

# No shirt, no shoes, no problem

With arrival of online classes, students go to school from the comfort of their homes

BY LAUREL BROZOVICH  
For the Campus Press

He went to class in his underwear.

He attended lecture at 3 a.m. His name is Scott Berls, and he is a journalism major who has taken three online classes through the University of Colorado.

Many students at CU and across the nation are pulling up a seat in a one-person classroom and using their right-clicks to raise their hands. Access to a computer is all that's needed to be a part of the new trend in online classes, which included over 100 courses offered through CU Online in the fall.

Berls describes his online class experiences as interesting and convenient.

"It was something I had never really thought I would do," said Berls. "It was different to take classes solely through the computer, but I did as well in those classes as I would have in regular classes, and I could still have a job."

Berls thought his online experience was similar to the on-campus classes he has taken.

"The course load varied

depending on the teacher and the class, much like it would in a regular class," Berls said. "I had assignments by week instead of every couple of days, so I could work at my own pace and around my schedule."

Berls was not the only student experiencing this new wave of non-traditional education, according to a recent USA Today interview with Bill Cole, vice president of academic development at Peterson's, a company that publishes college guides. Cole told reporters that in 1997, 390 U.S. universities reported having classes online. This year, that number doubled.

Some universities only offer a few online classes per semester, but others allow students to take all of their classes online. According to Peterson's, the University of Phoenix has implemented a program in which students can acquire bachelor and master's degrees in business, management and technology entirely online.

As the number of online classes continues to grow, so do the concerns of CU educators and students.

The academic community is worried that online classes

remove the "humanness" and personal contact of regular classes. Some professors are concerned that the quality of online classes does not match that of regular classes, and as a result, these classes might offer students and teachers an easy way out of traditional learning teaching methods.

Professor Terrance Brennan, who teaches both online and on-campus classes at CU, does not believe there is reason for concern.

"I am sure the quality of classes varies, just as it does for on-campus classes," said Brennan, who does not think that his online courses lack immediate feedback and responses from his students.

"I have interpersonal communication with my online students via email and chats," said Brennan.

Brennan also attests that more work goes into preparing his online classes than in his on-campus classes because of the complications the technology can create for the teacher or the student.

"It takes more time to plan and execute the online class because all the information must be either pre-recorded or written

in great detail to avoid any confusion that can occur with such a medium," said Brennan.

The same amount of work is also expected of Brennan's online students as would be in traditional learning environments.

"The assignments are the same as they'd be in a regular class, but they are simply submitted through email," Brennan said.

The widespread use of online classes has not only been a convenient supplement to on-campus classes, but also an answer to some non-traditional and special needs students' prayers, Brennan said.

"It serves students well, who for some reason, are unable to get to campus," Brennan said. "I had a student with a physical disability that required him to be on a respirator. He couldn't take classes on campus. He could online."

The recent explosion of online education across the nation is also helping many non-traditional students achieve degrees, such as those with young families and difficult work

schedules.

"(It) removes a lot of barriers, especially for the market it primarily attracts — woman with children," said Cole in his interview with USA Today. "Sixty-six percent of the adult distance-education market is female, and 80 percent of them have children."

Regardless of the benefits online classes can offer, some students and professors at CU are not as confident that the online classes are a blessing in disguise for everyone, or that they can achieve the same success rate with students as on-campus classes.

Jeff Lake, a CU sophomore advertising student, has recently experienced a negative aspect of online classes. Lake says taking the classes might be convenient, but there is a lot of miscommunication that goes on between teachers and students when taking a class via the Internet.

"I did my first two assignments this semester only to find out that they were the wrong

# Online classes lack personal touch

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ones," said Lake. "I did not receive credit for those assignments."

It is a lot easier to make those kinds of mistakes when students receive their assignments from a syllabus posted to a Web site instead of having the weekly assignment explained and handed out in class, Lake said.

Professors at CU are also voicing concerns about the lack of interaction between students and teachers involved in online classes.

Interpersonal Communications professor Jane Elvins, who has taken training courses in 'distant education,' believes that it is important in an educational environment to have face-to-face communication with the students in order to maximize the understanding of a particular topic and be as effective as possible as a teacher.

"I'm so tuned into face-to-face communication with the students that I think it would be very hard for me to have the same kind of rapport with the students," said Elvins. "I would feel that there would be a big chunk of information missing as to what's going on with them."

Elvins says that online classes lack important elements such as voice tone, eye contact and facial expressions that help a teacher to know if the students understand the material.

Elvins said it would also be more difficult for students who are not visual learners to succeed in online classes because they must rely totally on the written word.

As an interpersonal communication educator, she believes that the 'power of the group' is an important part of learning in the classroom. There is a lot of cohesiveness between students that would not be achieved through

one-on-one exchanges via computers, Elvins said.

"You would miss so much without face-to-face discussions between class members and without verbal communication with the teacher," she said. "It would be a real disadvantage."

Elvins believes that one advantage in the lack of interpersonal communication online is that a student does not have to be as concerned with impression management and has the ability to

turn their focus more on academic work. The flip side to that, however, is that students tend to be easily distracted and disengage themselves outside of the traditional classroom setting, Elvins said.

Online classes are currently increasing at CU through the CU Online Program. Students can look up more information on the CU Web site at <http://www.cuonline.edu>.

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