

Anytime, Anywhere

By Carlo Rotella

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Karen Cator, director of the office of education technology at the U.S. Department of Education, says she thinks of online learning this way: “If students have their own computer, it can travel with them from home to school. There can be software programs that help the student, or there can be an online teacher, but the technology can also augment a teacher in a face-to-face classroom.”

Such shape-changing mobility is becoming the norm. According to a study by the Sloan Consortium, at the K-12 level, there were 50,000 students enrolled in wholly or partly online courses in 2000. By 2008, there were more than a million. Most of the students are in high school (many taking courses in subjects their local districts find it inconvenient to offer in classrooms) or in credit-recovery courses intended to lower the dropout rate by allowing students to pass a previously failed or incomplete subject. About 200,000 students are in full-time virtual schools, getting all of their schooling online.



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Caprice Young, the former chief executive of KC Distance Learning, says, “In 2008, our primary clients were alternative schools and charters, but in the last year our client base flipped to predominantly traditional schools.” Online courses have typically catered to some of the most motivated students — those seeking Advanced Placement credit, for instance — and also to some of the least motivated, especially those at risk of dropping out. But now, as it becomes a standard part of normal public education (70 percent of school districts had students enrolled in an online course), online learning is increasingly reaching all types of students.

President Obama’s Department of Education supports online learning, notably in its National Education Technology Plan, to be released this month. Other countries are digitizing their curricula on a national scale. Proponents of online learning warn that we’re falling behind, but skeptics should be asking: Is the instruction good enough? Will some teachers lose their jobs? Is online learning just another concession to the electronic shrinkage of public life? Is it a fancy way for government to abdicate some of its responsibility to educate?

For better or for worse, imagine a near future in which your avatar can attend high school in a Second Life-like environment, your body no longer required to sit quietly in a row and your mind no longer obliged to settle for what the local district can offer. You won't need a locker, and if you realize with swooping horror that there's a big test today and you're not ready, you can stop time and study until you are. And your avatar's skin is clear. And you can fly.

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