Three distinct categories of Internet instruction are provided in this essay: distance education, online education, and digital education. Distance education was “all the rage” in the 1970s and succeeding years. It remains, in fact, a viable means of instruction for students who do not have physical access to colleges or universities. Many distance education courses are conducted entirely by paper: instructional materials and books are mailed to the student; the student then responds with written papers and processed paper tests also delivered by post. A more modern upgrade is with televised or Internet distributed lectures. Those distance education courses with televised lectures seek to duplicate the lecture experience that has been a hallmark of university education for centuries and to some extent is even in practice today. Examples of this can be seen in the collection of educational videos at Towson University’s Cook Library which includes Kanopy and Academic Video Online: Premium.¹ Bridget Sullivan, Professor at Towson University in the College of Fine Arts and Communication, also noted the development of this type of instruction at Anne Arundel Community College in the late 1990s in her podcast interview.² The Great Courses series published by Recorded Books emulates the traditional lecture as well. Despite the use of the Internet or even DVDs, however, the student products of these distance education courses are the same as many in-class or face-to-face courses – written papers or pencil-and-paper examinations.³

Online education is noteworthy for providing Internet access to course materials. This is the most common form of instruction over the Internet today. Some courses might use supplemental books, but many provide all the readings, lectures, tests, and quizzes over the Internet. The courses are hosted with a Learning Management System (LMS) such as Blackboard (currently in use at Towson University), Moodle, or Canvas among others. LMSs also feature forums or chat rooms, the sharing of documents such as digital papers between students and teachers, and on-line gradebooks. The LMSs are generally easy to use for both students and professors. The distinction between distance education and online education is that distance education student products are paper and the online student products are almost always digital. However, even though online student assignments are are digital, most if not all these student materials are comprised of text documents or text entered in online examinations. Responses by instructors to students are also with text in Microsoft Word documents or online postings.

Digital education, while using materials and approaches developed in correspondence and online education, departs in significant ways from the prior two systems of Internet education. These differences are not just of degree, but more importantly they are transformative approaches that vary the nature of the educational experience, result in different student products, and require new competencies that students can readily apply after leaving the university. Online education, which mostly features text-only approaches, is much more regulated and limited than digital education. Not surprisingly, professors of the arts and communication are more likely to depart from text-only responses by students and seek student materials that contain artistic expressions in graphics, sound, and video. For instance, this readily explains Prof. Sullivan’s venture into digital education. She has the distinction of having developed Towson Universities first 100% online course and continues to this day with curricular innovations.³

To explain this further, let’s consider online and digital education as playgrounds. Online education is noted for its ease of use for instructor and students. The Learning Management Systems, which are often associated with online education, are analogous to sandboxes. They are safe and well-defined. The tools—little shovels, toys, etc.—are...
At the start of the course there are many students who have difficulties properly placing assignments in the appropriate folders. Surprisingly, even towards the end of the courses there are still a few who struggle with this digital organization. Students need to practice these skills frequently so that they are reinforced as positive habits. In addition, many university students are not aware of the suffixes on computer file names that identify associated computer programs. In some of my courses, students will produce four or more file types. These suffixes may not be seen on many of the students’ computers for digital education are not contained in well-managed “cyber sandboxes.” Students and faculty need to master software that might not be easy to use. There are more risks of failure for students of digital education might be frustrated with the additional work. However, the reward is that skills learned by students in this more demanding environment will be valuable after graduation. Furthermore, the analogy, the goal is for students to leave the digital school yard and venture forth with new proficiencies into the cyber city. Skills mastered in this larger digital school yard do transfer to postgraduate, job requirements.

One might think that students who are experts at Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, and gaming already possess basic skills needed for digital education. Actually this is not the case! Many students are not proficient with basic digital file management, naming protocols for computer files, and the administration of digital items. Most students do not employ a regimen for placing files in order or use unique computer directories, but they are visible in Dropbox—another important reason to consider using this application. Beyond the digital management skills that students should learn, students must also gain fluency with new applications. Digital technologies now allow non-specialists to produce competent artifacts in sound, graphics, and video. Learning basic skills in digital media enhances future opportunities for students, but surprisingly many university students lack basic technology competencies. They can play in the sandboxes of Snapchat or Instagram, but not on the playground of digital media. For instance, many students are ignorant of how to capture a picture of their computer screen. This is a useful skill to document test results or other items that are presented in the form of a video on YouTube than instructions in print. Recognizing the students’ preferences for audio/visual communications, digital professors can provide critiques by video rather than just by text. Screencasting software creates videos of what appears on the computer screen.

Providing students with a personal video in which the instructor discusses the students’ work is particularly effective when the student products include graphics, audio, or video. The maxim “A picture is worth 1,000 words” is only too apt. Screencasting the computer screen video is exponentially more useful as an explanatory and evaluative tool than just written replies. In screencasts the cursor can point to details of critical components of post-presentation print commentaries. These attributes of screencasts were particularly important for video portfolios of student submissions. Thus, screencast evaluation of student submissions are particularly appropriate for digital education.

In conclusion, the strategies and tools described above need not be limited to digital education. However, digital education provides “furnaces or crucibles” in which the elements of digital creation, manipulation, sharing, and critique can be forged. These skills are not only useful for education over the Internet, since they already receive so much information through this forum already. Thus, digital professors, one’s advancement digital education, are uniquely positioned to challenge students to new levels of creativity and digital mastery. Ultimately it is not whether Towson University students take courses over the Internet that matters, but rather whether they leave education with them digital skills that will aid their success after graduation. The non-linear career paths that most students will encounter in their futures will be best aided by those possessing multiple skills in digital media.

There are further advantages to digital education. Much of professional education is delivered through text, yet this is quite opaque. Text is not an easy vehicle by which to convey instructions or critiques. This is even more so a problem for today’s students, who would rather find information in the form of a video on YouTube than instructions in print. Recognizing the students’ preferences for audio/visual communications, digital professors can provide critiques by video rather than just by text. Screencasting software creates videos of what appears on the computer screen. Providing students with a personal video in which the instructor discusses the students’ work is particularly effective when the student products include graphics, audio, or video. The maxim “A picture is worth 1,000 words” is only too apt. Screencasting the computer screen video is exponentially more useful as an explanatory and evaluative tool than just written replies. In screencasts the cursor can point to details of critical components of post-presentation print commentaries. These attributes of screencasts were particularly important for video portfolios of student submissions. Thus, screencast evaluation of student submissions are particularly appropriate for digital education.

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