

A DEFINITION OF THE FIELD

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The chief merit of language is clearness...we know that nothing detracts so much from this as do unfamiliar terms. —Galen, 129-199

Recently, the Association for Educational Communications and Technology released a monograph titled *Distance Education: Definition and Glossary of Terms*, by Lee Ayers Schlosser and Michael Simonson. This monograph was released to continue the discussion about the appropriate definition for Distance Education. The Definitions and Terminology Committee of The Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), chaired by Al Januszewski, provided early leadership and supported the publication of the Schlosser and Simonson monograph. This monograph is designed as a companion to *Instructional Technology: The Definition and Domains of the Field* by Barbara Seels and Rita Richey that was also sponsored by the Definitions and Terminology Committee of AECT.

The definition presented in the monograph is as follows: "Distance education is institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors."

There are four main components to this definition. First is the concept that distance education is institutionally based. This is what differentiates distance education from self-study. While the institution referred to in this

definition could be a traditional educational school or college, increasingly there are emerging non-traditional institutions that offer education to students at a distance. Businesses, companies, and corporations are offering instruction at a distance. Many educators and trainers are advocating the accreditation of institutions that offer distance education to add credibility, improve quality, and eliminate diploma mills.

The second component of the definition of distance education is the concept of separation of the teacher and student. Most often, separation is thought of in geographic terms—teachers are in one location and students in another. Also implied by the definition is the separation of teachers and students in time. Asynchronous distance education means that instruction is offered and students access it at separate times, or any time it is convenient to them. Finally, intellectual separation of teachers and learners is important. Obviously, teachers have an understanding of the concepts presented in a course that students may not possess. In this case, the reduction of separation is a goal of the distance education system.

Interactive telecommunications is the third component of the definition of distance education. Interaction can be synchronous or asynchronous—at the same time, or at different

times. Interaction is critical, but not at the expense of content. In other words, it is important that learners be able to interact with each other, with resources of instruction, and with their teacher. However, interaction should not be the primary characteristic of instruction, but should be available, commonplace, and relevant.

The words “telecommunications systems” imply electronic media, such as television, telephone, and the Internet, but need not be limited to electronic media. Telecommunications is defined as “communicating at a distance.” This definition includes communication with the postal system, as in correspondence study, and other non-electronic methods for communication. Obviously, as electronic telecommunications systems improve and become more pervasive, it is likely that they will be the mainstay of modern distance education systems. However, older, less sophisticated systems of telecommunication will continue to be important.

The final component of the definition is the concept of connecting learners, resources, and instructors. This means that there are instructors who interact with learners and that resources are available that permit learning to occur. Resources should be subjected to instructional design procedures that organize them into learning experiences that promote learning, including resources that can be observed, felt, heard, or completed.

The definition of distance education includes these four components. If one or more are missing, then the event is something different, if only slightly, than distance education. It is also important to recognize that distance education includes both distance teaching and distance learning. The development, design, management, and evaluation of instruction fall under the heading of distance teaching. Utilization of learning experiences is distance learning. According to the definition of distance education, distance learning is not possible without distance teaching.