

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONLINE AND IN PERSON GED PREPARATORY COURSES

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**Abstract:** Courses are taken in order to prepare for the General Educational Development Test. These courses are offered traditionally and virtually. The actual test must be taken in-person regardless of whether an individual took preparatory courses virtually or traditionally. This paper will explore the benefits and obstacles that each method of delivering instruction has.

*Keywords:* Virtual learning, Traditional learning environment, High School Credentials

### INTRODUCTION

With the technology age amongst us, there is an increasing demand for online learning options. The purpose of this paper is to compare General Education Development (GED) preparation courses that are taught online to those that are taught in person. The paper will begin by introducing what the General Educational Development test is, briefly touch upon its history, and state who takes the GED. The benefits and challenges of in person preparation courses will be discussed, as well as the benefits and challenges of online preparation courses. The paper will conclude by comparing both methods of delivering the GED preparation course material.

### BACKGROUND

The General Educational Development (GED) test is sometimes referred to as the General Education Diploma. It is a series of five tests that are given to determine whether or not the test taker has High School level academic skills. It consists of Social Studies, Science, Math, Reading, and Writing. The American Council on Education created the GED in 1942 to help World War II military personnel obtain the credentials to enter college. Legally, the GED is the equivalent to a High School Diploma (Rose, 2013). Since its creation, the GED has changed with the times and gone through many revisions in order to cover the material that is needed to enter college. Currently, test developers are planning to have two passing levels for the GED test, a college level and career readiness passing level (Rose, 2013). This is very controversial because they do not want to GED to appear to be a second-class certificate.

Preparation courses are taken before taking the GED test. These courses are widely available online and in person. Places like GED Marketplace offer to assist adults in GED training online by teaching basic skills, computer skills, and access to the Official GED Practice Test online (GED Testing Service Unveils, 2012). Each state has different age requirements for GED test takers. In most states, test takers must be at least 18 years old to sign up for the GED test, but there are waivers that allow 16 year olds to sign up under the right circumstances.

Nearly 800,000 GED tests are taken every year through the GED Testing Service (Online GED, 2012). The GED test must be taken at an official testing center. There are many fraudulent websites that claim they can provide an online “GED Certificate.” There is no such thing as an online “GED Certificate” although there are online practice tests and GED preparatory courses. If the credential is not issued by the state, it is unlikely to provide any benefit to the test taker in regards to seeking a higher paying job or college acceptance (Online GED, 2012).

Technology is integrated into our day to day lives. The GED Testing Service offers computer based tests at testing centers in nearly half of the United States (GED Testing Service Reports, 2012). Giving test takers the option to use pencil and paper or a computer opens up many opportunities that make the testing process more efficient, for instance immediate results and enhanced test security. The new 2014 GED test will only be offered as a computer based test at official testing centers; there will no longer be the option to take the test using pencil and paper (GED Testing Service Reports, 2012).

## **DISCUSSION**

A lack of a high school diploma or its equivalent affects adults personally, socially, and economically, and extends out to influence their communities (Koenig, 2011). High school credentials are normally the minimum academic requirement when applying for any job. It is very difficult for a high school dropout find employment. High school drop outs influence our communities because they make up a disproportionate amount of prison inmates (Koenig, 2011). The GED offers high school dropouts a second chance.

### **In-Person GED Preparatory Classes**

In person GED preparatory classes are filling up quickly around the United States, especially in areas that have been hit hard by the current economic times (Khandaro, 2009). The economic recession has been driving people back into the classroom and further their education to improve their chance of landing a job. In the spring of 2008, 40 states reported that they had waiting lists for in person GED classes and this was before the recession deepened (Khandaro, 2009).

### **Benefits**

Taking GED preparatory courses in person can be beneficial to the traditional learner. They are structured just as a regular classroom would be, in which students meet at a school, community center, or adult learning facility. Some GED programs moved to colleges, which has served both as a motivator and a self-esteem booster (Khandaroo, 2009). Having an instructor that attends every GED class and builds relationships with the students can inspire them to do well.

Many high school dropouts stated that their reasons for dropping out were due to feeling disconnected with teachers, the school and the curriculum (Koenig, 2011). In person classes provide students with the opportunity to connect with their instructor. In addition to a relationship with the instructor, peer to peer relationships are important amongst a learning environment. When students are all working towards the same goal, it creates a bond. This gives

the learners a sense of belonging, which they may have missed in high school. It is of great importance in the facilitation of learning to feel connected to the learning environment.

In person classes allow for more individualized guidance. Sometimes learners need one on one attention. People learn in all different types of ways. There are some people who need to be walked through a concept to fully understand it. These learners may learn best visually or kinesthetically, which work best in face to face settings. There are instances in which an instructor tries to convey material to the learner by verbally explaining it, yet it does not sink in until the instructor demonstrates. This type of personalization and individual attention is what sets in person GED preparatory courses apart from ones that are taken online.

