



default lines Default: Values set by the system until changed by you

‘Convergent education’ comes together

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As I was saying last month (www.eschoolnews.com/avalanche), an avalanche of change is rumbling towards our field. I propose we call this cascading phenomenon “convergent education.”

Here’s what I mean: A new species of education is emerging that artfully aggregates up-to-the-minute instructional technology, sophisticated pedagogy, robust and standards-based educational content, and web-based delivery that requires a computer or other personal digital device but no fixed address. Under most circumstances, convergent education certainly can amplify the impact of traditional instruction, but it is not necessarily dependent on face-to-face encounters between teacher and student.

At its best, convergent education features diverse learning opportunities delivered via multiple media platforms combined with field trips (virtual or real), live streaming video, interactive archived video, educational gaming, student collaboration, animation, celebrity lectures and adventures, project-based instruction with student-managed data, virtual demonstrations and experiments, continuous monitoring of student engagement and learner satisfaction, and classic, in-the-classroom instruction.

In general, convergent education is based on developments such as distance learning and lecture capture strategies that have been around for some time, but which are now reinforced by the completely unprecedented fact that nearly every willing learner has (or soon will have) economical access to the rich multimedia resources of the internet – access delivered by such devices as personal computers, netbooks, smart telephones, personal digital assistants, interactive white boards, pocket projectors, and hand-held reading devices.

Convergent education has been made feasible – and perhaps even inevitable – by a unique confluence of social and technological forces that ultimately must transform the way we learn. Such forces include – but are by no means limited to – the thinning of our teaching corps by retirement, reductions in force, and classroom abandonment; the movement toward charter schools, open-courseware, and online universities; the push for school reform from government and industry; and the desire and necessity of multitudes of adults to obtain new skills for a swiftly changing job market.

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Here’s what’s profoundly different now: This time the transformation will come whether entrenched interests like it or not.

Those elements of the education establishment that traditionally have defeated change will be powerless to stop it this time. Their hands will be tied, because the general population will no longer be limited to learning in authorized institutions at appointed hours under regular supervision.

Authentication of electronic resources will represent a crucial challenge, to be sure, so the role of colleges and degreed professionals as certifiers of curriculum and educational materials will be secure. But new methods of course validation such as crowd-sourcing also will arise.

Already enclaves of the learned are forming up – not only in traditional institutions, charter schools, and open universities but also as independent cadres of scholars

and academics working outside traditional environments. And now these mavericks are drawing on electronic media in all its forms to convey ideas and insights.

Persons committed to learning are now experimenting with open-course education in colleges, schools, museums, corporate offices, military installations, and shopping malls. Like latter-day monasteries, some of these enclaves go about their illuminating work primarily to ennoble the spirit and enrich humanity.

The best example I’ve seen of what convergent education can become is The JASON Project, a non-profit subsidiary of National Geographic. As one student engaged in The JASON Project explained it, “It’s like school, only more fun.”

The JASON Project is staffed by a relatively small team of highly skilled and fully credentialed experts. They deploy new media in all its manifestations to present serious and rigorous content in academically valid programs aligned with state and national standards. The programming – dubbed “education by exploration” – is designed to fit within school districts’ core 5th - 8th grade curricula.

Although The JASON Project has a venerable pedigree, it has now been completely revamped and up-graded. To get a clearer idea of what’s involved, check out these video clips featuring educators at Virginia’s Fairfax County Public Schools in metropolitan Washington, D.C.:
www.eschoolnews.com/jasonadmin,
www.eschoolnews.com/jasonteach.

And I’ve saved the best for last: All The JASON Project’s course materials are free. By popular demand, The JASON Project now does offer professional development for a fee, but those services are optional, not required to obtain access to the courses.

To learn more about this ground-breaking example of convergent education, visit www.jason.org.