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# Teaching courses online: A challenge for the field

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# ***TEACHING COURSES ONLINE***

## ***A Challenge for the Field***

**Michael Simonson**

*Co-Editor*

Mary K. Tallent-Runnels and a team of other scholars just published an interesting review that summarized the research on online teaching and learning (2006). The review was organized into four primary categories:

- Course environment,
- Learners' outcomes,
- Learners' characteristics, and
- Institutional and administrative characteristics.

This paper examined 68 published papers and drew a number of interesting conclusions, many of which will be of no surprise to distance education researchers. First, they identified the bane of reviewers—the failure of authors to use standardized terms and to clarify the definitions of key ideas, in this case the types of courses taught—traditional, blended, and online. Tallent-Runnels and her co-authors suggest that these three terms be used when research is conducted and reported.

The review also found that there did not seem to be a comprehensive theory guiding the design of courses taught online and used when research is conducted. This is a critical weakness of the field.

The paper goes on to identify conceptual and methodological problems with the research dealing with online teaching and learning. Apparently the problems of early research on distance education have not yet been corrected—problems related to lack of a theory base, the ad-hoc nature of studies, and the difficulty of generalizing results from one study to other similar situations.

One important conclusion reported in this paper is the research that found that students have positive attitudes about online learning, and that computer anxiety is not a problem for most students. Well-designed online courses were reported to produce more positive learning outcomes and to be related to overall student satisfaction. Design and quality are important.

After reading this paper, one arrives at the conclusion that online education is working and is widely accepted, but that if members of the field had to “prove” this conclusion to skeptics, it would be difficult to do so. More and better theory-based research is needed. Distance educators should pay heed to the advice of Campbell and Stanley (1963), who wrote:

the experiment: as the only means for settling disputes regarding educational prac-

tice, as the only way of verifying education improvements, and as the only way of establishing a cumulative tradition in which improvements can be introduced without the danger of a faddish discard of old wisdom in favor of inferior novelties.  
(p. 2)

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