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THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION, PART 3

Alternative schools and flexibility

Future of learning may be blend of in-person, online

By Emily Cox
The Herald-Times

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is last in a three-part series on the future of K-12 education.

As schools have shifted to an extended period of e-learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students are being pushed to develop self-directed learning skills, according to Curt Bonk, a professor of instructional systems technology at Indiana University.

Bonk believes that schools, students, educators and parents adjusting to a different structure of learning will lead to various changes for K-12 education, and he predicts that in the future, more students will go on to graduate at younger ages, more alternative schools will open, and greater flexibility will be key.

Bonk is a former CPA, has his master's and Ph.D. degrees in educational psychology and has authored a number of books about emerging technologies for learning. Now that students are learning from home, self-directed learning skills are increasing, he said.

"Self-directed learning is under

emphasized," Bonk said. "It's underappreciated. It's misunderstood. And I think there will be more awareness of allowing kids to take control of their learning to a greater degree, opening up their learning, letting them discover things and letting them self-direct."

As for the students who feel less motivated without a teacher in front of them or don't have as much home support, flexibility is important. In this case, Bonk said teachers could suggest a project that's relevant to the student that meets the curriculum guidelines, or offer options by showing project examples from the past. He also suggests tying the learning to something relevant today, such as a current scientific discovery.

"No. 1, you base it on what students' interests are, and two, you build around something that's current that is happening today, rather than relating old textbook stuff," Bonk said.

Bonk said usually in schools, there's a mindset that things have to be a certain way. There are exams at certain times and procedures to follow, often because of state requirements.

"I think the fact that no one's following any of them now is going to at least open up, to some degree, people at least rethinking the 'no' mindset," Bonk said. "There's people who say no because of procedures, rules, prerequisites, that's just not how we do it."

That won't go away, but will subside, he said.

Bonk sees that as the standard ways of doing things are rethought and students develop self-directed learning skills, students may take more classes online or graduate sooner.

"You hear about the odd students who are 16 and going to college, or 15 or younger than that," Bonk said. "In 10 years, that's no longer going to be the odd student, that is going to be the normal student."

He thinks students will be more likely to take courses online during the summer to get ahead, leading them to graduate quicker and to take more beginning college courses online as upperclassmen in high school. This is something happening globally, Bonk said, such as in China or Nepal.

Bonk isn't suggesting that students never take a break, but rather to rethink the current structure. Maybe some students would take the winter off rather than the summer, taking a few extra online courses here and there as they choose.

"Freshman-year courses are going to be increasingly taken from online entities, organizations," Bonk said. "Students will be less resistant to do that today. Their parents will be more knowledgeable, they'll be aware of what's possible."

Bonk said Modern States Education Alliance, a non-profit, is trying to create the freshman year of college for free. Arizona State tried to do the same thing, but it didn't go the way its leaders hoped, Bonk said. Organizations experimenting with advanced placement courses, college prep courses and freshman year of college going fully online have been developing for more than a decade, he said.

Bonk believes there will be an increase in concepts that have been around, such as Massive Open Online Courses, MOOCs, or textbooks that are free to access.

During this time, some teachers may find they enjoy making videos as a way to teach their students, Bonk said. This could lead to a flipped classroom approach, where instead of classes being lectures and students having problems to solve as homework, students could have instructional videos from their teachers to watch in the evening and come to class to solve problems.

"Then they come to class for scenarios, discussions, simulations, mock trials," Bonk said. "All those will be really lively."

He also predicts more alternative schools, which causes concern for some people, since a recent study in Indiana revealed that students fell behind academically after transferring to virtual charter schools.

A national study from 2015 by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University found that students attending online schools had less academic growth in both math and reading compared with their traditional public school peers. The loss was the equivalent of a student losing 72 days of learning in reading and an entire school year's worth of learning in math, 180 days.

Recently, the Indiana Virtual School and Indiana Virtual Pathways Academy misreported enrollment numbers and misspent more than \$85 million in state funds.

"I think hopefully, this will force people to look at the silver lining, to look at the underlying reason why we should move to open schools," Bonk said. "It's not just to reduce costs at schools. I'm a former accountant — cost is an important factor, but that shouldn't be the only thing. It should be about learning first."

Some parents will become aware that their child or children learn better online, Bonk said, and there are a lot of caveats. Some people will find out online learning has opportunities that face-to-face learning doesn't and vice versa, he said. He gave an example that guests can be brought in through Zoom or other technology to grade or evaluate student's work to get them excited.

"People think that face-to-face is the best, but in actuality, across hundreds of studies, online and blended turned out very, very good," Bonk said.

Meta-analyses looking at blended, face-to-face and online outcomes have mainly been focused on the higher education space.

In "The Blended Course Design Workbook — A Practical Guide," author Kathryn E. Linder writes that "the impacts of blended and online learning methods on student learning outcomes are not entirely definitive when measured through rigorous research."

Overall, COVID-19 is part of a large societal change, Bonk said, not just in schools. Change is happening so fast and we are in the learning century, he said.

"The coronavirus is going to make people aware of the fact that learning is around us all the time," Bonk said, "even when we're stuck at home."

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Curt Bonk, professor of Instructional Systems Technology at Indiana University, is a former CPA with master's and Ph.D. degrees in educational psychology and is the author of many books about emerging technologies

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COVID-19 PANDEMIC

MONROE COUNTY NUMBERS

1,393

TESTS

132

CASES

8

DEATHS

COVID-19 tests, confirmed cases and deaths in area counties: Brown (80 tests, 18 cases, 1 death), Greene (482 tests, 97 cases, 7 deaths), Lawrence (589 tests, 109 cases, 14 deaths), Morgan (1,410 tests, 171 cases, 7 deaths), Owen (313 tests, 24 cases, 1 death). Last updated noon Tuesday by the Indiana State Department of Health. Cases listed by county of residence. Probable Indiana deaths (doctors listed COVID-19 as contributing, but no test): 113.

STATEWIDE: 115,834 TESTS 21,033 CASES 1,213 DEATHS