

Strategic Directions and Non-Directions That Independent Schools are Taking in Online and Blended Learning

Brad Rathgeber, *Executive Director*, One Schoolhouse

Lorri Palko, *Director of Finance and Operations*, One Schoolhouse

In November 2011, One Schoolhouse (then the Online School for Girls) originally published *Strategic Directions and Non-Directions That Independent Schools are Taking in Online Learning*. Since that time, we have increased our work across the independent school community and observed a number of changes since our initial report. Our observations are based on four years of working with schools, including: more than one thousand participants in our professional development programs, visits to more than 100 independent schools, work with national and regional associations (including NAIS, NBOA, NCGS, NYSAIS, ISAS, SAIS, CAIS, VAIS, and IE), and engagement with our own consortium of seventy-six schools.

- Independent schools have significantly increased their participation in online learning, forming new consortia, increasing participation in existing consortia (enrollment in the Online School for Girls, for example, has more than tripled since the initial report), and developing their own programs;
- Regional differences are becoming more pronounced. Our enrollment has highlighted some regional differences with respect to how quickly schools have moved into online and blended learning. The early adopters are now using online and blended learning to strategically deliver education, while many schools are just beginning the discussions.
- Blended learning has taken hold in various forms in many schools, though most of the experimentation with blended learning has not addressed changes in how time or schedule can be augmented; and
- Modes of online learning have continued to evolve, as competency based online learning programs have emerged, and a significant number of higher education institutions have engaged in MOOCs.

Moreover, schools know that their future students will be different consumers of education and technology, yet many schools remain hesitant and fearful to fully embrace changes they intuitively know will need to be made. Students of the future are growing up with the ability to obtain information quickly and connect intimately using technology. Those same students will continue to value the relationship with their teachers and other students, but only in conjunction with using all the tools available to them to expand their minds, express their creativity, and form meaningful relationships.

And yet, at the same time, much of the initial report still holds true:

- Most schools continue to develop programs organically, with little planning or vision around online or blended learning;
- Most schools are not investing in professional development in order to prepare faculty to teach in online or blended courses, and most schools do not have a targeted professional development plan for faculty at their schools; and
- The longer that schools wait to engage in online or blended learning, the more difficult (and expensive) it will be for them to match their overall school mission and values to online and blended learning approaches.

As with the previous version of this Whitepaper, we will use definitions around how schools have approached online and blended learning. In this paper, we suggest four ways that schools have (or have not) been approaching online learning: as Skeptics and the Tried and True; Dabblers and Lone Wolves; Pilots with a Plan; and Strategic Thinkers and Actors. Here, we attempt to identify each type of school and identify the common threads that we see for each group. Of note, these definitions are meant to describe a school as a whole, not individuals within schools (as schools that are Strategic Thinkers and Actors will have individual skeptics, and Skeptics and Tried and True schools may have some strategic actors).

Skeptics and the Tried and True

Some independent schools remain deeply skeptical of online education, though there are far fewer of these schools today than

there were in November 2011. The common thread between these types of schools is that they have school cultures that do not embrace change.

In the November 2011 version of this Whitepaper, we noted that many of the skeptics were often also defined market leaders or had large endowments. This does not seem to be the case anymore. Many of the wealthiest independent schools have moved somewhat aggressively into the fields of online and blended learning. Some have joined existing consortia, like One Schoolhouse or the Global Online Academy, others have created their own online or blended courses, and others have formed new consortia or alliances (such as the work in online learning of the Eight Schools Association).

Skeptics, whether market leaders or not, whether rich or poor, are most often tied together by a common bond that they have a school culture that not only does not want to see change, but often actively works to undermine it. In these schools, dissenting opinions from established norms are not welcome or even heard. Over and over, we have seen that no matter how hard a strong voice or two may press a community (even if that voice is the Head's), without a cultural shift, these schools will miss opportunities in online and blended learning. We have found in our work that skepticism and embrace of the “tired and true” is particularly prevalent in the boys’ school community, and that these schools would need to be even more deliberate about changing their faculty cultures in order to begin work in online and blended learning.

Dabblers and Lone Wolves

Many independent schools have a singular person or a small group of people who are looking to actively explore online education. In the past, this small group of people might have been associated with a school’s technology office (in some way) or in the youngest faculty members on campus. This does not seem to be the case any more. Instead schools that are Dabblers in the field and have a number of Lone Wolves are increasingly the schools that are “plugged in” to changes in the field of education more broadly and yet without the leadership and administrative buy-in to move the school forward in any truly substantive or comprehensive way. We continue to believe that administrative buy-in and support is critical at the point in order for schools to move to the next stage of online learning development. Administrators will need to understand the possibilities of online learning to the degree that they are comfortable communicating their school’s vision and articulating a plan for online and blended learning. Research reports continue to show that a school’s faculty will be most reticent to online learning-- not the parents, Trustees, or students-- and thus it is imperative that those who oversee faculty development and evaluation buy into online learning to help bring faculty along.ⁱ

Pilots With a Plan

An increasing number of independent schools have moved past the point of having a singular or a few faculty members or students engaged with online education to a point where they are actively piloting one or more online education programs within their schools and then measuring students’ performance. We have seen this group grow dramatically in the last few years, led by consortium approaches to online learning.

