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Education and Society

by Gary E. Miller

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ABOUT ME



Gary Miller

For the past four decades, I have been involved in media-based

distance education at Penn State and the University of Maryland University College. I am a 2010

Updated E-Learning Definitions

Below is the latest version of the definitions of e-learning that Frank Mayadas and I have been working on. This version reflects comments from several readers. Please take a look and let us know what you think.

Definitions of E-Learning Courses and Programs Version 1.1

Developed for Discussion within the Online Learning Community

**By
Frank Mayadas
and
Gary E. Miller**

As e-learning has evolved into a global change agent in higher education, it has become more diverse in its form and applications. This increased diversity has complicated our ability to share research findings and best practices, because we lack a shared set of definitions to distinguish among the many variations on e-learning that have arisen. This paper is designed to provide practitioners, researchers, and policy makers with a common set of terms and definitions to guide the ongoing development of the field. Our hope is that it will move us toward a set of shared, commonly understood definitions that will facilitate the sharing of research data and professional standards in our field. In developing the definitions below, we have tried to incorporate existing definitions developed by others and have incorporated comments from colleagues who have reviewed earlier drafts. We do not

Sloan Consortium Fellow and a 2004 inductee into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame. In 2009, I received the Prize of Excellence for Lifetime Contributions to the Field by the International Council for Open and Distance Education.

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present these as the ultimate definitions, but as a step toward more commonly held standards as our field continues to evolve. Additions and revisions will be published as needed.

The Impact of E-Learning

While e-learning has become the primary form of distance education, it is also transforming instruction on campus. Higher education historically is a campus-based institution. Many students live on campus for the duration of their studies; others live near campus and commute to campus to take classes and to receive campus-based support services. This physical connection has defined the relationship between the student and the institution. It has also helped to shape the curriculum itself. E-learning has blurred these traditional relationships, removing geography as a defining element in the student-institution relationship.

Technology-enhanced learning has evolved both from enhancements to earlier generations of face-to-face teaching and enhancements to earlier generations of distance education. Engaged intentional design of learning experiences has also evolved to promote the most effective design to serve the learners, their life experiences and the opportunities and limitations of the particular environment. For example, many graduate programs have deliberately designed programs for working adults, which are predominantly offered online but also include short-term face-to-face residencies.

At the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult to define a common measure for instruction. The "seat time" measure on which common understanding of a "credit hour" is largely based, is being challenged as new instructional models and alternatives to traditional classroom lectures become more widely accepted. However, the credit hour remains the most widely accepted measure used to compare courses across different delivery environments. Continued growth in the number and diversity of learning environments will increase the need for a common standard by which different learning environments can be compared. The following definitions assume the credit hour as the primary means by which courses are defined, regardless of delivery environment.

As e-learning has matured, it has begun to be used in different ways to address diverse goals. Several models have emerged that have different geographical and curricular implications. It is important to be able to distinguish among these factors in order to compare practices and to understand and be able to effectively apply research findings. Shared definitions will also empower students to make better decisions. The major goals of e-learning include: improving *access* for both traditional-age and nontraditional students who are not otherwise able to attend a traditional, campus-based program; improving *efficiency and effectiveness* by using e-learning media and methods to control cost or provide other efficiencies or

to make large-enrollment courses more effective for students; and improving *student choice* over when, where, and how to engage in the learning process. In addition, we are assuming that courses and programs defined below are instructor-led experiences, distinguishing them from some corporate training models.

The following definitions are designed to help both faculty and students better understand the different kinds of e-learning that are now practiced in higher education and to provide institutions with some standard models to encourage effective sharing of data about e-learning, at both the individual course and the curriculum level.

COURSE-LEVEL DEFINITIONS

Below, we have distilled current practices into six categories that reflect the variety of applications that are in use today.

1. Traditional Classroom Course – Course activity is organized around scheduled class meetings.

Traditional courses are measured by the number of hours spent in required class meetings or other traditional activities, such as laboratories, field trips, or internships. Such courses may involve some sort of computer usage—for example, a software simulation or laboratory or design software for art or engineering applications—but the course is still anchored to the normal time spent in classes. For the purposes of this paper, courses that use technology at this level are considered to be “traditional classroom” courses.

