

Distance Learning vs. Face-to-Face Learning



1 Although many people think it is a modern phenomenon, distance learning has been around for at least 200 years in one form or another. Historical examples of long-distance learning include students being sent a series of weekly lessons by mail. The technological advances of the past 20 or so years, however, have meant that this form of education is now a credible alternative to face-to-face learning. Indeed, 1996 saw the establishment of the world's first "virtual university" in the United States, showing how far distance learning has come in a relatively short space of time. While it is now possible to obtain a large variety of online degrees, which is the best type of education to pursue? A closer examination of this topic reveals that distance and traditional educational instruction have significant differences but also some similarities.

2 When comparing the two systems, the most obvious difference lies in the way that instruction is delivered. Distance learning is heavily dependent on technology, particularly the Internet. In a face-to-face course, students may only require a computer for the purpose of writing an essay. In comparison, when learning remotely, technology is the principal means of communication. Face-to-face instruction must take place in real time and in one location. Conversely, distance learning can happen at any time and in any location, since the learning is not restricted by geography. The flexibility this provides means that students may be better able to learn at their own pace, but it may also mean that learners have to be well organized and self-disciplined. In other words, they must be more highly motivated in order to do well in distance-learning courses. Finally, with

face-to-face learning, the teacher and student have the opportunity to develop a personal relationship. In a virtual classroom, by contrast, the teacher may seldom or never actually meet the student. This may make it hard for teachers to understand their students' specific learning needs.

3 Although the nature of the teacher-student relationship may differ in the two methods, they do share the same core principles. Just as a teacher is the "knower" in a classroom, he or she is the one responsible for helping students understand the key sections of an online course. The teacher needs to decide how to best present the material to be learned and in which sequence the topics should be introduced. He or she must also create the assignments for the course and help the students know what resources (textbooks, websites, and so on) will best support their learning. Additionally, a teacher needs to provide student feedback in some way. For example, a language teacher in a classroom may be able to correct a student's grammar or pronunciation in the moment, whereas a distance-learning teacher may need to provide written or recorded feedback to be delivered later. In any case, all the usual elements of the teacher's role are necessary, no matter what kind of instruction is being used.

4 It is difficult to state whether one form of learning is better than another, since they are geared toward different learning situations. They are certainly different experiences. Nevertheless, there are strong similarities between the two systems, which can both produce positive results. A student who has the choice should consider the advantages and disadvantages of each method before deciding to take a course.

