English

Sociology

Are Web-Based Courses Right For My Child?

Chemistry

Patricia B. Campbell, PhD
Lesley K. Perlman
Earl N. Hadley

Campbell-Kibler Associates, Inc.

What Are Web-Based Courses?

Web-based courses are increasingly being considered, by families and others, as alternatives to traditional schooling. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that, during the 2001-2002 school year, 40,000-50,000 students will enroll in a web-based high school course. Some students will take one or two courses, while others will earn their entire high school diploma on-line.

Web-based courses are a form of education called distance learning, which also includes courses by mail, videotape, CD, DVD, television, satellite broadcast and videoconferencing. In distance learning there is either no instructor or there is an instructor who can be reached by mail or electronically.

Web-based courses can be *asynchronous,* where students progress through courses at their own pace. Students may have e-mail or mail contact with an instructor, or the feedback they receive may be totally computer generated. Courses can also be *synchronous,* where students and an instructor are connected through the web, satellite or video conferencing and simultaneously participate in the same or similar activities.

Web-based courses may have instructors, called e-teachers, whose primary interaction with students is electronic. E-teachers correct papers, ask and answer questions and generally provide students with support. Unlike the classroom, where students get immediate responses from their teachers, students in asynchronous courses usually have to wait a day or two for responses from their e-teachers.

Range and Types of Web-based Courses

A great variety of web-based courses are offered at the high school level. Courses range in skill level from Basic Math to Advanced Placement Calculus and cover required and elective high school courses ranging from Personal Finance to Advanced Japanese.

The following is a short introduction to two sample web-based courses.[1]

Algebra I

Using text, graphics and audio you cover 69 different topics in six units. Within the course, you can try lots of problems--sample problems, practice sets and summary practice sets. When you solve a problem on-line, the computer tells you if you're right or wrong and asks if you would like an explanation of the solution. Along with solving problems, you take computer scored quizzes, unit tests and a final exam. There are three written assignments that the e-teacher grades and an on-line discussion group where you "talk" about Algebra with other students.

U.S. History II

U.S. History II covers the years 1865-1974 in four units, each of which includes five different views of history: political, cultural, minority, military and economic. Each page has pictures, text and links to websites with maps, quotes, timelines and additional information related to the unit. During the course you take computer-scored quizzes, write four short essays and do a final project covering the history of the United States from 1974 to the present. The essays and the final project are e-mailed to the e-teacher for grading and feedback.

The best way to find out what web-based courses are like is to try them. Most course providers have demos that allow you to do that.

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[1]These courses are part of the high school curriculum offered by www.class.com.

Will My Child Do Well In Web-Based Courses?

The students that are the most successful [in web-based courses] are the ones that have learned on their own to be self motivated and have some drive ... (e-teacher, 2001).

There is general agreement that mature, self-disciplined, motivated students who are independent learners are most likely to be successful in web-based courses (and in education in general). Not surprisingly, web-based courses don't work very well if students are unmotivated and if they aren't interested in the subject. In the words of one student, "If you don't like what you are studying, don't take it on-line."[2]

There is a lot of writing in web-based courses. Writing e-mails, discussion group entries and assignments are the primary ways you let people know what you are learning. Students who are unable or unwilling to write will most likely have difficulties completing web-based courses.

Parents should know that the chances of average and basic-level students doing well in web-based courses can be increased by matching the courses with students' ability levels and providing the following supports as needed:
- ◊ a quiet place and regularly scheduled times to work on the course
- ◊ agreed-upon deadlines for the completion of units, activities, tests and the course as a whole
- ◊ adults with some technical and subject-area knowledge
- ◊ tutors
- ◊ related books and other instructional materials that can often be found at local libraries.

A variety of informal quizzes and tip sheets have been developed to help students decide if web-based courses are for them. You can access a number of them at the Illinois Online Network (http://www.ion.illinois.edu/IONresources/onlineLearning/). The results of these quizzes are useful in parent/child discussions about what it takes to do well in web-based courses.

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[2]Trotter, Andrew. "Cyber Learning at On-line High". *Education Week.* January 24, 2001, 28-33.

Technology and Web-Based Courses

> *We are so rural that the technical connections did not work for us. We were shut off so many times during the time he tried to work that he dropped the [web-based] classes and did not finish either of them. He did enjoy them however. He liked the graphics and the content. We had planned to take more until we developed the problems. (Mother of a Web-based Student, 2000)*

No matter how good the course or the student, if the technical aspects of a web-based course don't work, the student will not be successful. There are a number of technical questions you need to answer:

Will the course run on your computer? Before registering for a course, check to make sure the course will run on your existing hardware and software. If you are not sure, check with the course provider. Different courses have different requirements in such areas as processing speed, operating systems, storage space, CD readers and speakers. Buying new hardware and/or software can add a lot to the cost of the course.

