INTRODUCTION

This article discusses virtual schools. It examines reasons for their growth, and relates criticism and support of virtual schools to the purposes of schooling. In particular, the notions of socialization, values, affective objectives and the future needs of communities are examined. This article discusses the measurement and importance of values and socialization in a school system where virtual schools are valued, and concludes that more attention must be given to these issues as this schooling mode matures.

Virtual schools are a variant of distance education whereby students use online computers for some or all of their schooling. Russell (2004) suggests that they may be categorized in terms of the amount of face-to-face interaction, as the range of virtual schools now available includes the following:

1. Those offering some virtual classes at conventional schools.
2. “Out-of-school” models, where there is no designated school building and students never attend a face-to-face class.
3. Mixed-mode examples, where students are expected to work online from home or elsewhere, but attend some face-to-face sessions such as sport or social activities.

Variation can also be seen in the experiences offered to students in the online component of their course. Some schools, such as the Virtual Schooling Service in Queensland, Australia (VSS 2003), rely principally on synchronous interaction in the timetabled classes of conventional schools. Other schools, such as Florida Virtual School in the United States (U.S.), use asynchronous methods to enable greater flexibility. The Florida Virtual School uses the motto of “Teaching Any Time, Any Place, Any Pace” (Johnson 2004).

The experiences that students will receive within the online component of their virtual schools also vary. An examination of virtual school Web sites and reports, including the California Virtual School Report (2000), Virtual High School (Kozma, Zucker, Espinoza, McGee, Yarnell, Zalles, & Lewis, 2000) and Florida (Florida High School Evaluation, 2002) indicate a range of environments. These include Web pages, chat rooms, online discussion groups and e-mail. In addition, some schools retain predecessor technologies such as telephone, post and audio and videotapes—or combinations of technologies that seem appropriate. It is difficult, if not impossible, to compare student experiences where the technological provision is so disparate.

The Growth of Virtual Schools

Virtual schools have become increasingly popular in recent years. The extensive list of available schools provided by Clark (2001) supports the contention by Cavanaugh (2004) that the number of virtual schools in North America is around 100 and growing. There are reasons to believe that this growth will continue, including increased technological capability, a belief that technology can provide better education, discontent with conventional schools and the modeling effect provided by online courses in higher education.

One of the principal advantages of virtual schools is their flexibility. For many students, a virtual school alternative means freedom from the regimentation of bells, uniforms, timetables and organizational constraints. This means that students who are unable to study a particular subject because it cannot be provided at their local school can still enroll in it at a virtual school. Students who live in remote areas, or those disadvantaged by illness or disability, are provided with additional options. In addition, students who have been excluded from a conventional school and even those in detention may be able to continue their education. It is relevant to observe here, however, that many of these functions have been traditionally carried out by distance education in the pre-Internet era, and in this respect, virtual schools continue an existing tradition.

Virtualization and the Purposes of Schooling

It is a truism to assert that students who live in a postmodern, online world have needs that differ from previous non-
Implications of Virtual Schooling for Socialization and Community

digital generations. However, there are critics of virtual schooling who remain unconvinced that issues such as social isolation, socialization and preparation for future life and work have been adequately addressed. Nevertheless, a hasty examination of these issues assumes that there is a consensus on what the purposes of school should be. It is likely that the answer to this question is related to the viewpoint of the individual or group asking the question, and to the agendas of those in power who control the schools.

It is likely that several purposes of schooling can be identified at any one time. These include the maintenance of free-market capitalism (Toll, 2001), respect for public and institutional authority (Laszlo, 1994), future employment (Australian Centre for Equity, 2001), preparing young people for adulthood (Bentley, 2000), value formation (Beare, 2001), and less-overt reasons such as improving social status or custodial functions (Hutmacher, 1999). It is reasonable to expect a tension between economists, who emphasize the links between market ideology and education, and parents, who also want their child to be able to relate well to others.

