

Guidelines for Selecting Quality K-12 Online eCourses
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With the proliferation of online "homeschooling solutions" and the abundance of new terms describing online learning, many homeschoolers are baffled as to how to effectively evaluate these online services. This article presents guidelines formulated by Learning By Grace, Inc., one of the nation's leading providers of online resources for homeschoolers, and is intended to help home educators navigate the multitude of available choices so that they will be better equipped to select the provider that offers the curriculum and services most suited to the needs of their family.

What is an eCourse?

You may know it by many names: electronic course, distance learning, correspondence classes, virtual learning, or elearning. All of these different names describe courses delivered through the Internet. Some eCourses merely use the Internet to deliver instructions such as "Read page 37-45 in your textbook." This should not be called an eCourse, as it is only using the Internet to deliver directions; this is not fully utilizing the amazing capabilities of emerging technologies. A genuine eCourse is very expensive to build and very hard to find. Learning By Grace, Inc. offers over 110 eCourses covering core curriculum as well as a wonderful variety of delight driven courses.

Why participate in an eCourse?

Homeschooling students want more flexibility, the ability to take courses at convenient times and to continue to learn from the safety and comfort of their own homes...in their pajamas, if they wish! Many parents of homeschoolers feel ill equipped to handle more advanced level courses and seek the services of online educational providers. Many homeschooled students thrive best when an adult who is not their parent holds them accountable. Teens, in particular, often need the guidance of a non-parent adult mentor.

Criteria Checklist

The following is a checklist of criteria for evaluating online educational services:

- Curriculum**
- Instructional Design**
- Teacher Quality**
- Student Interactivity**
- Assessment**
- Management and Support Systems**
- Technological Infrastructure**

Curriculum

Does the curriculum represent the world view you wish to teach your children?
Does the curriculum enable the student to deeply explore content for mastery?
Do the eCourses offer multiple learning paths to accommodate different learning styles?
Does the curriculum use multimedia to engage the student?

Rather than requiring simple rote memorization and regurgitation of facts, eCourse activities should promote abstract thinking and critical reasoning. Assignments that include student reflections on course work (e.g., readings, projects, labs, online discussions and collaboration with peers), peer review and revision help students acquire those skills (Deubel 2003b; Fulton 2002). A quality curriculum should enable students to engage in analysis, synthesis and evaluation activities as part of the course requirements (Phipps and Merisotis 2000).

Design Elements

Are the eCourses beautifully designed? Do they contain attractive graphics, layout and navigational features?

Instructional Design

eCourses offer much more than traditional courses because of emerging technologies such as instant messaging, video conferencing, whiteboards, and email.

Many “online courses” are really just a list of assignments the student is required to complete in their textbooks. These should not be called online courses because they do not include any of the benefits of technology that a real online course offers.

Are the eCourses self paced? Can the student work at his or her own pace or is the student forced to move at the pace determined by the teacher or the school?

Are the eCourses asynchronous, synchronous or a combination of the two? Synchronous means everyone in the class is required to complete the assignments at the same time, attend lectures at the same time and take tests at the same time. Asynchronous means students work independently of one another or at their own pace. All courses offered by the Learning by Grace, Inc. academies are asynchronous, giving homeschoolers the most flexibility and freedom.

Grade Level

Are students able to take the eCourses of their choice because they meet their academic needs, not just because they correspond to their grade level?

Multiple Learning Styles

The online K-12 course should appeal to various learning styles (SREB 2000; Fulton 2002). Through the use of different types of media, the eCourse will appeal to different learners. A high quality eCourse integrates videos at the click of a button as well as all illustrations and animations. The more these options are seamlessly embedded into the eCourse, the greater the depth of student engagement.

Accreditation

A course or a school becomes accredited when an independent accrediting agency conducts a comprehensive evaluation of the curriculum. Professional administrators and educators review the learning objects and assessments via the criteria mentioned in this article, determining if the curriculum can be accredited. All of the Learning By Grace, Inc. academies are accredited.

Talking Content

A great eCourse will enable the student to listen to the content as well as read it. Learning By Grace, Inc. has pioneered technology known as "Talking ebooks". When the student highlights a passage or an entire page of text, the computer automatically reads the selected text to the student. It is wonderful for auditory learners or for students who enjoy having the text read to them.

Does the eCourse present information that builds upon the student's previously acquired knowledge? Does it provide ongoing, relevant feedback, choices of content and tools, adjustable levels of challenge, choices of rewards, and choices of learning context?

Teacher Qualifications

Has the teacher demonstrated his/her subject-matter expertise and been trained to teach online?

Online teachers should be technically proficient in the emerging technologies.

Teachers should share a world view consistent with the worldview that the parents wishes the student to learn. Attitudes, values, and critical thinking processes are communicated through a teacher and should match the ideals of the parents.

Field Tested

eCourses should be field-tested and revised as necessary to ensure content accuracy and realistic completion times for assignments. All navigational and functional aspects of the instruction delivery system should be systematically reviewed for functionality.

Student Interactivity

The Internet offers tremendous ability for students to communicate with people from all parts of the globe in an instant. However, it is important to know how much interactivity is built into the eCourse. For example, Learning By Grace, Inc. eCourse tools include a Raise Your Hand button on every course page. When the student encounters a problem or needs to ask the teacher a question, all the student must do is click on the *Raise Your Hand* button to be instantly connected to the teacher of their choice.

