

## A Post-Millennial's View of Online Courses

*Last fall, I learned from Cynthia Golden, Vice President of EDUCAUSE, that her middle-school-aged daughter, Hannah Somers, had taken an online course over the summer. I thought it would be interesting for EDUCAUSE Review readers to get Hannah's perspective on the differences between face-to-face learning and online learning. This is Hannah's thoughtful report on her experiences. For those of us who provide information and technology support in higher education, her ideas may help us to better understand our future clientele.*

—Susan Perry, E-Content Department Editor

When I took my first online course last summer, I had just completed the seventh grade. I signed up for the course through the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth (CTY) program (<http://www.cty.jhu.edu>). I had qualified for the program and thought that this would be a nice opportunity to see what an online course was like.

I took a writing course called “Crafting the Essay.” It was a college-level course. There were about twelve kids, from age twelve to sixteen, who took it with me. They were from all over the country, from Virginia to Alaska.

I was worried that it would be somewhat complicated to get started without anyone there to give instructions, but since I do use the Internet often for online talk with my friends and occasionally for schoolwork, it was easy to get started. In the beginning, I spent a lot of time online trying to figure everything out—how to use the Web site, how to use the CD that contained a lot of the course

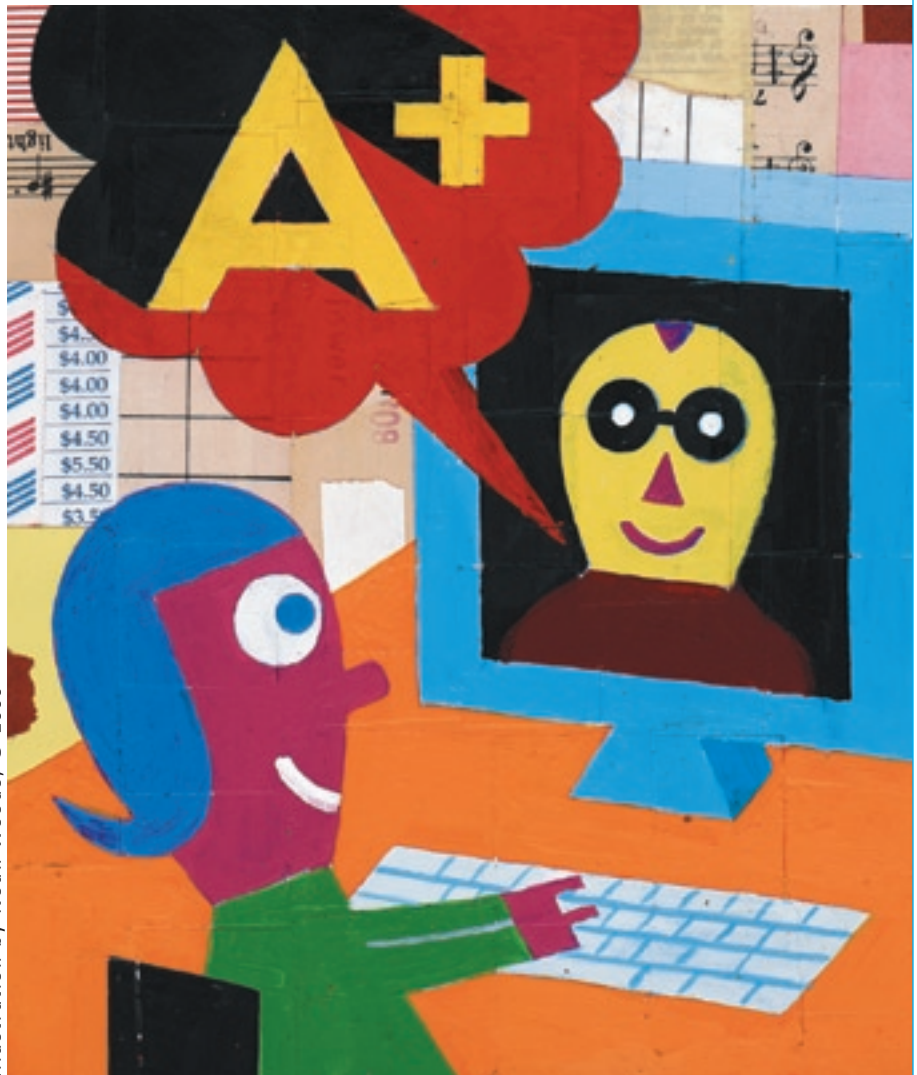


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material—but overall, I spent more time writing my essays. We had a lot of work to do and usually had a writing assignment due every other day.

We never did have chats or live group discussions. We always posted something, and then anyone could post back whenever they had the chance. I think

that live group discussions would not have worked because it was summertime, and we all had the opportunity to do other things during the day while taking this course. A lot of us, or most of us, took advantage of that.

Taking a course online is very different from taking a course in a classroom.

How do you know which type of course you would prefer to take? Well, that depends on your situation. Here are some things about online courses that may help you make up your mind. Some of these things are good, and some of these things are bad.

One good thing about taking an online course is that you get to meet people from all over the country. When I took my first online course, I met people from places like Alaska and California.

Another good thing is that you can work at your own pace. Some people fall behind in classes, and some people work ahead. Taking a course online gives you the ability to work at your own speed. You can also work at whatever time of day you need to. If you have a job during the day, or just have other things to do, you can do the other things first and then come home and work on the course, or you can work on the course and then go out. Your day is not wasted in a classroom. If you finish early, you can do whatever you please, and if you need a lot of time, you will not fall behind because you will have an entire twenty-four hours to do the work.

