

Non-traditional learning environments need clearer definitions, researchers say

April 5 2011

What is the difference between e-learning, online learning and distance learning? University of Missouri researchers have found that even educators can't agree on what different forms of learning environments entail and, without some common definitions, it is difficult to study the best methods and provide students with accurate previews of courses.

Joi Moore, associate professor in the School of [Information Science](#) and Learning Technologies in the MU College of [Education](#), along with doctoral students Camille Dickson-Deane and Krista Galyen, found several definitions of the terms "e-learning," "online learning" and "distance learning" in a survey of [educational technology](#) experts. In fact, they found no common spelling of "e-learning," because of differences in capitalization and hyphen use. The researchers recently published their findings in the journal, *Internet and Higher Education*.

While the definitions of these terms might seem trivial, the researchers argue that the implied differences will impact the future of education. As education researchers evaluate best methods for student learning, they have found learning environments are presented in many different ways in schools, colleges and the business world. For example, some online learning includes occasional face-to-face meetings, while others have synchronized video classrooms. Some courses might have instructors available to students through email, while others are entirely self-directed by students.

"What we found is there is no common understanding, even across

disciplines or locations," Moore said. "We found that many experts in the field didn't define what they were doing; they just said, 'this is what I use.' As [education researchers](#), we don't get the true context of the instructional environment, and without that, it is impossible to compare learning results."

"For example, we might hear that e-learning is not as good as face-to-face instruction," Galyen said. "But what are you talking about? What kind of implementation is it? Is it instructor-led e-learning? Are you combining all the different modes together? Instructors might be encouraged to teach online, but our job is to explain what methods work well."

The researchers agree that technology will become more prominent in education in the future; however, the methodology and expectations are still being defined. Their goal is to impact the policies of the future so that students have a true learning experience with deep-level engagement – not just busywork.

"When you travel overseas, you will be surprised at what counts as online learning; we want to know why it's working," said Dickson-Deane. "We found one course during which the instructor teaches with a blog, and it's very successful and winning awards. He calls it e-learning. We need educators to learn from that, and clearly share that information across the discipline. For the field to progress, we need a common ground that we can evaluate and judge."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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