### **Challenges**

People often use the phrase “life happens.” There are many events which are beyond the control of an individual that has caused them to drop out of High School. Events such as a parent becoming disabled and the student having to get a job to pay the bills, becoming a caregiver to a parent, or becoming a parent themselves have been reasons why students drop out (Koenig, 2011). These individuals have very time consuming responsibilities that they prioritize over finishing high school. Just as hard as it was to make time for high school, it will be equally as difficult to find time to attend in person GED preparatory classes. An hour class will take more than an hour out of their day. When a person is pressed for time, they must take into account the time it will take to travel to the location where the class is being held and the time it takes them to get ready and be able to leave home.

Transportation is another issue that may be encountered when attempting to take in person GED classes. In high school, students have the option of taking a bus that is provided by the school district. That is not the case during GED preparatory courses. Each attendant must arrange their own transportation to and from the in person GED preparatory courses. Monetary issues may arise when searching for a way to get to class. An individual must be able to afford the gas it takes to get to the location or be able to pay for transportation. If transportation is a problem for an individual, this may cause them to not attend the courses and in turn not pursue a GED.

Some students may have dropped out of school because of social issues. They could have been associating with the wrong crowd and having a hard time focusing on academics (Khandaroo, 2009). There are students who may have a hard time learning amongst a large group. For students that have difficulty focusing, large classrooms may not be the best way to learn new material. One of the challenges with in person GED classes are that they may not be beneficial to individuals who are not social learners.

Adults may not at this time in their lives have the family arrangements, support systems, or work schedules that make attending GED courses and passing the exam feasible (Rose, 2013). Making time in someone’s busy schedule for the GED is difficult if they have to juggle family responsibilities and work. Some GED preparatory classes meet in the evenings after people with a full time day job have finished working. This causes difficulty for people who work other

hours like those in the restaurant business. Everyone's work schedule or family obligations vary which causes coordinating difficulties.

These days, jobs are not easy to find. The minimum requirement for most jobs is a High School Credential (Khandaroo, 2009). People want to better market themselves to a prospective employer by furthering their education. This means that many people will be taking the necessary steps to earn their GED if they have not completed High School. Enrollment in GED preparatory classes has risen so much that there are waiting lists. One problem with in person classes is that seating is limited.

### **Online GED Preparatory Classes**

GED preparatory classes are offered online. The way online GED preparatory classes work is by students registering for the class and taking a pretest online. The pretest serves as a placement tool that allows the software to identify which areas the student needs to concentrate on (Koenig, 2011). The student is able to work at their own pace until they complete their personalized GED preparation program. Once they complete the online program, the student goes to an official GED testing center and the GED is administered in person.

### **Benefits**

Convenience is the first benefit of taking online GED classes that comes to mind. Students typically work full time and struggle to balance competing priorities; therefore studying online is very convenient (Melkin, 2012). Students can log in and work on their online program as much or as little as they want. There is no pressure of any sort of time constraint when the student is working online.

Students are able to work at a self-directed pace. While taking GED preparatory classes online they are not able see how far along their peers are in the program. This alleviates any stress that may come with working slowly. Working online, whether the GED student is doing modules or in an online chat room, allows for anonymity. Visual anonymity decreases apprehensions and creates an egalitarian environment (Melkin, 2012). In an online learning environment, there is less anxiety about saying the wrong answer or being an active learner.

Some people did not do well with the social aspect of high school, leading them to drop out. An online learning environment is safe, non-threatening, free of violence, drugs, and alcohol (Koenig, 2011). Social interactions with peers are completely monitored in online classes. Designers of these online GED preparatory courses desire to make the learner completely comfortable. Students can feel safe in the comfort of their own home while completing their GED preparatory program.

Being able to log in to your course from any computer is beneficial to GED students. Having access to their course where ever they are allows the person to be able to manage their other responsibilities and obligations. An online student never has to deal with transportation issues or tardiness.

Online GED preparatory classes can be taken from anywhere with internet access. They can be done at any time of the day or night. Because these courses use virtual classrooms and GED software there is no limit to the amount of students that can be enrolled at any time. There is also rolling admission to most online GED preparatory classes.

Younger students may even prefer learning online. Students who grew up using the internet and other digital technology tend to work online easily. Studies have gone so far as to suggest that people growing up in the digital age have brains that are wired differently than those who have not (Hernandez-Julian & Peters, 2012). People must have computer skills in order to stay abreast in our society. Some believe that Millennial students are bored with traditional school settings and that causes them to drop out (Koenig, 2011).

