

Continuing Education Showdown: Online Learning vs. In-Person Seminars

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Many state TCM and acupuncture regulatory bodies and associations are interfering with the success of their members by limiting the number of continuing education credit hours they can earn online.

Despite the rise in online learning, some TCM regulatory boards persist in holding to the familiar old way of thinking believing wrongly that in-person courses, where a practitioner must physically attend a conference or session, are always superior to live webinars or recorded online courses.

Regulatory boards can better serve their professional members if they catch up with the rest of the educational field and focus less on how practitioners learn and more on what their members are learning. Courses could be approved based on the practitioner's ability to interact with the presenter, and more importantly, if learning objectives are met at the end of course evidenced by a mandatory assessment tool. Practitioner's course choices should meet their individual long-term professional goals, regardless of whether the course is in-person or online.

With the speed of technological advancements it's hard to predict what is next to come, but it is more than possible that online learning has already surpassed in-person learning in didactic and theoretical classes and maybe one day soon even with hands-on skills, too.

The shift from in-person to online learning offers huge advantages to acupuncture and TCM practitioners including: affordability, convenience and access to specific learning opportunities that suit their practice and learning style that would not be feasible (time and money) otherwise.

The North Carolina State Board requires that practitioners take 20 CEU credits in-person and will not accept live webinars as a substitute for in-person requirements. NACCOM, however, treats all methods equally and allows all 60 PDA hours through online learning. California and British Columbia consider live webinars like live CEUs, but both still have a limit on recorded courses. California allows members to complete all 50 hours via live webinars or in-person and has restricted non-interactive online courses to a maximum of 25 hours.

Regardless of the learning format, it is the course content that deepens practitioners' learning, helps them stay abreast of the latest developments in TCM and acupuncture, and, ultimately better treat their patients. When practitioners advance their own learning based on well-planned goals, they build thriving practices and this moves the entire profession forward.

Let's take a look at the pros and cons of the two main growing learning formats: online seminars (live webinars and recorded courses) versus in-person/classroom seminars.

In Person Learning: Pros and Cons

One of the biggest pros of in-person learning is: the face-to-face advantage. For some, learning

with living, breathing humans works best. After all, it is also the nature of the acupuncture/TCM practice to treat people in person. Fans of in-person education will tell you that the complex, layered world of questions, spur-of-the-moment thinking, shared problem-solving and enthusiasm for learning can never be replaced by the flatter world of online learning.

There is also a focused learning environment. Classroom learning keeps learners engaged and on-task and leads to spontaneous learning during breaks. There are opportunities for questions but only if the class size is not too large.

Networking is a big advantage as well. It's often between sessions with peers, at coffee breaks, dinner or in the pub that deep learning and 'aha' moments occur. Being able to ask questions and connect with like-minded practitioners and friends in person is a huge advantage of in-person learning.

Some of the cons include: lack of assessment. Currently, there is no assessment required for practitioners during in-person classes that count for CEU/PDAs so there is not a real gauge for learning.

Also was the practitioner paying attention? Did they absorb what they needed to or were they daydreaming, in the bathroom or texting or checking emails when that all-important point was made?

Something else to think about is that in well-attended courses, it's not practical for each person to ask questions. Minimal to no interaction is available even though the course is taught in-person.

Online Learning: Pros and Cons

When it comes to TCM and acupuncture continuing education in mid 2013, online learning refers to both live webinars and recorded courses available for viewing video & demonstrations "streaming live" or later on your computer, with assessment tools and feedback forms required to receive certificate of completion. Online learning has developed leaps and bounds since the days of a DVD in the mail or a link to a download a PDF.

One of the biggest pros is accessibility: Owning a computer is mandatory for anyone running a business, and smart phones are the norm for developed nations. Increases in WiFi access and bandwidth mean online learning is accessible to practitioners across the board. Technology isn't a barrier.

Practitioners who learn digitally also have a world of course choices. They can take the courses they need to deepen their knowledge and build their practice in a meaningful ways rather than only taking what is just being offered in their city.

Learners can take courses at home, at the cottage, in coffee shops or anywhere on their mobile laptop, iPad or phone. And they are not restricted by a fixed date. Practitioners, can also choose to learn from experienced practitioners in the field without incurring travel, hotel and food costs, or having to close the clinic to travel to the course destination.

In a live webinar, students can text the presenter/moderator with questions, which is a great boon to more reserved students who may find this atmosphere liberating. Students can also interact with colleagues, review the live video feed later, and still have access to detailed handouts, case studies and articles with a few clicks.

Unlike live courses where no testing is required, some regulatory bodies require assessment tools

be completed for online courses to be CEU/PDA approved. Students must complete and pass the assessment tool(s) to receive a certificate of completion for CEUs/PDAs.

Online learners can review the material later if it was a live webinar (they are usually recorded) or a recorded course. Practitioners can watch and listen several times in smaller chunks over whatever period the material is available, allowing them to review and go deeper into the material as compared to hearing it once at a live seminar.

Online learners can join forums to discuss challenges and points of interest with speakers, mentors and fellow practitioners.

In order to do online classes, students need to have a computer and be at-ease with technology to engage.

Board	CEU/PDA/CPE Hours in TWO YEARS	Must be In Person (hours)	Maximum Live Webinars (hours)	Maximum Recorded Courses (hours)
CALIFORNIA	50	No restrictions, up to practitioner	No restrictions, up to practitioner	25 (50%)
CTCMA	50	6 (12%)	44 (88%)	16 (32%)
NORTH CAROLINA	40	35 (88%)	5 (12%) online	5 (12%) online
NCCAOM	40	No restrictions, up to practitioner	No restrictions, up to practitioner	No restrictions, up to practitioner

Comparing Costs

Compare attending an in-person seminar (assume you live in Chicago, course is in San Francisco) vs. online:

In-person costs (23 CEU) \$2,725 to \$3,725

- 4 day conference in San Francisco (Fri, Sat, Sun Mon) \$625
- Airfare from Chicago return \$300
- Hotel 4 nights \$150 x 4= \$600, \$50 per day in meals 4x50=\$200
- Lost revenue - travel Thursday, clinic closed Fri and Mon - some Sat too - assuming \$500 revenue per day in clinic = \$1,000 to \$2,000 in lost revenue

Online Recorded Seminar costs (23 CEU) \$499.99 (plus \$5 to print your notes if you choose, or use PDF)

Online savings: \$3,200 vs attending in-person for the 4 days.

Regulatory Board Requirements - How They Compare Let's take a look at four regulatory boards and how they treat in-person and online learning for their continuing education requirements.

Regardless of the learning style, course providers and regulatory boards should ensure that courses for acupuncturists are relevant, measurable and meaningful learning opportunities that help practitioners move towards their unique long-term practice goals.

British Columbia (CTMCA) has an interesting model. They require a minimum of 6 out of the 50 hours to be in person classes to prevent their members from becoming complete TCM hermits. It

has nothing to do with value of online vs. in person learning. There is something about breaking bread and connecting in-person with your colleagues that can't be done online. But, online has its advantage to allow you study in small chunks of time at the fraction of the cost and to be able to repeat the material (rewind and pause) to really absorb material is something in person courses do not offer.

If your board limits the number of hours of online continuing education, ask them why. Let them know the direction of the NCCAOM and CTCMA. Tell them you want to learn online, to not only save the cost of travel, but to also take courses you may otherwise not have access to.

Good courses, whether in-person or online, need to be led by top educators, researchers and practitioners in the field, be engaging and foster active learning communities. Whether learners connect, collaborate, inspire and discover online or in-person, the question is not how they learn, but what.

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