

7-3-2017

Digital Graduations and Reunions

Mandayam Thirunarayanan

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/tl_fac



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Sciences & Education at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of Teaching and Learning by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Digital Graduations and Reunions

 by **M.O. Thirunarayanan**  Monday, July 3, 2017

Key Takeaways

- **Online students** deserve the same rituals of **graduation** as place-based students, and the same **opportunities to hold reunions** with their sometimes worldwide cohort of peers.
- **Digital graduations and reunions** can provide these options for online students, using avatars and appropriate scenes on **virtual reality platforms**.
- Besides the **increased engagement** with the institution and possibly the alumni association, these virtual convocations can **save travel costs** otherwise required for the widely distributed online participants to attend in person.

Over the past few years, more and more colleges and universities offer some of their degree programs fully online, and more students are taking advantage of this opportunity by enrolling, completing the necessary coursework, and earning degrees. Although some skeptical educators question the quality of degrees offered fully online, such credentialing is bound to grow for at least a few more years before reaching a plateau.

Students who complete their courses and degrees online do *everything* online. They apply to programs online, register for courses online, pay their tuition online, interact with faculty and peers online, receive technical support online, submit the work required in the courses online, receive feedback from their course instructors online, and view their posted grades online. It is therefore ironic that students who complete all their work online do not get to graduate online.

One question that comes to my mind is, "Why not?"

Digital Graduations

I propose that colleges and universities hold digital graduation ceremonies for students who earn their degrees online. Students should be able to log in to an online digital graduation portal or system from anywhere in the world. They should be able to select or create their own "avatars" and dress them in academic regalia similar to those worn by students who attend face-to-face graduation ceremonies.

When students log in to the digital graduation portal, their avatars can stand in line outside the virtual building that can be a replica of the venue for the graduation ceremony. All students' avatars can be made to undergo security checks similar to what students and faculty members at many universities experience at all large gatherings of people in these days of potential threats from various antisocial groups. That should increase their feeling of engagement and offer a topic of conversation with their online peers. Of course, their discomfort or annoyance won't reach the degree of the place-based group who must actually go through extended security procedures.

After meeting the avatars of their classmates, friends, and family, who have either purchased or were given tickets to attend the virtual graduation ceremony, the graduating students' avatars can take their designated seats. After the avatars settle into their seats, the master of ceremonies can declare the graduation ceremony open. After the singing of the national anthem, the inevitable speeches can begin, both by the institution's officers and by invited speakers. Then the names of the graduates can be called one by one, in alphabetical order. When a graduate's name is announced, his or her avatar can walk to the virtual stage, shake the hands of the avatars of the president, provost, and dean, and receive a digital version of the diploma earned online. Avatars of friends and family members as well as classmates can cheer the avatars of the graduates.

At the end of the ceremony, all the avatars of graduating online students can throw their mortarboards up in the air to celebrate their accomplishments. The ceremony can end with the avatars of the online graduates walking out of the hall. A physical diploma can go to each graduate via regular mail. How closely the program follows a place-based graduation ceremony is up to the institutional creators and perhaps the students.

Digital Reunions

Where do online graduates have their reunions? At present, probably nowhere.

Where can and should online graduates hold their yearly reunions? The obvious answer to this question is, online!

A digital reunion can take place anytime and anywhere. The three-dimensional online digital reunion platform can create the look and feel of any place on Earth and beyond. Digital reunions can even be held on the moon, Mars, the sun, or any other place in the universe. The participants can log in to the digital reunion portal and select their reunion party; their avatars can enter the party dressed in costumes of their choice.

Once inside their digital reunion zone, the avatars can mingle with their classmates and eat and drink digitally as long as the reunion party lasts. They can also enjoy the entertainment provided and dance the night away. Organizing, programming, and hosting reunion parties offer the institution's alumni association a chance to reach out to each class that graduates from the online programs.

Some Advantages and Disadvantages

One advantage of a digital reunion is that even former international students can meet and party with their classmates at least once a year. All they need is access to the Internet and a browser with the appropriate plug-ins. And someone to organize the event, arrange the online venue, and invite participants.

Another advantage is that people do not have to spend a lot of money on travel, hotel accommodations, food, and other expenses to attend digital reunions and graduations. Such events can also be occasions to raise funds for charitable causes by charging money for digital food, drink, and memorabilia.

The obvious disadvantage is that such simulated digital experiences are not the same as the real face-to-face graduations and reunions. Moreover, they will probably have their own costs, even if less than those of a physical party.

Will Students Want Digital Graduations and Reunions?

Students use social media for almost everything they do. Modern students live in a digital world. Even when students get together, they constantly look at their smart phones rather than at each other. I believe students who complete degree programs online will prefer digital graduations and digital reunions, where they can meet others in their cohort from anywhere in the world. A few years ago, when I completed a certificate program online, I would have jumped at the chance of attending a digital graduation ceremony, followed a year later by a digital reunion. I would still enjoy attending a class reunion online.

What About Costs?

Creating a portal for digital graduations and reunions will require some initial investment, and many universities might not have the funds to invest into developing such a system. However, many universities charge a technology fee along with other student fees. The development of a system for digital graduations and reunions could be funded using appropriate fees.

Private software companies that provide services to institutions of higher education can develop tools to provide digital graduation and reunion venues. Universities can either pay a per-student fee or ask the students to register with and pay the company directly. The university's branding can be negotiated with the software company that offers the services.

Other possibilities include seeking sponsorships or advertisers for the events. A catering company might finance virtual food based on a typical menu and branded with its name, for example. A virtual DJ might be hired, or a member of the cohort or the alumni association might play that role. Initial efforts would probably try to keep costs down while keeping the event fun and easy to attend. Only after secure financing was secured might the organizers take a freer hand in what the virtual event offered for entertainment, sophistication of venue, and refreshments.


Looking Ahead

Technologies such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence will help make digital graduations and digital reunions more like the real experience. Virtual reality will make participants in such experiences feel that they are really attending a graduation ceremony or a reunion gathering. Artificial Intelligence technologies will learn continuously from the experiences of each participant and modify such experiences to

make them better for all participants over time. These advances are simply a matter of time and attention.

Let the digital graduations and digital reunions begin.

M.O. Thirunarayanan is associate professor of learning technologies, Department of Teaching and Learning, Florida International University.

© 2017 Mandayam O. Thirunarayanan. The text of this article is licensed under **Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0** .

► **Digital Learning, Distance Education, E-Learning, Learners, Online Learning, Student Engagement and Interaction, Student Experience**