this debate with colleagues, peer reviewers, students, and countless people I’ve met outside of work when they learned what I do in my research. I was also asked, during two separate job in-

interviews, about why my research wasn't examining strategies that could ensure that online education is as good as face-to-face education. But as Jim had pinpointed with perfect clarity, the real issue is not whether online education is as "good" (whatever that means) as face-to-face education but instead how *this online course* differed in particular ways from *some* of the in-person courses he'd taken. We've all taken face-to-face courses that were more effective, engaging, inspiring, or harder or easier than others, which is true of online courses, too. And even though Jim reported spending his hour-long drive home from work wondering if "so-and-so responded to my discussion post" and did not "recall having that feeling in a face-to-face course," he most likely knew that some of his future online courses were going to be better than others in the same way that he had come to recognize that quality and modality weren't synonymous.

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Can online education ever be as good as face-to-face education? This question has been debated ad nauseam. As I am writing this chapter, I am consulting with a university in the Caribbean, assisting faculty in converting some of their face-to-face courses to online ones, and I am anticipating that this question will arise during my workshops with faculty. The question is both predictable and understandable. Most faculty members have taught face-to-face courses and have a good understanding of the richness of an in-person classroom environment. Nevertheless, surveys of faculty members in the United States reveal that the majority have neither taught online nor taken an online course (Jaschik and Lederman 2018). The widely known and damning stories about predatory for-profit colleges and independent-study correspondence courses may, therefore, lead many of us to imagine that

most contemporary online courses look like those. Gannon (2019, para. 5) writes that “so long as there are still predatory, for-profit, financial-aid thieves masquerading as colleges and universities, online courses will still be held in suspicion in many quarters of academe.” Why would anyone—the argument goes—want to give up the personal and deep relationship one can cultivate with students in a physical classroom with the exploitative and isolating potential of online education? Comparing the two modalities of online education and face-to-face education is a natural tendency among many people—including students, researchers, policymakers, and laypeople. After all, if we want to offer the best education for our students, identifying which modality is “the best” will ultimately benefit them. But rather than try to answer the question of whether online education can ever be as good as face-to-face education, this chapter argues that one-to-one comparisons between face-to-face and online courses are ultimately unhelpful and that any course is only as good as its design and its ability to meet the needs of its students. In other words, “which one is better?” is the wrong question to ask.

When it comes to preferences between modalities, a recent survey of nearly 65,000 undergraduate students in the United States found that most students (55%) prefer a blended learning environment over purely face-to-face or online environments (Galanek, Gierdowski, and Brooks 2018). In probing these results further, the authors report that experience with and exposure to learning environments drive these preferences. They report that students “who have never taken a completely online class are significantly more likely to prefer face-to-face-only courses, and vice versa . . . students who have taken at least some of their courses online are significantly more likely to

prefer blended environments and less likely to prefer purely face-to-face courses.” A *preference* for a particular modality, however, does not necessarily mean that the modality will lead to superior learning outcomes compared to the alternatives.

One of the problems with debates comparing online to face-to-face courses is that some arguments tend to assume that face-to-face education is uniform and always effective, personal, and engaging. But surely most of us have taken courses that haven't always met that standard, courses in which we felt disengaged, our learning experience was generally poor, or the course objectives were not met. Many factors may have contributed to those outcomes, ranging from a problematic instructional design (e.g., a misalignment between learning objectives and assessments) to our own interest on the topic or the instructor's commitment to the course. Further, consider just how “personal” face-to-face learning typically is for a large class of perhaps 200 or even 400 students meeting in an auditorium. The most efficient and common way to teach such a class is through a series of lectures, but does that really make for a class that reflects individual students' needs, interests, and motivations? Now imagine an alternative instructional approach for this class that involves students' reading relevant literature prior to class, coming to class with questions, and, with guidance from the instructor, working in groups of four or five on activities aligned to the goals of the course and joining interest-based post-course labs to work on their assignments. Even though both courses occur in a face-to-face environment, the experiences of the students who take them would differ remarkably. The same is true of online courses. In short, modality doesn't mean uniformity, and, therefore, modality should not be the barometer by which we should judge the quality of courses.