Do you have a fast reliable Internet connection? An unreliable Internet connection can lead to lost work, frustration and as indicated in the quote above, dropping courses. A slower, phone connection can mean a wait of 30 minutes or more to get a 3-5 minute video. If the course has a lot of audio/visual, a lot of time will be spent waiting for things to download.

Is there technical support? Most people will have technical problems at some point in the course. It is important to know where students can go for help when they have minor and major technical problems, what support is available, when it is available and if the support is available by phone as well as e-mail.

How is student privacy assured? Your child will be sending a lot of information, including applications and essays, over the web to the course provider. You may want to check what happens to that data and who has access to it.

Selecting A Web-based Course: Some

The first step in selecting a web-based course is to be clear what your goals are. If, for example, you want the course to provide your child with opportunities to interact with other students on-line, your criteria may be quite different than if your goal is for your child to take advanced courses for possible college credit.

General criteria include:

Accreditation: If your child is interested in taking a course for credit, it is important to know if the course is being offered by an accredited provider and if course credits will be accepted by high schools and recognized by colleges.
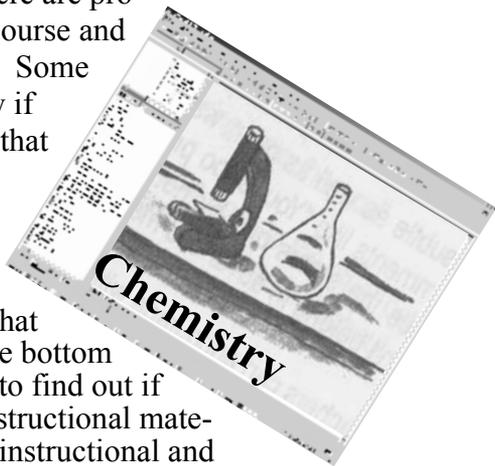
Course Appropriateness: Web-based courses can work for at-risk and low-literacy students who like the subject area and/or are excited about the novelty of working on the web. These students, teachers say, will have a greater chance to be successful if the web-based courses are:

◊ well organized

◊ easy to follow with clear instructions

◊ written at an appropriate reading level

◊ able to keep students interested.

Student Feedback: Timely, informative feedback to students is key to success. Most students need more feedback than finding out whether an answer was right or wrong. They need to find out why a certain answer is wrong and where they made a mistake or what they misunderstood. Some of this feedback can be generated by computers; however in many cases, teacher feedback is needed as well. In addition, some level of e-teacher and/or peer interaction may be needed to help students stay on track. You may want to find out about the amount and kinds of course feedback your child will receive as well as the qualifications of the people providing it.

Criteria To Consider

Success: Before your child takes a course, you may want to know how many others have taken the course, how many have completed the course and if there are provisions for students to drop a course and receive a full or partial refund. Some parents may also want to know if there is information available that ties course completion to increased standardized test scores.

Costs: "How much?" and "What is and what isn't included?" are bottom line questions. It is important to find out if the cost includes all student instructional materials, as well as any necessary instructional and technical support. Per course costs tend to be about $300 but many providers offer steep discounts to those taking an entire program of study on-line. Some states allow residents to take on-line courses for free or at a reduced cost. Your state department of education should be able to tell you if that is an option for your child. They can be found at http://www.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/ERODmap.html

Course Format: Web-based courses should make use of the web's interactive and multimedia capacities. Text should be integrated as necessary, rather than being the primary way information is presented. If a course is going to be primarily the reading of text, it most likely should not be on the web.

Additional Criteria to consider can be found at http://www.dlrn.org/k12/criteria.html

Sources of Courses for Individual Students

Remember things on the web change quickly; some URLs that are here today may not be tomorrow. The URLs listed below are intended as examples; no endorsement is intended or given.

http://apexlearning.com

Apex Learning offers more than 30 Advanced Placement (AP), foreign language, general studies and technology courses.

http://www.babbagenetschool.com/index_home.html

Babbage Net School offers more than 50 high school and AP courses in English, math, science, social studies, foreign languages, music and art.

http://www.clonlara.org/compuhigh.htm

Compuhigh offers more than 20 high school courses in social studies, language arts, science, math, computing and career planning.

http://www.dennisononline.com/dolwelcome.shtml

Dennison Academy provides over 30 courses in humanities, science, mathematics, fine arts and technology leading to a high school diploma.

http://www.flvs.net

Florida Virtual School serves Florida residents offering an entire high school curriculum of more than 60 courses.

http://www.iacademy.org/

Internet Academy predominantly serves Washington State residents and offers a complete high school curriculum of over thirty-five courses.

http://www.laurelsprings.com

Laurel Springs has over 40 courses available for 9th through 12th graders including courses for special needs and honors students.

http://www.dlrn.org/k12/virtual_list.html#state

The Virtual School List has information on a wide variety of courses and schools.