

What is online learning?

“Technology makes online education possible, but it is the people that matter”.
(White and Weight, The online teaching guide, 2000).

Online learning is a form of flexible learning, sometimes referred to in the UK as open and distance learning or education. Flexible learning was, and continues to be, developed to meet the changing needs of learners enabling them to have greater access to learning opportunities.

Nipper (1989) classified distance education as having three generations, first came correspondence teaching circa 1840; then in the 1970s came the second generation of broadcast and multimedia followed in the mid eighties by computer mediated communication. There is overlap in the generations but the move in distance education has tended to be from single mode (correspondence) to multimedia (correspondence, broadcasting, audio cassettes and video) to computer-mediated communication (correspondence both synchronous and asynchronous, video and audio conferencing, video, CD ROM etc) (Hawkrige, D. 1998). The developments over the generations have sought to increase learner participation and interaction with the materials, with their tutors and with their peers.

The third generation is where online learning sits. However, elements of both first and second generation can be seen in most online learning courses. The internet, along with other technologies, has facilitated a change in the way we communicate. This change has an impact on all areas of our lives, including the way in which we learn. It is no longer essential to be physically present in a classroom; your contribution can be delivered online. Discussions can take place synchronously or asynchronously and people have been freed from having to be physically co-located to share ideas, collaborate and learn together. Online learning has potentially widened access and allowed for increased participation across all areas.

At its most basic online learning requires some level of connectivity to the Internet. In the ‘Overcoming social exclusion through online learning’ project we have defined online learning as “Formal or informal learning that involves purposeful use of the Internet for educational content delivery or support.” (www.niace.org.uk/online/glossary.html) The key word here is purposeful.

However, there is no one definitive definition or model of online learning and the term is applied in a range of ways, each carrying different meanings and having different implications for the learner and provider. It is important to remember that online learning is a descriptor of the way in which some or all of the learning will be

accessed or provided, it does not usually refer to the content (although it is possible to take an online course on how to teach; learn or moderate online). Almost any subject can be taught online from French to forklift truck driving (both offered by learndirect). However, putting a course online does not make it automatically accessible, or any better than a conventionally taught face-to-face course.

Given this, the first task anyone providing or undertaking an online learning course should do is find out what definition of the term is being used and how it is being applied. Clarke (2002a) identified some of the elements online learning can include:

- Simple delivery of the learning materials to the learners (i.e. the learner downloads the package and either works interactively with it on their own computer or prints out the material and takes the paper away with them)
- Lecture notes and visual aids being placed on the web, Intranet or network to aid students
- Using the World Wide Web as a library of resources (eg electronic journals, online databases, reports and references) through which learners browse and locate what they need
- Communication between student and tutor
- Communication link between learners to provide mutual support (eg conferences, mailgroups and bulletin boards)
- Communication link between tutors so they can assist each other
- 'Frequently asked questions' web sites
- Interactive learning on-line (ie learner interacts with a package at a remote location)
- Computer learning environments which provide many different resources to assist the learner
- Computer assisted assessment
- Virtual seminars and conferences
- Video conferencing to provide face-to-face support to learners in remote locations

One of the main aspects of online learning is that it enables people to learn "when they want; where they want and at the pace they want" (Clarke, 2002a). There is no need in online learning to respond to a request or question straight away, although the ability for immediacy is there. Learners and tutors who are able, and who want to join in, may do so while others can choose to reflect on their reply secure in the knowledge that when they are ready to respond the thread will still be there. Conventional education tends to be dominated by extroverts who usually respond quickly, often moving the topic on, whereas online asynchronous teaching allows for reflectors and theorists (Prendergast with Mason, 1998) to make contributions too. This one element alone can dramatically alter the dynamic and depth of contributions expressed by a group because it allows for everyone to have a voice without putting any one individual under direct pressure to respond (Harasim with Mason, 1998).

However, as much as online learning can increase access for some learners, it should be noted that for many, especially those who are socially disadvantaged, it takes more than increased access to enable effective learning to take place. Social and economic factors also have to be considered, and while public access may give an opportunity to undertake online learning it must be remembered that access to virtual learning may still require tangible childcare.

Online learning statistics

Taking the Open University (OU), as the main provider of flexible learning in the UK, we can see that there have been major changes in the way courses are developed, designed and delivered. Most of the 375 courses offered by the Open University currently have some element of online activity either through support services or as part of the course itself. In a recent survey (2004) carried out by the OU 93% of students said they had access to a computer and 87% said they had access to the Internet.

Learndirect now offer more than 550 different courses in over 2000 learning centres in England. Since Learndirect was launched in 2000 over 1 million learners have enrolled on courses.

96% of all government services are now online – including enrolling for higher education courses, see website: www.publictechnology.net/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=2

The move toward online learning is in part being driven by online training, especially in large companies where there is a duty not just to ensure all staff are trained to the same standard in areas such as health and safety but to prove that this has been done.

