

Define the terms¹

With a soaring number of online learners some terms have been used interchangeably. It is about a new extensive terminology that educational researchers need to agree on the definition of the new terms. As a result, it is difficult for researchers to perform meaningful cross-study comparisons and build on the outcomes from the previous studies. This contributes to conflicting findings about distance learning, e-learning, and online learning environments. In addition, terms are often interchanged without meaningful definitions.

Distance learning. Distance education is the most renowned descriptor used when referencing distance learning. It often describes the effort of providing access to learning for those who are geographically distant. During the last two decades, the relevant literature shows that various authors and researchers use inconsistent definitions of distance education and distance learning. As computers became involved in the delivery of education, a proposed definition identified the delivery of instructional materials, using both print and electronic media. The instructional delivery included an instructor who was physically located in a different place from the learner. The definition also stated that distance education uses emerging media and associated experiences to produce distributed learning opportunities. Here we recognize the changes that occurred in the field and the new accompanying technologies. The term distance education may cover a number of practices such as correspondence education and correspondence study. According to others the terms distance learning and distance education are not interchangeable. Distance learning is referenced more as ability, whereas distance education is an activity within the ability; though, both definitions are still limited by the differences in time and place. As new technologies become apparent, learning seemed to be the focus of all types of instruction, and the term distance learning once again was used to focus on its limitations associated with "distance", i.e. time and place. The term then evolved to describe other forms of learning, e.g. online learning, e-Learning, technology, mediated learning, online collaborative learning, virtual learning, web-based learning, etc. Thus, the commonalities found in all the definitions is that some form of instruction occurs between the learner and the instructor, it is held at different times and/or places, and uses varying forms of instructional materials.

E-learning. The origins of the term e-learning is not certain, although it is suggested that the term most likely originated during the 1980's, within the similar time frame of another delivery mode online learning. The e-learning definitions materialize by simply comparing defining characteristics with other existing terms. E-learning could be defined as strictly being accessible using technological tools that are web-based, web-distributed, or web-capable. E-learning technological characteristics are not sufficient to provide a full description. According to some authors, e-learning is not only procedural but also shows some transformation of an individual's experience into the individual's knowledge through

¹ Modified from "Moore J. L. *et al.* (2011)."

the knowledge construction process. It is believed that some level of interactivity needs to be included to make the definition truly applicable in describing the learning experience. As there is still the main struggle as to what technologies should be used so that the term can be referenced, some authors will provide either no clear definition or a very vague reference to other terms such as online course/learning, web-based learning, web-based training, learning objects or distance learning believing that the term can be used synonymously. What is abundantly obvious is that there is some uncertainty as to what exactly are the characteristics of the term, but what is clear is that all forms of e-learning, whether they are applications, programs, objects, websites, etc., can eventually provide a learning opportunity for individuals.

Online learning. Online learning can be the most difficult of all three to define. Online learning is described by most authors as access to learning experiences via the use of some technology. It is a more recent version of distance learning which improves access to educational opportunities for learners described as non-traditional. Other authors discuss not only the accessibility of online learning but also its connectivity, flexibility and ability to promote varied interactions. Some authors consider online learning as is a newer version or, and improved version of distance learning. These authors, like many, believe that there is a relationship between distance education or learning and online learning but appear unsure in their own descriptive narratives.