Some online courses offer “teacher support”, meaning different things to different providers. For some, it may mean the teacher responds to the student’s inquiry within 3 or 4 days. For others, it may mean instantaneous feedback such as the *Raise Your Hand* feature available at Learning By Grace, Inc. When evaluating an online course provider, make sure to ask specific questions about what type of teacher support will be available.

Simulations and Games

Learning By Grace, Inc. has pioneered the inclusion of historical simulations in its online curriculum. Simulations and games present the course concepts through an interactive online tool that recreates the story and the facts to be covered.

Graphics

Graphics are static visual representations and can include text, computer generated images, drawings, and photographs.

Audio

Audio is voice and sound reproduction used as another method of communicating content within a course. Audio can be used as narrative explanation for still images, or to give directions or announcements. Audio can be used to create more interactive ways to learn word pronunciations in foreign language or science courses.

Animation

Animation is a sequence of individual frames of imaginary action that creates the illusion of motion. An animation can be computer-generated graphics, a form of digitized video, or a combination of the two.

Videos

Videos include commercial videos such as news clips, video lectures of an instructor explaining a concept (i.e., The Victory Math Video Series offered through Learning By Grace, Inc.), footage of experiments or processes in action, or videos that use animation and graphics to illustrate key ideas and principles.

Text

Text refers to the written material provided online. Text should be used effectively, be topic-related, and complement the multimedia. Traditional paper

textbooks are not noted for their lively and interesting writing styles. In fact, most textbooks are downright boring and often poorly written. An online course can change all of that. The online courses produced by Learning By Grace, Inc. are written in an understandable and contemporary style.

Exercises, Projects, and Activities

Exercises, projects, and activities complement the primary content. These assignments may ask students to work independently or in a group. A high quality online course will provide plenty of offline activities.

Assessments

Are assessments authentic, formative, regular and summative? Do they prevent cheating?

Online testing and the creation of valid assessments are issues affecting the quality of an online course.

Assessment Types

Test item types refer to the types of test questions included to support the course. Types of assessments may include multiple choice, true/false, matching, short answer, essay, problem solving, and multimedia-based items such as drag and drop.

Feedback Loop

The terms “Feedback loop” refers to the ability of the test-takers to receive feedback on their test answers by referring back to the course content on wrong answers, including a pop up box that explains the error. The more immediately the student receives feedback from their assessment, the more quickly they will understand the concepts presented and correct their errors.

Assessment Grading

Assessment grading refers to the method used to provide students with feedback on their assessments. Manually graded assessments are those submitted to and assessed by the instructor, while computer graded assessments provide instant feedback to the students and automatically register the grade in the CMS grade book. At Learning By Grace, Inc., all of the Math and Science assessments are automatically graded so the student receives instantaneous feedback.

Assessment Availability

Assessment availability refers to prepared tests, exams, or other preassembled or authored testing activities, projects, and assignments.

Grading Rubrics

Grading rubrics are the specified criteria for assignments and course performance that describe the characteristics of quality expected for a particular grade level.

Answer Keys

A high quality online course will provide the instructor with answer keys that provide the answers to assessments that are not automatically graded by the computer. Answer keys should assume that the instructor has no prior knowledge of the subject matter.

Support Materials for the Instructor

Support materials for the instructor may include prepared teacher notes, optional simulated lab materials, extra credit assignments not included in the body of the course content, etc.

Supplemental Enrichment Materials for the Student

Do the courses come with any supplemental materials for the student? Enrichment materials may include optional tutorials, workbooks, literature books, non-fiction books, software, videos, games, third party problem sets, lab simulations, AP test preparation materials, graphing or math equation software, etc.

Learning Portal

eCourses are usually delivered through some type of learning management system. Typically, the student accesses the learning portal, receives the daily assignments, completes the work, communicates with the teacher and keeps a record of their work. A good learning portal should also contain a place to log the student's instructional time and a space for the parent to review the student's progress.

Custom Learning Portal

Many online educational providers use an off-the-shelf learning portal which is bare bones and "one size fits all". Others, such as Learning By Grace, Inc., have invested millions of dollars in customized, complex and comprehensive learning portals that provide a whole suite of tools that enhance the student's learning experience such as a Social Center, an Art Gallery, a Video Yearbook, and a place to add instructional hours for delight driven offline activities.

Orientation Manual

Technical assistance for both students and teachers should always be readily available for the families using the online course. Families should have access to an Orientation Manual containing written online directions regarding the use of the learning portal and additional media that might be included.

Automated eMails

Course management systems can generate automatic messages such as suggesting additional activities based on homework and quiz performance, or encouraging greater participation in online discussions. Two other features that assist both faculty and students are an automated assessment of exercises, quizzes and tests in subjects that can be assessed in a standardized format, as well as modular online or CD-ROM-based tutorials presented with an interactive format.

Communication Tool Access

Communication tools are those tools and features within the course environment that allow students and faculty to interact with one another in either a synchronous or asynchronous method. Communication tools can be contained within the presentation of a course or in the learning portal.

For more information about the eCourses and other online educational programs available at Learning By Grace, Inc., log onto www.LearningByGrace.org or call our toll free line at 1-866-FOR-GRACE. For a limited time, Learning By Grace, Inc. is offering a FREE Family Worship CD. Just go to our website and sign up for our FREE Homeschooling Newsletter and you will also receive the CD.

About the Author

Mimi Rothschild has been actively participating in homeschooling since 1985. She is the mother of 8, including a set of triplets, and has been married for 26 years.