Virtual High School:

Closing the Gap Between Physical and Virtual Classrooms

Today’s high school administrators and educators have been transplanted into the world of technology. Because of this, they are hesitant to pursue Virtual High School (VHS) as a tool for teaching students. Due to the majority of educators’ lack of motivation to integrate technology into the classroom and their inadequate computer and internet navigation knowledge, students are failing to learn important skills that will propel them into college and the workforce. Technology is the future, and students need to be prepared. The Web-based Education Commission emphasizes, “The Internet is perhaps the most transformative technology in history, reshaping business, media, entertainment, and society in astonishing ways. But for all its power, it is just now being tapped to transform education” (WBEC 1). The future is now!

**Virtual High School Overview**

According to the VHS: Virtual High School Global Consortium website, “The mission of Virtual High School is to develop and deliver standards-based, student-centered online courses to expand students’ educational opportunities and 21st century skills, and to offer professional development to teachers to expand the scope and depth of their instructional skills” (VHSGC). VHS is unique. Students can attend classes that their schedule won’t allow and/or their school doesn’t offer. There are over 200 full-semester and year-long online courses offered by VHS. These classes are taught by certified teachers and meant to complement the students’
general education course work. Examples of VHS class titles are Introduction to Biology, Literacy Skills for the 21st Century, Music Listening and Critique, and Entrepreneurship: Starting Your Own Business. Zucker and Kozma tell us that VHS classes are a semester in length and the class size is generally limited to 20 students (19).

VHS instructors can be teachers who are already employed by schools who are VHS Global Consortium members. Teachers undertake extensive training to become VHS instructors:

To help assure consistency in the quality of VHS NetCourses, VHS requires teachers to enroll in the Teachers Learning Conference (TLC), a 26-week online course worth 12 graduate-level credits that provides professional development in how to design and teach virtual classes, or the NetCourse Instructional Methodologies (NIM) course. The latter, which lasts only 15 weeks, is for teachers who will teach a section of an already-designed course (Zucker, Kozma 23-24).

However, school administrators need to get on board the technology train before they will pay to send teachers to VHS instructor training courses and increase the use of technology in their classrooms.

Many educators fear that technology will replace them, which isn’t true. Technology is simply a tool that can allow teachers to reach students at an innovative, more effective level. A VHS Site Coordinator from Georgia states, “My VHS students have learned not only a great deal about Hispanic culture but also a great deal about using the Internet as a research tool. They have become responsible for their own learning – independent learners who can take the technological tools (that will only become more prevalent in the 21st century) and utilize them to
learn” (VHSGC). Integration of VHS can be translated as a web-enhanced classroom. It isn’t meant to take the place of face-to-face learning in the traditional classroom. 

VHS is a form of distance education, which has been around since the 1800’s. Oram points out how farmers, who couldn’t leave their fields to attend classes, learned through distance learning by correspondence courses. Their lessons would arrive in the mail. The farmers would then complete their homework and mail it back to be graded. The only difference today is that we can use technology instead of, or to complement, correspondence by mail (Oram 3). Distance education is present in elementary, high school, and college levels. Students are able to see, hear, and communicate in ways that they can’t in a traditional classroom. The Web-based Education Commission notes, “The interactivity of this new technology makes it different from anything that came before. It elicits participation, not passive interest. It gives learners a place for communication, not isolation” (5).

VHS Global Consortium began in 1996. While being monitored by the State Department of Education, VHS Global Consortium organizes and provides VHS classes for schools. A consortium is basically a group of organizations, or schools in this case, pooling their money together to buy bigger and better items and services than a single organization or school can afford on its own. VHS Global Consortium has member schools that pool their funds together to finance the VHS program and teachers. An individual school may have only one student participating in VHS, but he/she will have online classmates from the neighboring county and/or country. However, in some cases, an entire online class will be made up of students from the same school.

As Corry and Tu suggest in their book, Distance Education: What Works Well, “VHS isn’t only for public high schools. Charter schools and home-schooled students are eligible to
become members of the VHS Global Consortium and enroll in VHS classes as well”(4). What an incredible opportunity for students who are limited to traditional curriculum course offerings. Home-schooled students generally belong to a group of other home-schooled students in their area. The group as a whole is able to pool their funds with their local public school and take advantage of the learning opportunities VHS has to offer them.

**Technology Can Contribute to Learning**

Educators aren’t completely convinced that they need to move deeper into the age of technology. They seem to adhere to the thought process of, if it isn’t broke, don’t fix it. In spite of this, technology is instrumental in students’ development of increased responsibility and independent learning. “Distance learning demands that students take extra responsibility and be extra focused on learning. Of course, it may well be that distance learning is the very thing some students need to learn to be responsible and focused” (Jones 132). The majority of today’s students are using computers in the classroom, but mostly to type papers and perform occasional research online. Once they discover the World Wide Web and the stores of information it holds, learning will become an educational, interactive form of entertainment which will lead to independent learning. Parents will start to see their children wanting to do their homework. As stated by an eleven-year-old student in Glenview, Illinois, “Reading books is boring and it takes too long. Searching the Web is faster and more fun because we can get sound recordings, like of a dolphin’s sounds, or a video of the discovery of the bow of the Titanic” (Healy 32).

