





## Distance Learning

With the rapid rise of computing technology, the last two decades has seen a phenomenal growth in online education. Universities and educational institutions are beginning to offer fully online degree programs to serve the needs of non-traditional students. In a competing workforce, continuing education and professional development has driven the need for distance learning. However personal and financial demands reduced the likelihood of students uprooting themselves and their families to continue their education. The need for lifelong professional development is here to stay and online education is best suited to serve these needs.

The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) defines distance learning as the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance.

Realism	Types of Interaction	Formats
 <p>Most abstract least realistic</p> <p>Most realistic least abstract</p> 	<p>One way (or asynchronous)</p> <p>↓</p> <p>One-way, Synchronous</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Two-way, synchronous</p>	<p>Correspondence</p>  <p>Radio</p> <p>Audio-conferencing</p>  <p>Video conferencing</p>

Various forms of distance learning have been available for years. As the technology evolved so did distance learning. When compared to other delivery methods, Web-based or online learning falls closer to being most realistic and least abstract in the continuum above.

Known by several different names, online learning or e-learning saw its first rise in the early 80s as part of corporate training. As the internet grew and sophisticated technologies began to develop alongside, internet access become commonplace. Today approximately over 233 million users in the US (approximately 70% of US population) have internet access in their homes  
(Source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/am/us.htm>)

### Online learning

Online education can be defined as an approach to teaching and learning that utilizes Internet technologies to communicate and collaborate in an educational context. Typically online delivery of a course involves a course management system that has tools to support the teaching/learning environment. Tools such as discussion forums, assessments, quizzes, online grade book, blogs, and wikis enable instructors to create courses that are interactive and engaging. Engaging student activities, collaboration, self-directed learning, effective assessment strategies and community building are just some of the characteristics of well designed online courses.

Within most online courses are both synchronous and asynchronous elements that are dependent on time. Asynchronous elements include discussion forums, webpages, presentations, and quizzes etc. that do not require the student to be online at any required time. Students can pace their learning to their own schedules and interact with content and instructor as necessary or required. Synchronous elements on the other hand include virtual chat, web conferencing, instant messaging that require both the student and the instructor to be present online at the same time. Today's online courses are mix of these sophisticated asynchronous and synchronous tools.

As with any medium of delivery, online education comes with its fair share of advantages and disadvantages. Some of the advantages of online learning are: 24/7 access to course material, increases student to student and student to instructor interaction, enabling student-centered teaching approaches, remove distance and personal barriers to getting education, convenient and flexible to meet student needs. That said online learning is not for everyone. Some disadvantages are: equipment and access costs, discipline and focus is a must in an online student, students tend to feel isolated and lonely, online courses require more time than traditional courses. It is important for students to understand these disadvantages and advantages to know if online learning is truly for them!