“An Overview of Evaluative Instrumentation for Virtual High Schools” Erik W. Black, Richard E. Ferdig, and Meredith DiPietro. *The American Journal of Distance Education*

This article was very interesting as it covered the need for effective evaluation of virtual school learning in a K-12 system. The authors break the need for assessment into several categories, including: Student assessment, Teacher assessment, Content/Curriculum assessment, Course instance assessment, and “other” assessments. They then describe in detail, the types of assessments that are currently used in these areas, and make suggestions as to what kind of data can be studied to make sure these evaluations are effective.

I found this article to be very well written and thought out. As the authors note in several instances, with the field of “virtual schools” being so new, and the explosion of on-line learning taking place, it is of the utmost importance for the educational field to find ways to evaluate effective practices in this environment. The authors made certain not to condemn any current practices of evaluation, but rather used the lack of information in certain areas as a “call to action”.

With at least 30 states implementing a “virtual high school” of one form or another, there is a need for effective evaluation. What practices and procedure make the courses successful or not successful? I enjoyed the authors approach, as they broke down several different factors that can be analyzed. These could include: students prior knowledge of subject matter, their knowledge of technologies, and the level of comfort in the on-line environment. They also did this with teacher evaluations, and content evaluations, looking at each one through a different prism.

The fascinating part of this article was the evaluation of what they called “other assessments”. The main point made by the authors in this area, is how parental involvement is an important component of any educational experience. So virtual schools should then work to encourage parental involvement. The authors contend that virtual schooling has been a boon to homeschooled students, which would require parental involvement. However, “Few virtual schools currently track and account for student’s parental involvement”, with a few notable exceptions. In addition, I can’t help but wonder how difficult it would be to gather accurate data on something like this?

Certainly, one of the things that I can gain from an article like this is to understand that although there is a rapid growth in the field of “virtual high schools”, there is definitely room for improvement. The field is so new, that it has been difficult exactly what makes a successful school, and therefore leading to the success of the students.

There are so many variables that can affect student learning, and many of these have little to do with the students themselves. Are the teachers properly trained? Is the content arranged in an understandable manner? Is there parental involvement? These are just a few of the many, many, questions raised by the authors.

As I move forward as an educator, I take a look at the class I currently teach on the state’s webct program. I need to do some more evaluation. Are the students prepared to learn the content in this format? In what ways can I try to encourage some parental involvement in the class? Is the content delivered in an understandable manner? I found myself thinking and rethinking about what I currently do in my class.

This article was a real eye opener, not in the fact that evaluation is needed, because in such a new field, that is to be expected. However, I was unprepared for the amount of variables that need to be accounted for. This leads me to really take a step back, and evaluate myself.

I am definitely going to keep this article handy, in the future. As one teacher I’m certainly not going to be able to analyze all of the variables and assessments covered in the article. But if I can simply make a conscious decision to evaluate each of the main points: the students, the instructor (myself), the content, and the technology, I will at least have a good base of knowledge to go forward with.

The “course instance” assessments, which measure how comfortable the students are in the learning environment, and the “other assessments” which measure things such as parental involvement can begin to be evaluated by student surveys, and parent surveys at the completion of the course. This would at least give me a “base-line” of data to judge how things are progressing.