2. Synchronous Distributed Course—Web-based technologies are used to extend classroom lectures and discussions to students at remote sites in real time.

These courses use web conferencing or other synchronous e-learning media to provide access to a classroom experience by students at off-campus locations (such as places of employment, other campuses, etc.) while otherwise maintaining a traditional classroom structure. These courses may mix on-campus and remote students.

3. Web-Enhanced Course – Online course activity complements class sessions without reducing the number of required class meetings.

The University of Central Florida was among the first institutions to adopt this term as an official category. When Internet access is required to complete course requirements, and when this Internet-based work augments classroom activity or supplants less than 20 percent of the traditional classroom activity, the course is considered a “web-enhanced

course.” Traditional courses and web-enhanced courses are very similar, but are placed in separate categories because web-enhanced courses require additional faculty and student support, and very likely additional technology. Web-enhanced courses are not normally considered to be e-learning courses, but are described here because they may be a step toward a hybrid or online course. The National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) calls this a “supplemental” approach, in which some technology-based, out-of-class activities are used to encourage greater student engagement with course content.

4. “Emporium” Course – This model, designed for on-campus use, eliminates all class meetings and replaces them with a learning resource center featuring online materials and on-demand personalized assistance.

This model was developed through several innovations funded by the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) designed to give campus-based students control over when they study. The purpose is to allow students to choose when they access course materials, to choose what types of learning materials they use depending on their needs, and to set their own pace in working with the materials. It assumes that students have access to sophisticated instructional software and one-on-one on-site help. It replaces formal class meetings with increased access to instructional assistance and allows institutions to combine multiple lecture sections into one large section.

A variation on the Emporium model is the **Flex Course**, developed at Herkimer Community College in New York State, in which students have available to both classroom-based and online options for all or most learning activities and may choose to participate entirely online, entirely in class, or mix online and in-class sessions.

5. Hybrid Course – Online activity is mixed with classroom meetings, replacing at least 20 percent, but not all required face-to-face meetings.

When the technologies used for education and communication outside the classroom are used to *supplant* some of the classroom work, reducing the time actually spent in the classroom, the result is a hybrid course. For example, if a course traditionally meets in a classroom three times per week, a hybrid version might use online sessions to replace one or two of the traditional weekly classroom sessions or to eliminate all but a few key face-to-face sessions for laboratory work or examinations. A general rule is to classify a course as hybrid if online components replace a minimum of one class meeting per week in a typical three-credit course or to replace all but a few key face-to-face sessions for laboratory work or examinations. Some institutions use hybrid courses with traditional on-campus students to

improve efficiency in the use of limited classrooms. For example, replacing 50% of classroom experiences with online experiences would allow an institution to schedule a second course in the same room. The National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) describes this as a “replacement” approach, in which online activity replaces some class meetings. The Sloan Foundation required that funding for such courses use online experiences to offset at least 30 percent of traditional classroom experiences.

A variation—call it **Hybrid-Plus**—identifies courses that are mostly online but that require a small number of scheduled classroom or other on-site group events. These courses are at least 80% online.

Hybrid courses are one component of E-Learning. They are particularly relevant in programs that serve students within commuting distance of campus. They increase flexibility but do not totally eliminate the need for students to have physical access to a campus facility. Hybrid courses will be attractive to many traditional full-time students, in addition to non-traditional learners, typically working adults who are within commuting distance and who wish to earn a degree.

Note that, in the past, the terms “blended” and “hybrid” have been applied at both the course level and the program level without differentiation. This has created a degree of confusion. Our definitions use “hybrid” at the course level and “blended” at the program level to allow for clearer distinctions in usage.

6. Online Course – All course activity is done online; there are no required face-to-face sessions within the course and no requirements for on-campus activity.