VHS can reduce the amount of peer pressure students feel in the traditional classroom. For example, the unpopular students won’t feel as apprehensive when asked to answer a question in front of their classmates. It’s a lot less intimidating to communicate your thoughts when the captain of the cheerleading squad and the quarterback of the football team aren’t staring right at
you. After taking this into consideration, educators still may argue that students need face-to-face confrontation to develop social skills. It was reported by an editorial in the New York Times on December 28, 1995, “In New York City, 125 ‘at-risk’ students were given home computers and on-line hookups. Positive outcomes included withdrawn students conversing on-line, substitution of internet research for television viewing, and higher enrollment in college preparatory courses” (Healy 249). Once again, VHS does not replace the traditional face-to-face classroom learning style. It only enhances it. Students will still be interacting with their peers physically in the traditional classroom.

Students who face adversity because of health complications can benefit immensely from VHS. Peterson’s Guide to Online Learning provides this testimony:

I have a good example of the power of online learning for people with disabilities. A professor of ours was looking at the discussion board for a course on bilingual education that was almost finished. A student in the class posted a message saying, ‘I’ve been meaning to tell you that I’m deaf. When I got into this class, I realized no one knew. This is the first time in my life that I wasn’t different’ (Oram 18).

Physically handicapped students, who can’t attend the traditional classroom very often or at all, can take VHS courses from their home computer. Even students who are blind can listen to lectures and sound clips on the internet. Technology can empower those who may often feel powerless because of a disability. Female students who are facing teen pregnancy can benefit from VHS. They can take classes online to help with scheduling issues that may arise due to the strenuous demands of raising a child at a young age. Students who are facing adversity need to utilize technology to advance their education. When learning is presented in a more convenient,
entertaining, and hands-on method, students will be more likely to pursue independent and lifelong learning.

VHS can help students choose a career field. By integrating the use of technology and the internet into schools, educators are taking responsibility for the education of the world’s future leaders. From the first day of preschool to the last day of high school, students are being prepared to choose a career, attend college and enter the workforce. VHS offers courses that can introduce students to specific careers. VHS offers career specific courses such as Screenwriting Fundamentals, Career Awareness for the New Millennium, Pre-veterinary Medicine, Criminology, Practical Law, and Engineering Principals. By completing these courses, students will have a clearer picture of the career they are interested in. They may find that they aren’t interested in the career after all. Or on the contrary, they may decide that the career is definitely the right choice for them. This will make college selection easier for students and more than likely save them money because they will be less likely to switch degree programs after they enter college.

When students choose to take career-specific classes, they may find themselves spending time with professionals in their chosen career field. Riley opens our mind to the possibilities of VHS class locations in his article “Computer Education Is Vital for Students of the Future”:

Schools may emerge in unlikely places – such as office buildings – or more conventional schools may have branch campuses integrated into businesses, hospitals, or homes. Secondary schools may forge new links with two-year colleges and community institutions to ease the transition from school to work. Individual classes will be integrated into workplaces, providing a vocational education far richer and more useful than what is offered today (3).
Giving students the opportunity to enter a business where professionals are doing the job they do day in and day out will truly give them a taste of what their future could hold. For example, a student who is enrolled in a Pre-veterinary Medicine class may get the opportunity to watch a Veterinarian perform surgery in a clinic. If the student finds that she faints at the sight of blood, she will be happy to know in advance that veterinary medicine is not for her. This kind of experience is invaluable to students when planning for the future. A substantial amount of time and money can be wasted by students changing their majors halfway through college because they all of a sudden realize their chosen profession isn’t right for them.

**Educators are Unsure**

Some educators are afraid that technology hasn’t progressed enough to fully integrate it into schools. In the past, the internet was slow; schools, teachers, and students had limited access to computers and the internet; and media, such as video, images, and sound, weren’t as advanced as they are today. The drawing below (Table 1.1), which has been adapted from the Web-based Education Commission, clearly shows how technology is evolving and moving towards advanced availability in many locations, with higher speeds and better connections (7).

### Table 1.1 - Technology Trends

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moving From:</th>
<th>Moving To:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• narrowband</td>
<td>• broadband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• plain, single mode (e.g., text or speech)</td>
<td>• multimodal rich connectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• tethered (wired) access</td>
<td>• untethered (wireless) access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• users adapting to the technology</td>
<td>• the technology adapting to the user</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: "Web-Based Education Commission"*
Technology is now changing to accommodate our needs, and the public is always anxiously awaiting a bigger and better new model of hardware and/or version of software to be released. People used to dread the thought of technology and learning new skills. Now they want more, more, more! Computer programmers and web developers are constantly coming out with tools to aid educators, corporate America, and the general public in their everyday lives. Unfortunately, educators aren’t quite convinced that technology belongs so heavily in education.

