Defining Distance Education

Distance education is defined as:

> 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, while interaction should not be the primary characteristic of instruction, it should be available, commonplace, and relevant.

The words "telecommunications systems" implies 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 of 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 concept is that 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 is missing then the event is something different, if only slightly, from 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 (Seels & Richey, 1994) 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.
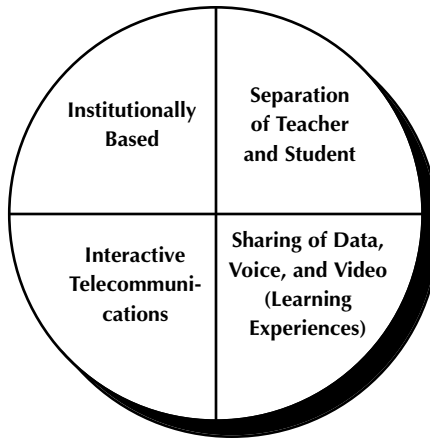
This definition is not the only one and certainly is not the first offered for distance education. As a matter of fact, distance education has been defined from a number of perspectives over the years. For example, Rudolf Manfred Delling (1987) said,

> Distance education is a planned and systematic activity that comprises the choice, didactic preparation, and presentation of teaching materials as well as the supervision and support of student learning. [It] is achieved by bridging the physical distance between student and teacher by means of at least one appropriate technical medium.

For Hilary Perraton (1988), distance education is an educational process in which someone removed in space and/or time from the learner conducts a significant proportion of the teaching.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement defines distance education as "the application of telecommunications and electronic devices which enable students and learners to receive instruction that originates from some distant location." Typically, the learner may interact with the instructor or program directly and may meet with the instructor on a periodic basis.

Grenville Rumble (1989) offered the following four-part defini-
tion of distance education.

> In any distance education process there must be: a teacher;
> one or more students; a course or curriculum that the
> teacher is capable of teaching and the student is trying to
> learn; and a contract, implicit or explicit, between the stu-
> dent and the teacher or the institution employing the
> teacher, that acknowledges their respective teaching-
> learning roles.

Distance education is a method of education in which the
learner is physically separate from the teacher. It may be used
on its own, or in conjunction with other forms of education,
including face-to-face interaction.

In distance education, learners are physically separated from
the institution that sponsors the instruction.

The teaching/learning contract requires that the student be
taught, assessed, given guidance and, where appropriate, pre-
pared for examinations that may or may not be conducted by
the institution. This must be accomplished by two-way com-
munication. Learning may be undertaken individually or in
groups; in either case it is accomplished in the physical absence
of the teacher.

For Desmond Keegan (1986), the following four definitions
were central to an attempt to identify the elements of a single
unifying definition of distance education:

1. The French government, as part of a law passed in 1971,
   defined distance education as education that either does not
   imply the physical presence of the teacher appointed to dis-
   pense it in the place where it is received or in which the
   teacher is present only on occasion or for selected tasks.

2. According to Börje Holmberg, distance education covers
   the various forms of study at all levels that are not under

the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance, and teaching of a supporting organization.

3. Otto Peters emphasized the role of technology, saying that distance teaching/education (*Fernunterricht*) is a method of imparting knowledge, skills, and attitudes that is rationalized by the application of division of labor and organizational principles as well as by the extensive use of technical media, especially for the purpose of reproducing high quality teaching material which makes it possible to instruct great numbers of students at the same time wherever they live. It is an industrialized form of teaching and learning.

4. For Michael Moore, the related concept of "distance teaching" was defined as the family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviors are executed apart from the learning behaviors, including those that in a contiguous situation would be performed in the learner's presence, so that communication between the teacher and the learner must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical, or other devices.

Keegan (1986) identified five main elements of these definitions, using them to compose a comprehensive definition of distance education:

1. The quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process. (This distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education.)

2. The influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services. (This distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programs.)

3. The use of technical media—print, audio, video or computer—to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course.

4. The provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue. (This distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education.)

5. The quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups. Included is the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes.

Garrison and Shale (1987) argued that, in light of advances in distance education delivery technologies, Keegan's definition was too narrow and did not correspond to the existing reality as well as to future possibilities. While declining to offer a definition of distance education, Garrison and Shale offered the following three criteria they regarded as essential for characterizing the distance education process:

1. Distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between (among) teacher and student(s) occurs noncontiguously.

2. Distance education must involve two-way communication between (among) teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process.

3. Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication.

Keegan's definition and the definitions preceding it define the traditional view of distance education. Rapid changes in society and technology are challenging these traditional definitions.

Emerging Definitions
The contemporary period is often characterized as one of unpredictable change. Globalization, brought on by supersonic air travel, satellite television, computer communications, and societal changes, has inspired new ways of looking at distance education. Edwards (1995) uses the term *open learning* to describe a new way of looking at education in a quickly changing and diverse world. He indicates that distance education and open learning are two distinct approaches to education. While he does not define the two, he states that distance education provides distance learning opportunities using mass-produced courseware to a mass market.

In contrast, open learning places greater emphasis on the current specific needs and/or markets available by recognizing local requirements and differences instead of delivering an established curriculum. Open learning shifts from mass production and mass consumption to a focus on local and individual needs and requirements. Edwards states that this can occur outside of the traditional organization of education. This is a major difference between his description of open learning and the previous definitions of distance education.