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## Chapter I

# Virtual Schools: A Critical View

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## Abstract

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*This chapter investigates some of the critical issues associated with virtual schools. It reviews historical forms of school education and the different types of virtual schools that are currently emerging. The educational value of virtual schooling is considered in terms of cognitive and affective outcomes, and some of the factors that promote the rise of virtual schools are outlined. The implications of related philosophical viewpoints and communication theory are explored, together with the benefits and disadvantages of virtual schools for society. A number of problems associated with virtual schools are identified and some possible solutions are outlined. Future trends in the growth of virtual schooling and the characteristics of the next generation of virtual schools are discussed in terms of their implications for school education.*

## **The Emergence of the Virtual School**

Forms of school education have been with us for around 2,000 years, and perhaps longer. Schools are known to have existed in Plato's time (Marrou, 1956), and histories of many societies refer to the ways in which the young have been educated. Modes of schooling over time have shown diversity that has sometimes been related to the social class and religion of the students and the facilities available to teach them. Until quite recent times, however, they have been characterised by the physical presence of teachers and students together. Usually a building is used for instruction, and teaching materials such as books or blackboards are often in evidence.

During the 19th century, education by correspondence was established in some areas of England, Germany, the U.S. and Sweden (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2000). The 20th century saw the emergence of additional alternatives to what may be called "bricks-and-mortar" schools. These were forms of distance education where children could learn without attending classes on a regular basis. The technologies used included mail, for correspondence schools, and the 20th century technologies of radio and television. The schools that used these technologies were particularly valuable for students who lived in remote areas, for those whose parents were frequently on the move, for students who were too ill to attend school, or for those who had been excluded. In Australia, a Correspondence School was established in Melbourne as early as 1914 (Correspondence School, 1978), and the Alice Springs School of the Air commenced radio broadcasts in the Northern Territory in 1951 (School of the Air, 2002).

However, although a number of examples of distance education schools can be identified during the 20th century, they rarely became the principal mode of education. There is little indication that parents wanted to abandon conventional schools in favor of distance education, although criticism of schooling has been constant.

Virtual schools can be seen as a variant of distance education. They emerged in the closing years of the twentieth century, and can be understood as a form of schooling that uses online computers to provide some or all of a student's education. Typically, spatial and temporal distancing is employed, and this results in students being able to use their computers at a convenient time in their homes or elsewhere, rather than being subject to meeting at an agreed time in a school building.

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