An alternative explanation of the purposes of schooling is to consider that notions of school education are affected by the contexts in which they are situated. Although there are pressures from within school systems to continue with established educational practices that have served well for many years, it is likely that virtual schools are an innovation emerging because of a perceived political, social or educational need (Russell & Russell, 2001). The form that more mature virtual schools will take will be largely determined by the environments that they serve. For Levinson (1997), inventors’ inventions differ from what is eventually produced because of the social environments in which they are to operate.

Conflicting Value Systems in Face-to-Face and Online Environments

Schools have traditionally promoted conservative values, both in terms of the notions of individual behavior and group norms that they encourage students to follow, and the less-overt values characteristic of school organizations. Wagner’s (1993) research into the purposes of school with focus groups from faculty, students and parents resulted in a consensus that the principles of honesty, respect for self and others, responsibility and citizenship should be followed. Similarly, Claeys, Lowyck and Van der Perre (1997) have reported views that schools have a function beyond that of transferring knowledge, as there are values, norms and socialization to be communicated.

For Gagne (1985), learning is largely dependent on events in the environment with which the individual interacts, which suggests that in face-to-face and virtual classrooms, students may adopt the desirable or undesirable aspects of those behaviors modeled for them. This creates a problem for educators involved in these experimental (traditional classrooms) and computer-mediated environments (virtual schools), respectively. The problem is further exacerbated when, as Walker (1993) argues, school leaders are faced with competing values when faced with the dilemma of preserving and communicating the values of society.

Virtual schools facilitate socialization and value formation through the values characteristic of the online environment. While virtual schools may take steps not to teach inappropriate values directly, the nature of the technology makes some transmission inevitable. In any case, students enrolled in virtual schools will be only a mouse-click away from the remainder of the Internet. While there are considerable advantages to students’ Internet use, there are also concerns. Ess (2001) argues that the Internet promotes a form of cultural imperialism, where cultural and linguistic differences are collapsed into a global consumer culture whose main language is English, and whose primary cultural activity is trade. For Herring (2001), Web content is permeated by values that include individual freedom, religious agnosticism, open sexuality and free-market capitalism.

This is not to argue for a dichotomy between conventional and virtual schools where socialization is effective in the former and suspect in the latter, as a diverse range of practices is included in each category. Similarly, it is likely that schools (whether in online or face-to-face mode) provide only some sources of socialization. Holmes and Russell (1999) argue that adolescents’ rapid uptake of communications and information technologies lift them out of the institutional control of school and family. Increasingly, the use of technologies such as the Internet and portable technologies such as mobile phones and Walkmans are gaining increased importance in adolescent self-construction. Despite these observations, a student who moves from a brick-and-mortar school to a virtual school is likely to encounter changes in the mode of socialization. That part of value formation and identity self-construction that previously took place in a conventional school, or was associated with it, is transferred to other institutions, technologies and people. Some part of this transfer is likely to be to virtual school environments.

There are concerns that virtual schools may be unable to aid students in learning how to work cooperatively with others, and to internalize the norms and values necessary for living in a civilized community. Moll (1998) is concerned with possible disruption to a 200-year-old tradition of public education as the primary vehicle for the transference of national narratives and humanistic and democratic values. It could, however, be argued that
Related Content

An Interactive Space as a Creature: Mechanisms of Agency Attribution and Autotelic Experience
[www.igi-global.com/article/an-interactive-space-as-a-creature/169931?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/an-interactive-space-as-a-creature/169931?camid=4v1a)

Conditions and Key Success Factors for the Management of Communities of Practice
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/conditions-key-success-factors-management/30810?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/conditions-key-success-factors-management/30810?camid=4v1a)

Visual Complexity Online and Its Impact on Children's Aesthetic Preferences and Learning Motivation
[www.igi-global.com/article/visual-complexity-online-and-its-impact-on-childrens-aesthetic-preferences-and-learning-motivation/214989?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/visual-complexity-online-and-its-impact-on-childrens-aesthetic-preferences-and-learning-motivation/214989?camid=4v1a)

The Effect of Augmented and Virtual Reality Interfaces in the Creative Design Process