

## The Affordances and Challenges of Online Learning and Teaching for Secondary School Students

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**Abstract :** In many cases, especially with the pandemic playing a major role in fast-tracking the growth of the digital industry, online learning has become a necessity or even a standard educational model nowadays, reliably overcoming barriers such as location, time and cost and frequently combined with a face-to-face format (e.g., in blended learning). This being the case, it is evident that students in many parts of the world, as well as their parents, will increasingly need to become aware of the pros and cons of online versus traditional courses. This fast-growing mode of learning, accelerated during the years of the pandemic, presents an abundance of exciting options especially matched for a large number of secondary school students in remote places of the world where access to stimulating educational settings and opportunities for a variety of learning alternatives are scarce, adding advantages such as flexibility, affordability, engagement, flow and personalization of the learning experience. However, online learning can also present several challenges, such as a lack of student motivation and social interactions in natural settings, digital literacy, and technical issues, to name a few. Therefore, educational researchers will need to conduct further studies focusing on the benefits and weaknesses of online learning vs. traditional learning, while instructional designers propose ways of enhancing student motivation and engagement in virtual environments. Similarly, teachers will be required to become more and more technology-capable, at the same time developing their knowledge about their students' particular characteristics and needs so as to match them with the affordances the technology offers. And, of course, schools, education programs, and policymakers will have to invest in powerful tools and advanced courses for online instruction. By developing digital courses that incorporate intentional opportunities for community-building and interaction in the learning environment, as well as taking care to include built-in design principles and strategies that align learning outcomes with learning assignments, activities, and assessment practices, rewarding academic experiences can derive for all students. This paper raises various issues regarding the effectiveness of online learning on students by reviewing a large number of research studies related to the usefulness and impact of online learning following the COVID-19-induced digital education shift. It also discusses what students, teachers, decision-makers, and parents have reported about this mode of learning to date. Best practices are proposed for parties involved in the development of online learning materials, particularly for secondary school students, as there is a need for educators and developers to be increasingly concerned about the impact of virtual learning environments on student learning and wellbeing.

**Keywords :** blended learning, online learning, secondary schools, virtual environments

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