Virtual—Is There a Better Word?

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Virtual is defined as something quasi, or pseudo. Virtual is often a potential state that at some time might become “actual.” And, just to add to the confusion, actual is generally considered the opposite of virtual. So, it must be that a virtual school would be a potential school as compared to an actual school.

Increasingly, the popular press and the educational literature talk about distance education—teaching and learning at a distance—as virtual education that happens in a virtual school. Professionals know that distance education is most comprehensively defined as “formal education where the teacher and learner are separated and where communications technologies are used to connect instructors, students, and resources.”

This definition of distance education does not imply anything virtual or potential, or pseudo. Rather, distance education is about as real and actual as education can be.

The field probably needs better words to describe the process of educating using technology without the need for the instructor and the learner to be in the same location, or for them to be communicating at the same time. The Florida Virtual School, featured in this issue of Distance Learning, says it quite nicely: “Any time, any place, any path, any pace.”

A school is an institution where learning occurs because of the efforts of teachers. Most often the school is a physical, actual place—a location that has an address, is visible, and has been there for a long time and will be there for a while to come. There is little if anything virtual about a school.

... continues on page 75
Perhaps the field needs a visionary leader who can precisely describe distance education in words that are clear and that captivate the imagination of the public. Until then, virtual is probably the word of choice. And finally, whatever happens, we must not use the word cyberschool.