Online courses totally eliminate geography as a factor in the relationship between the student and the institution. They consist entirely of online elements that facilitate the three critical student interactions: with content, the instructor, and other students.

While these courses may appeal to on-campus students, they are designed to meet the needs of students who do not have effective access to campus. They may reside near the campus, or they may reside quite a distance away in other states or even in other countries. Over the years, universities have sought to serve this “non-traditional” population through a variety of media—from correspondence courses to satellite teleconferences—but only since the mid-1990s has technology enabled easy and continuous communication—interaction—among the learners and instructors at a distance. The Internet also has made library and other information resources available to this group. Improvements in basic technology also permit this user group access to complex data as in precision images, mathematical

visualizations and simulations of various kinds. Social networking applications allow these learners to participate in both formal and informal learning communities.

PROGRAM-LEVEL DEFINITIONS

Similar distinctions among delivery environments can be made at the program level. Degree and certificate programs can be designed with a mix of traditional and e-learning courses in order to serve populations who have different levels of access to campus. Currently, there appear to be four major kinds of practices in wide use:

1. **Traditional Classroom Program**—The program may include a mix of traditional, web-enhanced, or hybrid courses, but all courses require some face-to-face sessions.

These programs take advantage of web-based applications to enhance learning, but without changing the traditional requirement that students attend classes on campus or in other traditional learning environments. As a result, online elements do not significantly improve access to commuting or distant students.

2. **Multi-Format Program** – A program mixes, along with traditional classroom courses, other formats that use a variety of different delivery modes, web-enhanced, hybrid, fully online courses, synchronous distributed education, etc., without a specific access goal.

These programs use a variety of technologies and course designs to provide a variety of learning experiences. Typically, choice of technology is less related to the geographic or time needs of students than on curricular goals or instructional needs.

3. **Blended Program** – A significant percentage, but not all of the credits required for program completion are offered fully online. Typically, up to 30 percent of the curriculum may be offered as face-to-face or hybrid courses or other face-to-face formats or as independent study.

These programs provide increased access to distant students who are able to come to campus for some courses, laboratory work, intensive residencies, or other occasional group sessions. Ideally, face-to-face sessions will be organized to minimize travel requirements for distant students. Some academic support services should be available to distant students as well.

4. **Online Program** – All credits required to complete the program are offered as fully online courses. Students can

complete the program completely at a distance, with no required face-to-face meetings.

Fully online programs are designed with the truly distant student in mind. Institutions that offer fully online programs should also take care to provide support services—registration, testing, advising, library support, etc.—at a distance.

Implementation

The authors are indebted to the many colleagues too numerous to list individually who have contributed to these definitions by providing feedback on earlier drafts and who, in some cases, have pioneered in developing innovative applications of technology to create new learning environments.

These definitions are a work in progress that will be updated annually as needed. The authors welcome comments and anticipate that they will prepare occasional companion pieces to add new definitions as the field evolves, in the hope the community will come together around a common set of definitions that will guide research, practice, and policy. We encourage researchers and professional associations to adopt the definitions with the goal that a shared vocabulary will facilitate the sharing of research data, increase the transfer of research into practice, and, ultimately, promote standards of excellence for the field.

Your comments are welcome in this ongoing discussion.

Version 1.0 8/2/2012

Version 1.1 9/7/12

Posted by [Gary Miller](#) at 1:59 PM



2 comments:



[Scott Helphrey](#) September 19, 2012 5:07 PM

This comment has been removed by the author.

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[Scott Helphrey](#) September 19, 2012 5:17 PM

I like the idea of consistency across the education community, and some of the course level and program

level terms are somewhat consistent as well. But why not all of them?

If a program is blended, then why not a blended course rather than "Synchronous Distributed Course" when they really aim toward the same concept, at least on our campus they do.

On our campus, blended courses are what you have as Synchronous Distributed Course, it's a blending of classroom and online students.

I just think if it's consistency you're after (which I would think is at least part of the purpose) then the terms would be more consistent as well.

I see this with traditional, online, etc., but not all. Just makes it more confusing I think.

Thanks.

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