



## DOES ONLINE EDUCATION RAISE ISSUES OF MORALITY?



NEPC Fellow Michael Barbour has contributed to a body of NEPC research that has repeatedly documented the ineffectiveness of virtual education at the K-12 level. Virtual and “blended” schools (which combine online and in-person learning) in the US have consistently failed those students who are not highly motivated, high achieving, and technologically savvy. But Professor Barbour recently defended a different element of online education: its morality pursuant to Catholic teachings.

In an interesting exchange, even for those who approach these issues from a secular perspective, Barbour and his co-authors [respond](#) to scholar [Jonathan Malesic](#), who [contended](#) that the very nature of massive open online courses (MOOCs) is unaligned with three core tenets of Catholic education:

- Teaching and learning through social interaction
- Adapting to learner needs
- Successfully teaching the masses

As Malesic further developed his line of inquiry, he suggested that online education in general was not well suited to address these core tenets.

Barbour does acknowledge that such schools (at K-12 and higher education levels), on average, suffer from all the problems that Malesic identifies. For example, most K-12 online education provides little or no interaction between students and teachers. Most isn’t synchronous (delivered at a specific time so teachers and students directly interact)—so students must instead seek out teachers on their own, and many do not. And most past K-12 online education efforts have had limited success with less advantaged students.

However, Barbour also contends that virtual education can rise above these problems, and he highlights two Christian K-12 online education programs that have managed to avoid many of these pitfalls: Heritage Christian Online School in British Columbia, Canada, and Sevenstar, a Texas-based program that offers online education and partners with brick-and-mortar schools.

Heritage, Barbour and his co-authors write, offers asynchronous education but encourages and actualizes extensive interactions between students and teachers through activities such as chats and a video conferencing “Breakfast Club.” Each student has a personalized learning plan. It’s also broadly available—any high school student in British Columbia can take a course at public expense.

Sevenstar teachers are charged with developing personal relationships with students by, for instance, praying with them. When students enroll in courses without attending a brick-and-mortar school, they are assigned to a local coordinator who makes weekly reports on their progress. Students are also assessed extensively upon entry and then assigned programs that help address their needs while skipping content they have already mastered—and then advancing to new challenges. Sevenstar enrolls students from around the world, including remote areas that would not otherwise offer access to its coursework. The school claims an 85 percent average pass rate.

Given that MOOCs were the original focus of Malesic’s argument, Barbour and his colleagues pay particular attention to challenges related to this format. The primary one is that MOOCs typically lack paid instructors—often the courses are little more than online collections of content and quizzes. However, Barbour offers suggestions for how they might overcome this challenge by, for instance, seeking expert volunteers to interact with students, incorporating adaptive learning, automatically “nudging” students with encouragement or reminders in order to decrease dropout rates, and offering courses that would more directly serve the needs of rural populations—e.g. farming and irrigation.

Steps such as these may not fully address the concerns raised by Malesic, but they do offer ideas worth considering for existing online schools.

## NEPC Resources on Virtual Education

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>