

Is Distance Learning Effective?

Yes

Distance learning is effective and opens doors for students around the world. Much of K–12 education occurs in rural settings. Not everyone lives in a major population center. Schools outside urban areas often have difficulty obtaining qualified teachers to teach courses, especially in more challenging, upper-level curriculum such as advanced placement courses. With No Child Left Behind requiring all students to be taught by highly qualified teachers, distance courses can supply the teacher. In the state of Alaska, 100 schools employ three or fewer teachers—with 36 schools having only one teacher, who teaches all subjects. Distance

education allows students in such schools to gain access to a wider variety of courses, as well as access to the highly qualified teachers to teach those courses.

Distance learning increases access to curricular offerings that might not otherwise be available to students. This is especially important for



Jean Kiekel

Maybe

The concept of distance learning is generations old, and encompasses snail mail, cassette and videotapes, video conferencing, Web-based training, and online learning. Early generations had slow feedback and limited interaction. Video conferencing improved interaction, providing immediate feedback, but it had its own inherent challenges to overcome. Technology advancements have eliminated many of these barriers, and now offer a platform to virtually meet where all learners are active participants.

Distance between the instructor and learner does not increase or decrease effectiveness and interaction. The focus is the pedagogy used to engage learners

instead of the technology used to deliver the content. Instructional strategies are changing from teacher-centered to student-centered in both face-to-face and distance learning.

I'll narrow the term used from distance learning to online learning to be more specific. Online learning does not replace the instructor



Diane Stelacio

schools that might only have a handful of students interested in taking a class, or do not have a teacher on staff who has the expertise to teach a course students wish to take. Distance education can fill that gap, allowing schools to increase the number and depth of courses offered to students without increasing the size of their faculty or school buildings.

Another advantage of distance learning is that it allows students to use their own learning styles in the exploration of a subject. This is especially important for students who are gifted or have learning disabilities. Well written online curriculum provides a shell that gives the basics of content. Students are then guided to other resources, allowing them to use their own learning styles to explore and enrich that content. It allows a broadening of understanding of general concepts because students can

with technology; instead it virtually brings them together. Online learning is a form of distance learning where the learner and instructor are not geographically together in time and location. Learners interact to learn together. Characteristics include an active instructor responding to questions within a preset time, clear expectations and timelines, private and group discussion areas, and online access anytime.

As with face-to-face instruction, not all distance learning is equal. The format should result in independence, not isolation. To remove isolation and support the learner, the course design should include four types of interaction, which researcher Marguerita McVay Lynch identifies as “interaction with the content, interaction with the instructor, interaction with classmates, and interaction with self.” Online learning is effective when interaction is required, developing an

Distance learning allows students to use their own learning styles in the exploration of a subject.

search out their own information to help understand and more effectively apply the concepts.

Why do I take this stance on distance learning? I have been teaching an online high school advanced placement micro- and macroeconomics course for the past five years. I wrote the curriculum for the course and have worked very hard to maintain the quality of the class. Over the past five years, approximately 85% of my students have received scores of 3 or greater on the corresponding AP exam—3 being the generally accepted minimal passing score to receive college credit for the course. Most of my students score 4 or 5 on the exams.

Distance learning isn't for everyone. The student must be self-motivated, interested in the subject matter, and able to meet deadlines. But students who develop these skills while still in high school will be even better equipped when they go to college and beyond. I am a firm believer that distance learning is of great benefit to all students, especially those who might not otherwise have access to the courses that they can take online.

Jean Kiekel completed her PhD specializing in educational technology from Kansas State University in May 2007. She has written curriculum and taught online for five years for Virtual High School, Inc. of Maynard, Massachusetts, and has just accepted a position teaching courses at the University of Arkansas-Little Rock in the College of Education.

The focus is the pedagogy used to engage learners instead of the technology used to deliver the content.

environment where all learners are active participants. The instructor must be present, creating an environment where the learners feel safe to enter, explore, connect, and apply the content to their individual setting.

A lot of similarities are shared by onsite and online instructors. What changes when the classroom shifts from onsite to online? Communication changes from a verbal format to a written. Writing skills strengthen during the educational journey while participants develop, post, and review responses. Participants' technology skills strengthen. The learners' growth exceeds the content area.

Learners benefit by having additional time to review content, time to search and introduce additional resources, and time to develop and

process responses. Screen readers can convert text to audio; software can increase text size. Participants in virtual high school courses are successfully achieving 3 or better on Advanced Placement exams. Teachers continue to pursue professional development while virtually attending universities. When given the opportunity to interact in an online course, all learners can achieve their success. Online learning is a viable alternative promoting individual growth while expanding the classroom boundaries.

Diane Stelacio earned a BS/BA from Thomas Edison State College and an MS in Education and Graduate Certificate to Teach Online from Capella University. She is an Educational Technology Training Center staff developer, high school online learning site coordinator, and Virtual High School teacher.