

The Evolution of the English Classroom: From Brick and Mortar to Virtual

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Abstract

This article explores the evolving face of the English Language Arts classroom. It examines some differences between the brick and mortar traditional classroom with that of the virtual classroom. Additionally, the article highlights best practices in online teaching, as well as some of the benefits a student may have from choosing to attend a virtual high school. Specific anecdotes and references pertain to the author's experiences teaching in a Wausau School District brick and mortar high school using a traditional delivery method as contrasted to teaching in Wausau Area Virtual Education (WAVE), also part of the Wausau School District.

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If the names William Shakespeare, John Steinbeck, Kate Chopin, H.G. Wells, and Sojourner Truth sound familiar, you may be an English teacher (or you paid attention in your high school literature courses). And, now that you are nostalgically thinking back to that English classroom that served as the hub for your scholarly pursuits, you may be fondly remembering Mrs. Smith as she clip-clopped between desks reciting “To be or not to be...” delighting all with her wit and enthusiasm or, in contrast the memory that might stand more prominent than the rest may be the sound of Bobby Porter’s voice reading aloud from *To Kill a Mockingbird*- he was the only kid in the class who ever volunteered. Regardless of your memories: positive or negative, one thing is certain, the majority of adults reading this article attended their required English classes on a daily basis, sat in Lilliputian desks, and carried gargantuan anthologies wrapped in brown shopping bags to and from home (this should have counted towards PE credit).

Luckily, students and teachers of the 21st-century have alternatives to the traditional setting. As a teacher for the past twenty plus years, I have poured my heart into making sure the precious, allotted minutes of desk time were spent in the most engaging English environment possible while addressing the diverse needs of the students that entered my classroom. And, in reflection, I am proud to think that most of those students had benefited in some way from what they had learned by the close of the semester. But, I know there were students filling the spots on my rosters that would have had a more meaningful English experience in a setting less driven by time and space- an experience that allowed more flexibility in content delivery as well as minutes spent on a given task. For these students, the traditional setting did not allow the freedom needed to fully engage and learn deeply, nor did it encourage the independence to become self-driven learners.

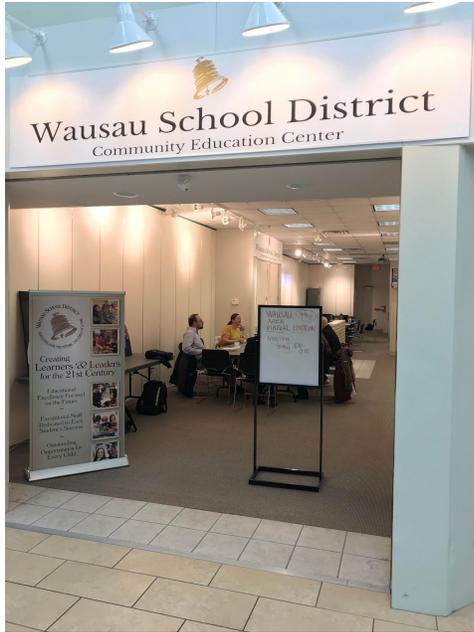
The virtual classroom is a viable option for students whose lives and paths need more flexibility than the brick and mortar model of our past. Currently, I am teaching English courses in our district’s virtual charter school: [Wausau Area Virtual Education \(WAVE\)](#), which has the motto of anytime, anywhere education for the 21st-century learner. [The Wausau School District](#) is committed to providing many pathways for students to achieve success in education, and in addition to other charter schools in the district, WAVE provides one of those paths. Our student body is composed of individuals who have chosen the virtual model for various reasons. Some have chosen WAVE because their passions and dreams require a commitment to an intense sports training during the “regular” school day. I am excited to think that down the road our WAVE graduates may be Olympic gymnasts, NHL hockey players, and PGA golfers. Other families have chosen WAVE for the the freedom it provides them to travel; I currently have a family traveling the world while not missing a beat of their Wausau School District education. And, for others, the teenage drama of high school is too much, and the option to learn in a setting that is void of that drama is the preferred option. And, still others, for a plethora of other

reasons, have found virtual high school to be the best fit for them: employment and internships, the need to be a caregiver to a family member, social or anxiety hindrances, the desire to graduate early, etc. The beauty is that virtual school changes the game and provides a choice for students who previously did not have one regarding the delivery of their public school courses.

