Internet and Distance Education Delivery Models

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Technological developments over the past twenty years have given people across the globe the ability to interact and obtain information at a tremendous rate. Due to these developments, the field of distance education is also growing at an exponential rate, as is the research conducted on the availability, effectiveness, and best practices for distance learning. This increased interest has led to a variety of options in distance learning systems and the primary methods for course delivery. Distance education courses are primarily taught via one of three course models: synchronous, asynchronous, or blended.

Synchronous course delivery is conducted in “real time,” which means the instructors and students are online at the same time and typically interact via streaming video, live chat, or an Internet meeting format. Students can post or ask questions and receive immediate responses from the course instructor or other students.

In the asynchronous course model, the instruction is conducted when the students and instructor are not online at the same time. These classes typically occur through a distance-learning system that allows users to post and respond to messages in a specific location within the course. For example, Ashford University conducts online classes using the asynchronous method. Students and instructors are assigned to specific online courses. Within these courses, students participate in discussion forums, post assignments, and retrieve learning materials. Correspondence with the instructor is conducted primarily via the online course discussion forums and email.

The blended learning model is a combination of both synchronous and asynchronous delivery. The instructor may have a set lecture time during which all students log into the system to listen and interact with the class. The remainder of the week’s instruction may then be
conducted asynchronously by having students post additional discussions and questions to a specific location within the learning system.

Regardless of the delivery method, all distance-learning systems include course management. Within the course management system, instructional designers, course authors, and instructors have the ability to edit content, administer assignments, monitor discussions, and interact with learners. The course management features of a distance-learning system are one of the key elements in the successful delivery of a distance education program.

An important factor in selecting a distance-learning system is the ease with which students and instructors can interact and understand the delivery structure. Students’ success is often related to their experience with the course technology. If students are to be successful in learning at a distance, they must be comfortable with the media used to transmit the content of the course. Ultimately, the distance-learning system should enhance the learner’s experience.

Within distance education, the delivery of information occurs through the use of various communication methods. When the instructor and learners are separated by time and geographic location, asynchronous communication occurs. Asynchronous communication does not require the participants to interact simultaneously. Asynchronous learning tools can be used for a variety of teaching and workplace situations.

Historically, distance learning involved only the student and instructor. Learners did not have the opportunity to communicate with one another. Fortunately, technological advancements have brought much to the field of distance learning. In the teaching arena of online learning today, asynchronous communication can be accomplished by way of email, newsgroups for discussions, streaming video, and audio. According to Witt and Mossler (2010),
The new opportunities that a college degree will [provide] is made possible by the advantages of an online education, including class work on a more flexible schedule, ease of doing research online, ease of collaborating with others at a distance, and access to universities that may be geographically far removed from where [one] lives. Online classes also make it possible for students to learn from working professionals in their fields who may be scattered across the country or around the world. (Adult Learning in the Information Age, para. 1)

Asynchronous communications allow learners to select the time and place for class participation. Through emails and other asynchronous learning tools, students can be a part of a learning community, set goals, and complete course work. In the workplace, professionals can interact without concern for time differences or the high cost of international phone calls. With the asynchronous model, the user has greater control over the acquisition of information and the ability to set a convenient time for completing coursework, training, or job-related activities.

Online synchronous course delivery offers students and instructors a format similar to a traditional classroom learning experience. While the instructor and students are not located in the same place, they are interacting and communicating at the same time. Within the synchronous delivery system, many options are available for the communication and transmission of course content. In Transforming Learning Methods through Online Teaching the authors address the role of technology in improving academics, including the benefits of synchronous learning, particularly for younger students due to their familiarity with “chat room” technology. Bach, Haynes, and Lewis Smith (2006) state, “Synchronous communication develops its own curios and quite different type of narrative when compared with face-to-face discussion, and there is often a text based ‘stream of consciousness’” (p. 135). Synchronous delivery of course
instruction also allows for immediate feedback. In the asynchronous delivery model, learners must often wait for feedback or answers to questions.

An effective synchronous delivery system motivates the learner, provides sufficient time for learner and facilitator interaction, and operates the course at a steady rate, allowing the learners time to reflect and ask questions. Like the asynchronous course delivery model, a successful synchronous delivery system can also provide participants with an effective and challenging learning experience.

While asynchronous and synchronous learning systems each offer a specialized approach to distance learning, a blended learning system can combine the tools of both systems to present an effective and convenient learning experience. According to Watson (2010), “…blended learning combines online delivery of educational content with the best features of classroom interaction and live instruction…” (p. 4). For example, training for supervisors may be divided into various sections. One section’s content may be taught via CD-ROM with the learners interacting through a newsgroup or discussion board. The next section may be taught in the classroom setting. Fundamentally, current blended learning models represent a transfer in instructional strategies, similar to the way in which online learning demonstrated a change in the delivery and instructional models for learning at a distance (Watson, 2010).

The distance education boom has led many institutions to search for a management system capable of delivering courses and sharing information, while managing the varied and often complex learning tools. As discussed by Caplow (2006), the most significant aspects of the course management system include the ability to provide course materials in a web-based format, access to online exams, and links to course materials in addition to a system that supports student and faculty interaction in discussions and evaluation. Given the increasing number of options...
available in distance education, the task of finding a course management system that offers the necessary options, along with the ability to interact with other technology solutions, can be daunting. The decision to implement a courseware management system cannot be pieced together. All distance learning systems, from blended learning systems to content management, must have the capability and the resources necessary to interact with the course management system.

Learning technologies have opened the doors to a wide variety of options for distance education delivery, and each learning model has benefits and limitations (Picciano, 2001). The Internet and learning technologies provide the means for transmitting content, managing courses, and promoting the interaction of the instructor and learners. When selecting technology for a distance-learning program, the system that provides the best learning approach should be utilized. Around the world, students can join the same class, share information, and learn together. The field of distance education and the various learning systems are continually being revised and improved. Ideally, the most effective distance learning system is one that provides students with the resources to be successful distance learners.
References


