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Learners and Technology: Myths about Online Education

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Introduction

Although online education is a relatively recent phenomenon, its position in teaching and learning is evidently consolidated, and myths have arisen since its development. These can be less positive myths that can distort perceptions and expectations. This chapter identifies and explains four kinds of myths found in online education – social, organizational, instructional and technological. The main assumption underlying this chapter is that while the halo of online education mediated by modern tools is evident everywhere, there is sound research which casts doubt on the global effectiveness of this modality of education in terms of middle- and long-term learning results.

Due to the relative novelty of online education, there is scant literature about online myths and what there is can be recursive. As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, some myths can be found scattered throughout different papers (mainly web pages) and explained, explicitly or implicitly, in a superficial way but hardly ever accompanied by deeper explanation and contrasted evidence. At the same time, the software industry that provides e-learning programmes points out that teaching online is, for example, cheaper because some procedures can be standardized and they also tackle pedagogical issues to convince their clients. This information can be found in institutions and company web pages and it contributes, informally, to build a specific representation of online education. For that reason, this chapter will firstly identify the most common myths that can be found regarding online education and will also highlight some other myths that are very pervasive and have a significant impact on this modality of teaching and learning, for better or worse. Secondly, the chapter will explore the limitations and benefits
of these myths for teachers and students, presenting the evidence-based part of each case reflecting the complexity of online education.

Finally, among myths about online education, we can often find the same myth with two very different results. This could be because the supposed myth is not very strong or because of the novelty of the online phenomenon. In the case of contradictory myths, the most likely solution seems to point towards opting for a more balanced view to compensate for the exaggerated vision of reality.

To better understand this complexity, we present the myths classified into four types – social, organizational, instructional and technological.

- **Social** myths comprise global issues that rely on common perceptions about online education in our societies, habitually going hand in hand with general insights about technology and global reputation.
- **Organizational** myths tackle matters that have institutional effects in educational centres providing online teaching.
- **Instructional** myths address questions related to the learning and teaching process.
- **Technological** myths deal with concerns driven by technology that have educational effects and modify the traditional education landscape.

**Social myths in online education**

Social myths comprise global issues that rely on common perceptions of online education in our societies, habitually connected with general insights about technology and global reputation: for example, these may include level of difficulty of online studies, comparisons with face-to-face education, labour market prestige and overpricing.

**Online learning is easier than face-to-face learning**

If someone has access to the necessary technology, this statement would seem valid because there is a widespread belief that simply by being connected to the Internet the student will learn (Globokar, 2010; Jubany, 2012). This idea is mainly prevalent among students and it could be classified more as an illusion nourished by the perceived ease of use of the technology (Ong & Lai, 2006; Sun et al., 2008). Online learners need to have competencies linked with autonomous learning and such competencies cannot be taken for granted and may need to be developed (Lynch & Dembo, 2004). The profile of online learners is not promising: they combine their studies with other responsibilities and study in their