

Finding Time for Tennis and Thoreau

My online education

By BRETT ELLEN KEELER

I'm a senior at Kaplan College Preparatory School (KCPS), a private online school for grades 6 to 12. I chose an online education because, as a competitive tennis player, I have a hectic schedule. This past spring, I traveled two weeks out of every month, from Hawaii to Florida,

California to Vermont. Most of the time I was home I was boarding at a tennis academy.

I have been able to travel all over the country to compete and train because online schooling has afforded me extra time. But don't think online schools are not as challenging as traditional ones. At Kaplan, students choose their course loads, and each course has a syllabus of 8 to 12 modules. Each module includes lessons, quizzes, and a final test or two. In my AP English class, each module typically covered a specific genre and focused on a central novel. By the end of the year, I had read 12 literary classics, exploring each one by analyzing its components and comparing and contrasting it to other works of literature. My junior year I took six classes: three APs, two honors level, and an SAT prep course. I pushed myself academically while I trained and competed athletically.

Although one might think an online school experience would lack student-teacher interaction, Kaplan courses require regular contact between students and teachers. At the beginning of every semester, each teacher works individually with each student by phone, e-mail, or both to create an outline of dates and assignments. With my tennis schedule, attending to my schoolwork isn't always easy, but with clear deadlines, courses become manageable.

My teachers have been my companions while I travel, whether it's my physics teacher giving me computer passwords at 11 at night or my history teacher taking time on a holiday to explain a concept. Questions I have on everything from homework to college and my future have me calling them to talk at least once or twice a week.



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I've formed lasting friendships with teachers I've never met in person. One of my English teachers has even become a very close friend. How is this possible when I live in Texas and she lives in Indiana? We've come to know each other through essays, poems, short stories, and seemingly endless piles of outlines and rough drafts. Whether I was writing my own rendition of *Cinderella*, creating a sonnet in iambic pentameter, or learning to appreciate the romanticism in *Frankenstein*, this teacher has been on call and ready to discuss my work.

During my travels, I have been able to augment my education by visiting the homes of authors and the settings of many of the stories I've read in my classes. I've experienced the tranquillity of Walden Pond; I've studied in Harlem, England, Scotland, Spain, and other locales across the globe. I've followed the path taken by the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* and I've walked through plantations reminiscent of those in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and

Frederick Douglass's autobiography. At every tournament site, my mom and I try to take a little time to find a bit of history in that place and learn about it. To have that frame of reference has made my schooling infinitely more colorful and tangible than it would have been had I spent the time in a classroom.

Brett Ellen Keeler lives in Austin, Texas, and is a nationally ranked tennis player. She plans to attend college in the fall and study pre-law and public policy.