

Effective Characteristics of Distance and Blended Education

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the peculiarities of distance and blended education. Some types of distance learning technologies are observed here. Advantages and disadvantages of distance learning and blended education are discussed.

KEYWORDS: distance learning, blended education, cloud platforms, educational process, learning management system, communication tools, online platforms, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning

Distance learning is a form of education that involves the use of the Internet and modern technologies for remote learning of educational materials by students, testing their knowledge, as well as communication with teachers.

Distance learning technologies are designed to simplify the educational process and improve its quality. With their help, tutors convey the necessary information to students, test their knowledge, collect feedback, answer questions, and exchange photos, videos and audio materials. The choice of tools often depends on the goals, capabilities, interests and preferences of all participants in the educational process. Conventionally, the following groups of distance learning technologies can be distinguished.

- LMS (learning management systems). These are server and cloud platforms that allow you to create and manage training courses. LMS helps not only train students, but also interact with them, track the learning process, and issue certificates. Cloud systems are especially popular because they do not require installation and are easy to use. An example of such an LMS for creating online courses is the EDU platform from SendPulse.
- Communication tools. These include technologies that help the tutor and students interact with each other. For example, ask questions, share materials, leave feedback, submit completed tasks, and so on. Distance learning communication tools include email services, instant messengers, social networks, websites, as well as services like Google Classroom or Zoom.
- Gamification tools. To make the educational process more interesting and memorable, game elements are often used. These could be quizzes in a chatbot, quizzes, specially developed applications, and so on. Gamification tools increase student engagement and also help diversify learning and testing knowledge.
- Online platforms for posting educational materials. These include a variety of services where you can post educational information. For example, a company

website, video hosting sites like YouTube, podcast platforms, and much more.

Freedom in choosing the place, time of study and even learning technologies makes distance education increasingly popular. Particular demand for it arose with the spread of Covid-19, when most students around the world lost the opportunity to study face-to-face. However, despite the enormous and rapidly growing popularity of distance learning, in addition to its advantages, it also has disadvantages, which you will learn more about in the next section.

Advantages and disadvantages of distance learning.

The main advantage of distance learning is the convenience of this format for all participants in the educational process. A tutor can simultaneously teach hundreds of people from his home, and the student can independently choose the time and place of classes. Distance learning, compared to traditional learning, significantly reduces the daily labor costs required for preparations and travel.

It is also worth noting that the cost of remote education is often lower, since there is no need to pay rent, utilities, take into account the costs of organizing classes and purchasing educational materials such as books, manuals, workbooks, and so on. Distance learning helps you continuously improve your skills, combine work and study, and work with a variety of sources of information.

Of course, this format of education has much fewer disadvantages than advantages, but for some they can become an almost insurmountable obstacle. Distance learning requires a high level of self-organization and regular self-motivation. Without these qualities, it is impossible to move forward and achieve your goals.

Another significant drawback is the minimal direct interaction between student and tutor, which can become an obstacle for both during the educational process. Also, there are difficulties in testing knowledge. Without video surveillance, it is difficult to check how well the student has mastered the material and whether he completed the assignments independently.

Next, you will find out what distance learning is like.

Types of distance learning

Today there are a large number of types of distance learning. Conventionally, they can be divided into three large groups.

- Synchronous learning. A group of students study at the same time. Synchronous learning is often used in online education, where classes take place in real time.
- Asynchronous learning. Students study independently of each other within established deadlines. However,

asynchronous learning can also be without a time frame. In this case, students study according to the most flexible schedule.

- Blended or hybrid education. Combines synchronous and asynchronous learning.

In each of these groups the following types of distance learning can exist:

- video conferences;
- audio conferences;
- webinars;
- video lectures;
- audio lectures;
- lectures in text format;
- presentations;
- notes;
- cases;
- methods of radio and telecommunication.

Read on to find out what you should pay attention to in order to choose the right distance learning system.

How to choose a distance learning system: recommendations for teachers and students

Here are the main factors that students should rely on when choosing a distance learning system.

- Easy to use. Explore the interface and make sure that you don't have to put in a lot of effort to access learning materials, complete assignments, contact your tutor, and track your progress.
- Level of trust and reviews. Pay attention to the authority of the resource where you plan to study. Read reviews and cases from other students about the course and the teacher. Make sure that the tutor is truly a professional in his field so that you will not waste your time.
- Requirements and schedule. Check out the class schedule. See if there are deadlines, whether you can download lessons, notes and presentations to study offline. Find out if any additional services or materials are needed for training.
- Price. Before purchasing any course, please note what is included in the price. Make sure that you will have access to all training materials and will not have to pay for them separately. Also, pay attention to the presence of a certificate. In some cases, you need to pay for it separately or buy an additional package of tasks that provides feedback from the tutor.

Tutors have other goals in the educational process. Therefore, below we have prepared recommendations on choosing a distance learning system for those who want to create their own online course and monetize it.

1. Familiarize yourself with the platform. Study the interface, make sure that the service is easy to use and all the necessary functions are available to you. Don't rush to buy a paid package. Carefully study the capabilities of the platform in the demo version or in the free plan.
2. Make sure you can use different training formats. See if you can add audio lectures and notes in addition to video materials. Different formats of educational materials increase student engagement and make the educational process more interesting.