Another good thing is that when you need help, you don't have to wait in a line to talk to the teacher, or wait until the teacher is finished grading papers. You can just call or e-mail your teacher, and usually he or she will be available. Of course, sometimes the teacher will not be available, but when that happens, you can just try back later, knowing that you have a lot of time before your work is due.

Another good thing is peer review. When you're working in a classroom, you usually write only one copy of your essay. You have to give it to someone, wait until they are finished, and then give it to another person, to get multiple opinions. The good thing about online courses is that you write your essay on a computer, so you can easily make copies and have more than one person reviewing it at the same time.

But the best thing about taking an online course, I think, is that you can be anywhere in the world where you have a computer and Internet access and be able to work. You don't have to be at your house or even in the same city. This really helped me because I was taking

my course while on vacation in Florida. I could go to the beach and then work when I got back, and I was able to get all of my work in on time.

Now, although there are many good things about taking an online course, there are also a few low points. One is that you never actually get to meet your teacher. Although that's not a big deal, I think that it would've been nice if I had been able to meet my teacher face to face. When you don't meet your teacher, or instructor, face to face, you don't share the same kind of bond that you might if you had taken one of their courses in the classroom.

Also, sometimes things can be more confusing when explained online. This brings me to another low point, which is that you work mostly on your own. There is no teacher there to guide you through the work. That can make it difficult to understand just exactly what you are to do. Also, since the teacher isn't there, it may be hard to get in touch with him or her. That was not a problem for me, but I know that sometimes people just aren't available and you have to wait if you need help with an assignment.

As you can tell, there are many differences between a course taken in a classroom and a course taken online. I think that both are good. The choice depends on your style of learning or on what you think will work best for you. If you are someone who likes being in a classroom, learns better from hearing instructions, and is more comfortable with having a teacher or someone who will be there to help you, then I think that taking a classroom course is the right choice for you. On the other hand, if you're someone who likes to work on your own, usually works ahead in classes, and doesn't like having to waste your time sitting in a classroom when you are finished with your work, an online course could be the right choice for you. It all depends on how you see it. Either way, I would recommend trying out an online course sometime. You'll never know what is right for you until you try!

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