Recent developments

There continues to be a constant shift and changing use of terms relating to online learning but emergence of definitions such as web enhanced (use of web and related e-services are available but use is optional), web focused (use of web and related e-services for delivery and support are required for parts of the course) and web intensive (use of web and related e-services is required for the whole course - all delivery and support is online) are helping clarify what level of online activity is required for a course.

Issues around language can also present problems in international online learning courses and it is important that developers address cultural assumptions about learning and the environment in which the learning may take place e.g. public space versus private; dial up versus broadband; regular access versus restricted access etc.

Other terms you might come across when exploring online learning are:

- e-learning (electronic learning, includes TV; video; radio as well as computers)
- m-learning (mobile learning, includes mobile phones, palm pilots and computers)
- i-learning (interactive learning, includes any learning where there is interaction required between the learner and the course content this could include moving through virtual worlds or simply selecting an answer from a drop-down list, I-learning can also include interaction between peers in collaborative tasks)
- blended learning (this is used to describe learning which encompasses a variety of approaches e.g. face to face, video and online discussion)

NIACE projects

Research Project - Overcoming social exclusion through online learning, funded by the Big Lottery Fund 2002 - 2005. In partnership with the Open University in the East of England, website: www.niace.org.uk/online

Key contacts at NIACE

Alan Clarke, Associate Director ICT and Learning, email: alan.clarke@niace.org.uk
Lisa Englebright, Researcher ICT and Learning, email: lisa.engelebright@niace.org.uk

NIACE
Enkalon House
92 Regent Road
Leicester , LE1 7PE
Tel: 0116 2044 298

These are some questions you might like to think about or ask before taking or providing an online course:

Learners

- How long does the course take? What amount of study time will it involve? And are there set times when I have to be online?
- What happens if my computer breaks down?
- Do I need previous qualifications? Do I need knowledge of computers before I begin?
- How will my work be assessed – exam / portfolio? What Qualifications do I get if I complete the course? What will they lead to? What happens if I fail part of the course?
- Is this the first run of the course?
- What support is there: Tutor/Peer/Technical? Is there more than one way of accessing the support eg can I phone for technical support as well as emailing?
- What does the course cover?
- How much does it cost?
- Is there face to face support?
- What happens if I don't have a computer? What happens if I can't afford to pay for the line costs?
- What support will I have if I don't speak English?
- What are the costs involved, explicit (eg course fees) and hidden (eg printing all course material out, number of hours required online)

Providers

- What benefit is there in putting the course online for staff, tutors, students and the organisation?
- Will there be discussion Group? What monitoring systems will need to be in place?
- How much work will be involved?
- What method will be used for enrolling?
- What kind of support will be available? Will there be any Face to face tutorials?
- What expectations will learners have in relation to number of staff hours put in?
- What technical support will be available? What provision will be in place for system failures?
- Who are our target group?
- What would be the normal duration of the course (face-to-face) and how will putting it online change it?

- Is it cost effective (short term / long term) to put the course online?
- What technology and ability will tutors need to deliver these courses?
- What qualifications will be offered for the course?
- How will work produced online be verified as the learners?
- Will exams be taken online?
- What measures will have to be taken to ensure that all courses and information meet with DDA and Data protection legislation?
- How will security issues be addressed?
- Will the organisation provide all staff and learners with email accounts?

Other useful contacts

Learndirect

Website: www.learndirect.co.uk

Telephone: 0800 100 900. This freephone number is accessible seven days a week between 8am and 10pm.

Open University

Website: www.open.ac.uk

Telephone: 01908 653231 during office hours (normally between 9.00 and 17.00). Outside of office hours the advice line is available on 0870 333 1444 between 17.00 and 21.00 Monday to Friday and 9.00 and 17.00 on Saturday. Alternatively you can email the Open University at General-Enquiries@open.ac.uk. Please include your name, e-mail address and a full description of your query.

References and Useful Resources

Computer conferencing: interviews with Linda Harasim; Gerry Prendergast and Betty Collis. Audio-cassette 2469 H802. R Mason. The Open University, 1989

E-learning skills. Alan Clarke. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. ISBN 1403917558. £11.99

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'Terms and rationales in open and distance education' in H801 Theory and Practice of Open and distance education. D Hawkrige. Open University, 1998

'Third generation distance learning and computer conferencing'. S Nipper, in Mason, R and Kaye, A (eds) Mindweave: Communications, computers and distance education. Pergamon Press, 1989

This is the fifty-sixth in a series of briefing sheets, which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues. Other titles in the series which may be of interest include:

65. Ideas for using ICT in adult and community learning
57. Mailgroups
56. What is online learning
55. How do I become a teacher of adults
54. Mobile ICT resources for older learners
53. Extended schools and adult learners
52. Adult participation in learning
51. The NLN and adult and community learning

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21 De Montfort Street

Leicester, LE1 7GE

Tel: 0116 204 4289

Email: information@niace.org.uk

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NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties, or insufficient resources. Registered charity number 1002775; Company registration number 2603322.