All benefits of technology aside, it will be more work upfront for educators to hone their computer skills and integrate more technology into the classroom than continuing to educate students the traditional way only. Although, Oram helps us to realize that educators are already implementing different uses of technology into their classrooms. For example, they use software to create slide shows to be shown on projectors or uploaded to webpages (7). Educators need to take just one more step and really dive into integrating technology into the classroom.

VHS requires its member schools to invest in technology hardware and software, instructor training, and VHS Global Consortium membership fees. Administrators argue that their budget won’t allow them to integrate VHS into their schools. It’s understandable that administrators may feel this way. However, they should exhaust their financial resources before disregarding the VHS program. Schools can write grants, conduct fundraisers, utilize the services of their Educational Service Unit, and join consortiums with other schools. Educators may also find that parents of students are willing to pay a small tuition fee for their children to enroll in VHS classes when they realize the value of what their money is buying. A small investment at the high school level could save the parents a lot of money when their children are in college. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Educators can find the funds to incorporate VHS into their schools.
Table 1.2 (shown below), which has been adapted from page 20 of The Virtual High School: Teaching Generation V, displays a brief overview of the services, requirements, and fees involved in VHS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.2 - Summary of VHS Services, Requirements, and Fees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Services</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to 120-plus course catalog for up to 20 students per semester; VHS central administration support; license for the teacher to use software tools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Requirements</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers with Internet access at school; one teacher to design and teach a course (20% full-time equivalent); one site coordinator to handle registration, grades, and student participation issues (20% full-time equivalent). Both the teacher and the site coordinator must take training provided by VHS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fees</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$6,000 annually. One-time costs of $3,500 per teacher for an online professional development course and $1,500 per site coordinator for management training online. Optional: $4,000 and an additional course offering for an additional 20 student slots.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Zucker, Andrew A., and Robert Kozma. The Virtual High School : Teaching Generation V.*

The fees for VHS member schools are clearly stated in Table 1.2. These figures are for one school paying by itself. If two schools join together, each school only pays half of the fees listed. When multiple schools participate in VHS, the fees are reduced further.

Schools have been known to raise money to build buildings and gymnasiums and buy vehicles and sports equipment. One would think a school could raise enough money to join VHS Global Consortium and/or buy additional computer hardware and software. These actions would, in return, give their students a more technologically advanced education to prepare them for their future.

**Why is VHS Important?**

In spite of the fees and training involved, schools need to heavily consider integrating more technology and VHS into their schools. If they don’t, the world is going to keep advancing into technology while schools sit and watch. The Web-based Education Commission suggests,
“Picture how different the world would be today if corporate America hadn’t put money into technology and realized the influence it would have in doing business. It may have taken awhile to recoup the money they spent, but it has changed the way the world does business (5).

Corporations are spending more money on their employees’ technology education than schools are spending on their students. The Web-based Education Commission points out that approximately $3,500 to $5,500 is invested by large businesses in the United States for every employee to advance their technology skills and update their equipment where schools are only investing a few hundred dollars on each pupil (5). Corporate employers are realizing the value of technical knowledge. If schools aren’t teaching students the computer skills that these employers are looking for, where does that leave the students? It leaves them unprepared and at a disadvantage, especially if they can’t afford to attend college and are forced to enter the workforce directly out of high school. Isn’t high school supposed to prepare students for the next step in their lives? Their next step after high school is going to be submerged into the technology driven world they live in, whether it be college or the workforce.

What will happen to education if educators don’t accept the idea of integrating the use of technology into their schools? The answer is simple. Students will not have the opportunity to advance into technology and career focused classes during high school unless they pursue it on their own without instruction. If educators don’t take responsibility for preparing students for the technology saturated world they live in, educators will be harming students ability to achieve more than they can imagine and for the United States ability to continue to be the world leader. Paul A. Winters is absolutely correct in his article written for the National Academy of Sciences when he says:
If this generation does not possess that courage – if it falters, hesitates, and ultimately refuses to open the door to the digital era – global competitors will certainly open the door first, and reap the rewards. And if this transformation is to come to full bloom, it must take root in the nation’s schools. For it is in the nation’s schools, with their 49 million students and 2.5 million teachers, that the country’s future is conceived, created, and secured. And it is in the schools that the United States will obtain the greatest returns on its investments in technology – immediate returns in the form of more productive and rewarding teaching and learning and longer-term benefits of geometric increases in individual and national productivity (1).

What it all comes down to is the futures of today’s children are in the hands of today’s educators. Will they choose to open doors for the students they serve, or will they close the doors to opportunity and success? All it takes is an open mind and a passion for education. If you don’t open the book, you’ll never learn what’s inside.
Works Cited


