

## **Driver Education Online?**

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Nick Pandolfo (2012) stated: “Online education has its origins in a movement in the late 1990s to bring specialized and Advanced Placement classes to rural areas whose districts couldn't otherwise provide them. Since then, shrinking school budgets have opened the door to companies that offer a range of online alternatives for special-needs students and parents dissatisfied with available options.” Commenting on the growth in online courses available in the United States NY Times writer Gabriel Trip (2011), writing in April of 2011, cites a government report:

The growth (in online education) has come despite a cautionary review of research by the [United States Department of Education](#) in 2009. ...benefits ... for college students, but ... few rigorous studies had been done at the K-12 level, and policy makers “lack scientific evidence of the effectiveness” of online classes. (Trip, 2011)

In driver education, program funding and convenience are two major reasons for the growth of online courses. Even though the overall effectiveness of driver education has been in question for decades, with the release of findings from the DeKalb study at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century doubt about the value of investment in driver education was raised in the minds of leaders in the U.S. Department of Transportation. Political considerations in Washington resulted in federal funding cuts and novice driver education program investments were slashed. State governments began to follow the federal approach and cut backs or elimination of funding for driver education programs occurred. Some school districts found driver education programs to be expendable.

With availability of driver education becoming restricted and the cost to parents rising people began to look for new ways to teach driver education that would be cost-effective and not place bound. Online courses offered hope in both regards. One of the responses to cost and place challenges is the arrival of for profit online driver education vendors. Another response has been the development by government and the not for profit sector of online curricular options for driver education. In 2012, NHTSA identified 40 government approved basic online driving courses that were used in 15 states. The NHTSA study cites no strong research supporting the idea that students perform better or for that matter worse following online courses.

Current law in most states, Minnesota included, require a student to complete 30 hours of face to face classroom instruction and pass a test before receiving a learner's permit. In the past and currently in Minnesota, this requirement could only be completed via seat time during face to face classroom instruction. Today, in some jurisdictions, online courses are offering an alternative to face to face instruction. Learners are given a list of assignments and tests to be completed online. Once they complete the assignments and tests they are allowed to take the permit test. Online courses like these are following in the footsteps of the program learning movement where the program takes the place of the teacher guided learning.

Online learning is not going away. Therefore, an interesting question is: How can driver educators make best use of online learning? Fortunately the NHSTA 2012 study, previously mentioned, identified a couple of promising approaches that may have set a standard for others to follow. Virtual Drive of America (<http://www.virtualdriveofamerica.com/about.html>) (Virtual Drive) and Idaho Online Driver

Education (<http://idahodigitalllearning.org/>) (Idaho's) were identified as having highly engaging online courses by the NHTSA study. There are commonalities these programs share. First, the curriculums aligned with the International Association for k-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) <http://www.inacol.org> formerly North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) standards.

The Novice Teen Driver Education and Training Administrative Standards released by NHTSA in 2009 contain no recommendations for the administration or delivery of online driver education, advising instead to “refer to a general standard for online education such as those established by the (iNACOL) in the absence of national standards specific to the delivery of online driver education or online teacher preparation.”

Both Virtual Drive and Idaho's online curriculum include a variation of text, audio voice-over, graphic illustrations, video clips, animation, mouse rollovers, and links to additional reading to help convey course material. Further they are responsive to the comment made by Thomas et al. (2012b) on best practice in teaching techniques regarding learning over time states:

classroom and laboratory research overwhelmingly support the tenet that students remember more information when they have been exposed to the information on at least two occasions.

Second, being able to interact with an instructor is very important and both programs established ways to communicate with students effectively. For every assignment and test there was a place for instructors to place comments and feedback. Instructors also utilized online forums to hold discussions and post information.

Incorporating online learning with traditional classroom teaching is the only option available to me as a Minnesota teacher. Under a blended approach, students can be exposed to more than 30 hours of instruction. By having assignments, readings, videos, games, notes and discussions online, it will afford the student more opportunities to learn safe driving concepts outside of class. This blended approach exposes the student to driving content more frequently and for longer periods of time thus helping to increase retention.

A computer used online will never replace a teacher but a teacher should never ignore an approach that can enhance student learning. The internet and online technology is here to stay and we should plan to embrace it when teaching driver education.

So the answer is a qualified yes to the question: Driver Education Online?

## References

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