3. See if you can make changes. Make sure that once you create lessons in your course, you can edit them, rearrange them, delete them, or add new ones.
4. Explore the function of testing students' knowledge. Pay attention to the ease of creating test and verification tasks.
5. Make sure you can track statistics and monitor student success. This will help improve the quality of your courses and promptly identify those who need help in the learning process.
6. Explore integration options with other services. Pay attention to whether you can work with instant messengers and chat bots, send email newsletters, SMS and web push notifications. To automate your sales, see if you can set up a CRM and connect.
7. See if you can add moderators. Working with a large number of students at the same time is quite difficult, despite the automation of work. To answer questions and comments, give individual feedback, and help struggling students, you should add assistants. Therefore, when choosing a platform for creating online courses, pay attention to this feature and its cost.
8. Explore the possibility of creating certificates. For students, a certificate is evidence of knowledge acquisition and a reward for their efforts, and for a tutor, it is a way to promote the course and themselves as a specialist. Therefore, before choosing a particular platform, be sure to see if there is an option to create personalized certificates.

Make sure there is a support service. After creating and launching an online course, difficulties may arise at various stages of work. To overcome challenges and avoid losing students, make sure the platform you choose has experts you can turn to.

When it comes to blended learning, researchers define the term differently. However, as an international group of researchers notes in the review "Preparing for the Digital University", all formulations can be boiled down to the main thing.

Blended learning is an approach that combines a variety of formats of face-to-face and remote interaction between students, teachers and educational resources.

In most cases, this means that students study part of the time in a classroom or auditorium, and part of the time online, synchronously or asynchronously. Although sometimes blended learning also includes such practices when the course is taught entirely in a traditional format, but digital resources, such as LMS, are used to create curricula and communication. Distance learning, which uses both synchronous and asynchronous formats, is also called mixed.

This term should not be confused with hybrid learning, although they are often used interchangeably. Hybrid learning takes place synchronously, that is, the entire group of students studies at the same time, together, only some are present in the classroom in person, and some are remotely online.

In blended learning, activities can be both synchronous and asynchronous. Let's say the entire group first attends a lecture in the classroom, and then students take an electronic test or complete assignments on an online platform to

reinforce the material. But, of course, in practice hybrid and mixed approaches can be combined.

How blended learning emerged and developed

Blended learning emerged long before the advent of the public Internet. HR and workforce development expert Josh Bersin, in his work "The Blended Learning Book: Best Practices, Proven Methodologies, and Lessons Learned," identifies four stages of development approach to learning.

What blended learning models exist?

There can be a huge variety of models in which blended learning is implemented. This is a flexible approach that allows a teacher, methodologist or trainer to customize the educational process to suit specific educational objectives and audiences.

Nevertheless, we can name seven main models that are not mutually exclusive and can be combined in one form or another.

Extended face-to-face model

Essentially, it is a traditional classroom model to which the teacher or instructor occasionally adds online activities to replace, expand, or complement traditional teaching methods.

Changing formats

Students move from one activity to another according to a set schedule. Among these types, online learning is a must. For example, after an in-class lecture, students work on a project in teams and then take an online educational game or test. This approach differs from the extended face-to-face model in the systematic nature of online classes.

When instruction involves a computer lab where students move after traditional face-to-face instruction, this approach is called a lab rotation.

Changing work areas

This model is very similar to changing formats, only the teacher also divides the class into groups, each of which is engaged in its own type of learning activity, and after a while the groups change places. For example, while one group is working with a teacher, the second is working on a project independently, and the third is studying online. Moreover, this happens, as a rule, in one room with dedicated areas for different types of activities.

Sometimes a change of work areas is implemented according to individual educational trajectories - depending on the results and goals of a particular student. This option is called the individual rotation model.

Flipped learning

According to this model, students independently master theory using materials prepared in advance by the teacher (in modern realities, these are often pre-recorded online lessons or an entire course), and in class they discuss complex issues and practice knowledge in practice. Essentially, this approach swaps homework and classwork. Flipped learning has many benefits, but it places an additional burden on the teacher: both preparing content for self-study and developing hands-on or interactive lessons.

On-demand model

This is an option for independent students - adults or at least high school students. They, on their own initiative, supplement traditional face-to-face classes with online courses. For example, if they want to deepen their

knowledge in specialized disciplines or attend electives that for some reason are not taught at their school or university.

Flexible model

This model is perhaps the furthest from traditional approaches to learning and is not widely used. The student plans his own training, which takes place mainly online. He attends an educational institution, but is practically not limited by the schedule or choice of activities. In this model, the teacher acts more like a tutor and curator - he conducts consultations individually or in small groups and provides support.

Wider educational opportunities

We have already mentioned above the choice of online electives in the expanded full-time learning model. And of course, this applies to all levels and types of education - digital technologies provide access to educational materials, courses and tools regardless of the student's physical location.

And the teacher can use digital tools to engage students and develop their soft skills, digital literacy and other universal competencies. For example, you can invite students to write a script for a short video instead of the usual essay, film and edit it using a smartphone.

In general, the mixed approach goes well with active learning methods - among them, for example, task-centered learning.

What are the difficulties in blended learning?

Many of those who want to introduce blended learning into the educational process are faced with the same problems that arose during the sudden transition to distance learning in the spring of 2020:

- insufficient technical equipment and undeveloped Internet infrastructure;
- low level of digital competencies - both among students and teachers themselves;
- poorly designed program or activity.

And so distance learning is the distance at which the teacher and students are located. The student works at home, receives assignments from the teacher via the Internet or by regular mail, personal meetings are possible. Online learning can even take place in one classroom, but the entire process takes place online.

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