How does an English class look in the virtual setting? For WAVE, we contract with [Wisconsin Virtual School](#) through CESA 9 and national curriculum providers to obtain rigorous, tested, highly engaging course curriculum. The core English classes are all taught using Florida Virtual School curriculum, while the electives (Creative Writing, Mythology and Folklore, Lord of the Rings, and Gothic Literature) come from various other national providers. When I was first trained to be a virtual school teacher, I will admit I was apprehensive. How could I possibly teach Macbeth via the computer? How do I get to know my students? How... How... How... the questions and doubts flooded my mind. But, all that changed when I had the chance to dig into the curriculum, the Learning Management System (LMS) and its tools, and the Student Information System (SIS) and its reports. Furthermore, hearing the excitement from other virtual teachers regarding what they were able to accomplish in their classrooms was the catalyst I needed to keep investigating this new frontier, and I am so happy I did.

To start, the curriculum is outstanding. The modules are aligned to national standards and organized into deliberate scope and sequence lessons. I am impressed with the continuity and skill building that exists between each of the core classes. Furthermore, the rigor is truly impressive. Students are being taught to the highest of expectations and standards. And, for students who are accelerated, they can move at a pace that does not hold them back. When they have mastered a task, they can move to the next one. I can offer honors modules and additional enrichment to these students as well. Furthermore, because online teaching is so personalized and dependent on teacher feedback, I can easily differentiate my instruction as needed.

Differentiation is much easier to manage in the virtual world where students are free to work at a pace appropriate to them versus the standard delivery which, for the most part, requires students stay lock step with one another. For example, learners who struggle with a concept can move slower through the pacing. I can meet students in Google hangouts, we can have running discussions in the margins of the feedback on a Google doc, we can email, we can talk on the phone, and if it works logistically, we can meet in a face-to-face environment. WAVE has a unique space for these types of meetings. We have a storefront in our local mall that serves as the face of WAVE. This space provides blended learning opportunities for those who need a hands-on component.



WAVE Storefront / Meeting Center

Another bonus I have seen in the virtual world of English is that students are required to communicate often and communicate well. There is no possibility of a student crouching in the corner desk hoping the teacher does not see that he is there. Every student must initiate, respond to, and maintain regular communication throughout the course. If a student can not do this, virtual school is not the right option. Specific student-driven teaching in the virtual setting occurs through this shared communication. I may ask students to re-submit an assignment multiple times and provide specific feedback to them (screencasts, links to video tutorials, audio feedback, etc.) regarding what needs to be improved in order for mastery to occur. There are many formative opportunities built into the curriculum as well as the reteaching that happens on a student-by-student case. Students, by nature of the delivery, will inherently become more sophisticated and confident communicators throughout their virtual experiences.

Any educator with a few years of teaching under her belt knows the key to reaching students is developing and nurturing relationships. Moving from the face-to-face world to the virtual one, I wondered how I would manage to create those same connections. It quickly became clear that it would take a more concerted effort on my part as the instructor. In the traditional setting, I stand outside the door and greet kids as they walk in. I know their personal styles through observation, and I create camaraderie in the classroom through shared educational risk-taking. How in the world was I going to accomplish that in the virtual classroom? The answer is by rethinking the ways I can connect to students. One avenue I have found to be invaluable is the constant communication which I've already discussed as being essential. I require meet and greet discussion boards at the beginning of the course to establish classroom culture. Students are asked to share things about themselves (including a picture) and carry on

conversations within the discussion thread. These discussion threads also occur within course units to encourage collaboration among peers. Furthermore, when I have the opportunity to speak with students on the phone, in Google hangout, or in person, I make sure a portion of that conversation is spent getting to know more about the individual. I extend these conversations into emails, asking how a student's sporting event turned out, how the new puppy is doing, etc. I also make feedback personalized by always using the student's name, identifying successes, and encouraging continued growth. And, then there's the quirky bitmojis, and GIFS that I send to celebrate birthdays, holidays, and successes. I feel like I know my virtual students as well, if not better, than students in traditional classes.

Virtual school prepares kids for life beyond high school. In a world that requires students be technologically savvy, good communicators, and flexible enough to handle whatever life after high school throws their way, these kids are ready. I embrace the opportunities for growth that teaching English in the virtual setting has provided, and I look forward to the ever evolving changes that are sure to present themselves before I retire. Heaven forbid I ever lose sight of the fact that there are many different kinds of learners and many different ways of teaching. Let us celebrate them all.