Online GED preparatory courses offer immediate feedback on student responses. Online assignments eliminate the traditional lag time between the student submitting an answer and the instructor giving corrections (Hernandez-Julian & Peters, 2012). Immediate feedback a positive aspect of online GED preparatory classes. The immediate feedback is beneficial because of how interactive it is with student. Some students prefer working on a screen with animated clickable graphs that provide immediate feedback rather than working on paper (Hernandez-Julian & Peters, 2012).

### **Challenges**

Learning on a computer is different than learning online. Sitting in front of a screen and actively engaging in learning can be a daunting task. There is evidence that proves that information accessed on a computer is less likely to be recalled than print information (Hernandez-Julian & Peters, 2012). There are also many distractions that come along with the use of the Internet. A student can be listening to a lecture and have the ability to surf the web at the same time, which will not allow him to focus fully on the information being presented. Online reading is less focused and more scattered (Hernandez-Julian & Peters, 2012).

Online learning is constantly questioned. Issues of reliability, validity, authenticity, and security are more problematic than in traditional learning settings (Oncu & Cakir, 2011). Many people question the security of online learning. There is a problem with validity associated with earning your GED online. There are websites that serve as “diploma mills” who prey on vulnerable people, take their money, and promise to send them a GED certificate in the mail. These are all fraudulent companies. The GED must be taken in person at an official testing center.

Some GED preparatory programs are designed in a way that parallels reading a test preparation book. They do not give the learner opportunities to ask questions. Many difficulties arise from these self-study techniques of learning. There are no instructors available through the course to be able to facilitate learning. This may be discouraging for the learner. They may feel alone in the leaning process. Other GED preparatory courses do give access to instructors using systems such as Angel, Moodle, Desire2Learn, and Blackboard (Melkun, 2012). Even then, there could be difficulty in communicating.

Every day individuals use digital devices and have become accustomed to using abbreviations in their writing. Although these abbreviations are acceptable in informal settings, they are not appropriate forms of communication in an academic setting. There is a frequent complaint about the unprofessional appearance and tone of students' digital writing (Melkun, 2012). Some students are not able to differentiate times when it is inappropriate to use abbreviations and slang that has grown to be such a normalcy in their lives.

As much as individuals rely on technology, it is agreed that technology is not reliable. Instructors are aware that with any technology, problems can occur (Melkun, 2012). There are times where the problem is because of the students' computer. Other issues can occur from not having enough bandwidth to work on the program. Sometimes technological problems are not in the hands of the instructor, the program designer, or the student. Problems could arise with the Internet service provider. Another factor to consider is not everyone has an Internet connection at home. Internet is not readily available to everyone, so it can be difficult for a student to be able to acquire internet access on a regular basis to work on their GED preparatory program.

Most students are accustomed to in person learning. They have taken classes in person at traditional elementary, middle, and high schools. It is difficult to transition from in person learning to online learning. There is no one who hovers over you to make sure you complete your work when you take online GED preparatory classes. For an individual to be successful in these programs, they must be self-motivated.

## CONCLUSION

Online and in person GED preparatory courses have different things to offer students. Individuals have their own preferences in which they think would benefit them most. In a study in which randomly assigned students to watch live lectures or the same recorded lectures online, there was no strong evidence of differences in learning outcomes (Figlio, Rush & Yin, 2010). The study concluded that small demographic groups appeared to do better with live in person instruction.

Both methods of delivering the GED preparation material are very different from one another, but different does not mean one is better than the other. Researchers are divided on whether in person learning or online learning is more effective. There is no definite superior method of delivering GED preparatory courses to students because each learner and their situation is unique.

Now that it is determined that one method is not necessarily better than another, it can be said that one is more acceptable than the other. Traditional in person GED preparatory courses are more acceptable than online ones. Critics maintain that there are large differences in the quality of online education and have stated online learning to be inferior (Adams & Defleur, 2006).

The largest reason why people return to educational settings to earn a GED is to make themselves more marketable to prospective employers. A study was done, in which real employers posted job openings in the newspaper. Researchers contacted employers and asked

them to participate in a questionnaire. The study determined that if asked to choose between someone who earned a degree in person or one earned online, 96% of employers chose the applicant with an in person education (Adams & Defleur, 2006). While they are legally equal, perhaps employer's perceptions could be addressed as a resolution to change this underlying inequality.

Though the Department of Education recognizes the equality between online classes and in person classes, the military does not. When a student takes classes online, they are automatically categorized as a Tier Two applicant, which is less desirable for the military (Cyber Students, 2011). This is puzzling because only a limited amount of Tier Two applicants are able to enlist. A drive to update the military's policy, which was last revised in 1987, could potentially address this inequality.

The findings used in this paper have shown that in person GED classes are more socially acceptable for beginning a career. There is no definite data that determines which method of delivery, whether online or in person GED preparatory classes, is best. Future research can be conducted to determine the demographic of learners who perform best when taking GED preparatory courses online.

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