The Classroom Online: the form and function of live instruction at an online school

The [name removed] online high school is an accredited, diploma-granting online school for gifted students in grades 7 to 12. Since 2006, we have provided instruction in a complete and rigorous curriculum in a school setting through a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous material. Twice-weekly live discussions in a video-conference environment enable students around the world to engage the material and their peers and teachers in college-like seminars, while students’ independent work comprises asynchronous lectures, software-based exercises, and traditional assignments. In this context, a focus on academic rigor for talented students in a school setting has prescribed a process of continual enhancement and expansion of live instruction and interaction, primarily through online media.

Several developments over the life of the school reflect both the ongoing impetus toward a traditional classroom dynamic in the online medium, as well as the medium’s potential to furnish it, under the right conditions. As a forum in which students participate in fast-moving conversations; stake out, defend, and critique positions on their feet; and participate in the instructors’ (a majority of whom hold Ph.D.’s) modeling of inquiry in a discipline, the discussion seminar has become the cornerstone of instruction at the school, increasingly in preference to self-paced software. Highly motivated and academically passionate students have additionally formed over 30 clubs that engage in team competitions and other collaborative efforts (from engineering teams to a gastronomy club) coordinated in a variety of synchronous media. The traditional apparatus of a school community, including a parent association, student government, assemblies, and student tutoring and study groups have all emerged with modest technological underpinnings. Certain other features of the synchronous systems, such as limited multi-point video and an accompanying text chat in class, both recreate features of the traditional classroom setting, and also present challenges and opportunities that are unique to the online forum. This talk will characterize the modes of instruction and interaction developed to meet the academic goals of the school online, with special attention to the ways in which these classic objectives can be met online by recreating and augmenting the conventional classroom experience.