

Key Concepts and Principles in Remote Learning

What is remote learning?

Remote learning is best defined in contrast to classroom-based or face-to-face instruction, where the teacher and the learners meet in a physical classroom at set times every week. In remote learning, the teacher and learners are geographically separated and they do not meet in a physical classroom. In this sense, remote learning is synonymous with distance education.

The physical separation of teachers and learners in remote learning means that learners study on their own or engage in independent learning most of the time.

Is remote learning the same as online learning?

Some people think that remote teaching is synonymous with online learning. But remote learning may or may not be online.

Fully online learning, where teachers and students interact via the Internet for the whole duration of the course, is only one type of remote learning. Some types of remote learning, such as correspondence study and radio- and television-based instruction, do not use the Internet.

There are also forms of online learning that take place as part of face-to-face instruction. This is called blended learning.

How is content or subject matter delivered in remote learning?

In a remote learning setup, content is delivered using different types of learning resources—text, audio, video, interactive multimedia, or a combination of these. These learning resources include off the shelf materials (such as books and book chapters) and materials produced by the teacher him/herself (such as slide presentations).

The use of learning resources to deliver the course content lends itself to resource-based learning. This is an instructional approach where students learn from many types of learning resources that are selected and organized by the teacher according to the topics that comprise the course or subject. To ensure that the learning objectives are met, the teacher provides study and activity guides for the students to use as they go through the learning resources. The study guides include study questions to help students read with understanding, while the activity guides set out learning tasks for the students to do to develop a good understanding of the topic through analysis, application, and practice.

The collection or compilation of learning resources and study and activity guides for a course or subject is called a course pack. You will learn more about course packs in the next topic in this section.

What are the types of learning activities in a remote learning setup?

Learning activities can be either independent learning activities or collaborative learning activities. The former are activities done by learners on their own while the latter are done by learners discussing or working together.

Learning activities can also be synchronous or asynchronous.

‘Synchronous’ means happening at the same time or in real time. Examples are listening to a live lecture and having a meeting via videoconferencing.

‘Asynchronous’ means not at the same time or not in real time. An example of asynchronous communication is email.

Asynchronous is not necessarily inferior to synchronous. An asynchronous discussion in particular has several advantages:

- It allows for flexibility—you can participate when able (in the wee hours of the morning, at midnight, or whenever you are ready).
- It can foster deeper learning as you can reflect more before you respond.
- It helps develop independent learning. Instead of relying on the teacher, students can do their own research to find out the answers to their questions.

The downside of asynchronous discussion is that it lacks immediacy.

In contrast, synchronous discussion facilitates the flow of information and allows for immediate feedback. But it can lead to surface learning and dependence on the teacher. It also requires a strong internet connection.

The amount of synchronous and asynchronous interaction in different courses or subjects will vary. That is, some courses will require more synchronous sessions than others.

Notably, different types of learning activities can be done synchronously and asynchronously. This is shown in the third topic in this section.

How are interaction and dialogue done in remote learning?

First, it would be useful to differentiate the types of learning interactions, namely, learner-content interaction, learner-learner interaction, and learner-teacher interaction.

Learner-content interaction happens when you read or study the assigned learning resources (for example, when you view a video lecture, read a textbook chapter, answer study questions, or write an assignment).

Learner-learner interaction takes place through group discussions and projects, which may be synchronous or asynchronous.

Learner-teacher interaction occurs in synchronous or asynchronous dialogue or consultations with the teacher and when the teacher gives feedback on your work.

All three types of interaction take place in remote learning via the virtual classroom (or virtual learning environment) or learning management system, which includes various features (such as quizzes and discussion forums). In addition, other communication tools may be used in remote learning, such as email, messaging apps, videoconferencing platforms, and file sharing sites.