Pilot or prototype programs seem to give schools the time and space that they need in order to fully develop a comprehensive plan for online and blended learning at their schools, and then communicate that plan out to their school constituent groups. This has been the case for many schools that we have worked with in our Charting a Direction for Online Learning program (run in 2012-2013 with ISAS, IE, SAIS, and NYSAIS).

There are two primary reasons that schools are piloting or prototyping programs. The first is academic support. Schools that are piloting programs often make sure that students taking an online course receive additional support. This seems to be particularly important when students have not experienced “blended” or intensively “web-facilitated” courses at their schools before. The second benefit of piloting online or blended programs is that it allows for a comfortable way to open dialogue about online and blended education within the community, while allaying community fears that “face-to-face” learning is going away – a primary fear among faculty, lesser so for parents. Schools that use the online learning pilot programs to help move the community dialog along can become strategic about their engagement with online learning within only a year or two.

While piloting or prototyping a program has been a substantive and important step, we have seen many schools, including many within our own consortium, not take advantage of a pilot or prototyping period to fully develop a plan and vision. In these cases, schools have remained almost in constant “pilot” mode, with a handful of students and faculty engaged in online and blended learning, but no clear direction or plan forward. In order to become Strategic Actors, they will need to re-vision



their work in the field and then actively work to communicate that vision out. Senior administrators, heads of school, and boards will all need to re-engage.

Strategic Thinkers and Actors

A growing number of independent schools are engaging in online education on a strategic level. These schools have been actively researching, testing, prototyping, and engaging in online learning programs for at least two years and have begun to incorporate online learning into their school's operations planning, strategic planning, budgeting, and curriculum planning. These schools often teach at least one of their courses online, and often work either with a consortium of schools to build an online program or work with a for-profit course provider. Some of these schools have also created graduation requirements for students to take online courses or are on the path to doing so.ⁱⁱ

Open and regular communication with all constituent groups of the school is a hallmark of Strategic Thinkers and Actors. The board, administration, faculty, students, parents, and alumnae/I are all involved in conversations about online and blended learning, and have an understanding of where their school is headed with its programs. These schools also have invested heavily in professional development for their faculty. Many of these schools have required their faculty to take online courses, and most of the schools have targeted goals for faculty development in web facilitated, blended, and online instruction. These schools do not see professional development as a one-time, one-shot offering, but instead have a more comprehensive approach to professional development that weaves mentoring and coaching in with skill development and evaluation.

Meeting Mission Through Online Learning

In 2011, the NAIS “Online Learning Guide” noted: “Schools thinking strategically are well aware of the *Disrupting Class* prognostication (confirmed by other recent studies) that the adoption curve for high school students taking coursework online is steeply rising and will inevitably change the way schools offer courses, as it already has in the higher education sector.”ⁱⁱⁱ If prognostications are correct, and half of all courses at the high school level are taught online by 2019, independent schools will have to address online learning at some point in the near future.^{iv} However, if the current market forces (university and for-profit) for online high school courses grow – and there is no reason right now to believe that they will not – it will be increasingly hard for independent schools to create online course opportunities to meet the demands of students and their parents while also meeting the mission and principles of their school, as it is hard to imagine a lecture-styled college course or a “competency based,” computer-driven course resonating with most independent schools’ missions. The underlying challenge here is: how will schools be able to meet their missions and what they hold as inviolate educational principles with online courses? We believe that the short (and pretty scary) answer is: they will not be able to meet mission and principles if they do not engage now.

Schools that engage and actively move toward strategically thinking about online education will have some time both to be true to *and* to strategically use online learning in providing a superior 21st century educational experience for students.

ⁱ “Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States,” Babson Survey Research Group, October 2012: http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/changing_course_2012

ⁱⁱ “Heads Letter on Online Learning,” Online School for Girls Member Heads of School, January 2013:

<http://schoolpress.cdn.whipplehill.net/osfg531/1/files/2011/04/Head-of-School-Statement-on-Online-Learning-January-2013.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ “Online Learning Guide,” National Association of Independent Schools 21st Century/Technology Task Force, September 2011:

<http://sss.nais.org/files/OnlineLearningGuide10-5-11.pdf>

^{iv} Clayton M. Christensen and Michael B. Horn, “The Rise of Online Education.” *Washington Post*, September 14, 2011. http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/innovations/the-rise-of-online-education/2011/09/14/gIQA8e2AdL_story.html

