

# Roadmap to Effective Distance Education Instructional Design

## Differences Between Distance and Traditional Education

The fundamental outcomes of education -- whether in a **distance** or "**traditional**" setting -- are the same. We want students to succeed, to understand the content, and (hopefully) to apply it in a variety of employment and social settings. Distance and traditional education methods just differ some on how to get to those outcomes.

Because most of us were taught in a traditional classroom setting for our grade-school and college years, we're used to this format. We're used to being in the same room with an instructor, in a face-to-face setting. We feel comfortable in this environment, so the distance education setting may seem a little strange to you, if you haven't taken distance courses in the past or if you haven't been involved in developing distance education courses.

The differences between distance and traditional education fall within three major areas:

- The use of technology to "bridge" students and instructors.
- Students are not time-bound or place-bound to take courses.
- Learners don't necessarily share the same characteristics as "traditional" higher education students.

## Technology in Distance Education

The use of various technologies **IS** a major difference between traditional and distance education. The use of the Internet and videotapes supplements content in a traditional classroom, but in the distance setting, the use of technology **is** the way that the major content is delivered. It can be delivered over the Web, through a Web course tools program (such as WebCT or Blackboard), by videotape or satellite, or by CD-ROM/DVD.

## Place and Time in Distance Education

A major difference between traditional and distance education is that students do not have to be **place-bound** or **time-bound**. A traditional class is developed to be a **synchronous** experience, meaning that students meet at a regularly scheduled time, in a regularly scheduled place to complete the course. Sometimes a distance education course is set up in a synchronous way, especially when students take live videoconference classes; students have to meet in a specified location and at a specific time where they can receive the live videoconference.

However, more distance education courses are being taught that are **asynchronous**, which means that students can take the class at their own time and in a location of their choosing. They can watch a videotape playback of a class at 11 p.m., as opposed to 8 a.m., when the "traditional" classroom meets. Students can take a laptop computer to a friend's house and "plug into" a Web-based course from there. The promise of asynchronous delivery of courses is driving the concept of "on-demand" education -- the students get to choose when and where the course content is received. This is definitely different from the synchronous concept that people are used to.

## Distance Education Learners

**Traditional** classrooms, especially at the higher education level, are full of "traditional-looking" students. They have some common characteristics. Usually, they're in their late teens to late 20s, have a strong educational background. **Distance education students** are a little different.

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Historically, we had some general characteristics telling us who distance learners were. For example, we knew that with telecourses (distance education via television) many of the learners were women who stayed at home during the day. However, with the advent and increased penetration of online distance education, specifically the Internet and the World Wide Web, the ability to provide definitive answers on who distance learners are has changed.

Look at the table below from the National Center for Educational Statistics Quick Source System on a survey on distance education courses offered by higher education institutions in 1995. This sample was based on mailings to 1,274 postsecondary institutions in the US, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico with 1,203 returns (94% response rate). (Note that this chart does not total to 100% because learners could belong to more than one category.)

Type of Individual	Percentage
Workers seeking skill updating or retraining	49%
Professionals seeking recertification	39%
Individuals with disabilities	16%
Military personnel	12%
Native Americans/Alaskan Natives	7%
Non-English-speaking individuals	3%
Other types of individuals	17%

Some other considerations or characteristics, based on other studies, show that (in general), distance education students:

- Sometimes feel isolated.
- May be technology-phobic.
- Are usually more highly motivated.
- Bring "richer" life experiences to the class because of their previous work or academic experience.

Distance education students have more freedom and more responsibility for their own instruction. Studies indicate that when students are active participants in the learning process, they are likely to perform better and remember more. The multimedia approach employed by many forms of distance education addresses a wider range of learning styles among students than do most forms of traditional classroom instruction. So although we have **some** indication of who is taking distance education courses, we don't have a tight set of **characteristics** that "**always**" describe distance learners.

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