The research on this issue is telling. While individual studies have occasionally reported findings that support one modality over the other, large-scale studies and meta-analyses have found little or no evidence that outcomes between online courses and face-to-face courses differ significantly (e.g., Bernard et al. 2004; Zhao et al. 2005). One of the best-known meta-analyses in this area, described in Means, Toyama, Murphy, and Baki (2013), found that even though learners in online courses performed modestly better than learners in face-to-face courses, there were no significant differences between the two modalities. The researchers did find significant differences in outcomes between blended and face-to-face conditions (higher outcomes in the former). However, they warn that these results should be interpreted with caution, as many studies didn't account for other variables (e.g., extra time on tasks, differences in pedagogy) that could affect the results. In other words, everything else being equal and as far as learning outcomes are concerned, we should expect no significant differences in student performance between online and face-to-face courses.

Everything else is never equal, however, which is why one-to-one comparisons between online and face-to-face courses tend to be misleading in the overwhelming majority of cases. Online education and face-to-face education lie on a continuum, along which lie courses that blend face-to-face and online components in different proportions. For example, some face-to-face courses may include online components in the form of readings, videos, and a/synchronous discussions hosted within a learning management system. Some online courses may invite students to meet with peers or others in face-to-face settings such as discipline conferences, and online degrees may include short-term, face-to-face residencies.

The human condition is perhaps the factor that makes comparative studies problematic: on any given day, students may be having a bad (or wonderful) day, facing an illness, or caring for an elderly parent. Or, they and their instructors, may be feeling generous or sad, sleep-deprived, or excited to study a topic that, for one reason or another, they find particularly meaningful.

Another problem with this debate is that it too often seems to imply that face-to-face education is somehow inherently “good” and that online education is inherently “bad.” Some critics, for instance, suggest that a transition to online education will force educators to “surrender” their pedagogy “to corporate control, monetization or groupthink” (Mentz and Schaberg 2018). While such concerns are not unfounded, Ross and Bayne (2016) remind us that “online teaching need not be complicit with the instrumentalization of education” and can, in fact, be mobilized to resist such efforts, such as through designs that emphasize community-oriented approaches to learning. Clearly, the pressures on higher education to function as a commodity, compete on a global scale, treat students as consumers, and generally reflect a market ideology are not limited to just one mode of education. This recognition behooves us to consider whose power and privilege is perpetuated whenever a particular mode of learning is declared “the best,” and to recognize that teaching face-to-face doesn’t necessarily equate to resisting neoliberal pressures on higher education. We need to reframe this concern in terms of pedagogy: in what ways does the course pedagogy resist those pressures, regardless of modality? As Dr. Ross Perkins once noted, advocates for face-to-face education also need to acknowledge that in-person education tends to privilege particular students, such as those who have the means and support

necessary to move and live far away from home (2019, personal conversation).

In sum, the larger issue behind this debate is what conditions make for a high-quality educational experience, one that is effective, efficient, engaging, socially just, and meaningful and isn't exploitative, unfair, or available only to those who can afford it. An online course may be as unaffordable as a face-to-face one, and a face-to-face course is as likely as an online course to perpetuate dangerous stereotypes and leave particular demographics of students behind. Ultimately, the value of an online course or degree rests upon its design and the strategies it employs rather than its modality.

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- Physical copresence is not a prerequisite for a high-quality learning experience.
- The question of whether online learning is as good as or better than in-person, or face-to-face, learning is the wrong one to ask.
- Meta-analyses and systematic reviews of the literature have generally found no significant differences in learning outcomes between online and face-to-face settings.
- Courses can be problematic, commodifying, instrumental, and unjust regardless of their modality. To address such issues, examine particular designs and particular courses rather than modalities.

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